The Devil's Child

by Dementian

Summary

One muggy night in 1892, the heir to the Crawley estate was snatched away from his crib and stolen into the night. Thirty years later, new evidence is uncovered that might just bring the missing Crawley home. It’s a massive task, and only one man in the abbey has the stones for the job… so Lady Mary decides to hire him as her personal detective. Unfortunately for Thomas Barrow, this case is about to get incredibly personal.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The Devil's Mark

Chapter Notes

I know that my readers are probably upset about Volver, and I don't blame them. Rest assured, I have found someone to help me finish the work, and we will now be pushing forward to get Volver wrapped up. In the meantime, I wanted to try something different in the hope of easing my mental anguish. This will be a rather dark fanfiction, with a noir-esque feel.

It was a terrible thing, to feel embarrassed and disappointed in your children.

Cora Crawley sat quiet and rather humiliated in her library, fingers twisting at the hem of her silk chiffon dress. Though the day had started off so gloriously, with Bertie Pelham and Henry Talbot both taking breakfast, it had ended in utter shambles. Edith had fled to London, her future up in flames due to Mary's meddling. Even worse, a lifelong servant had attempted suicide right under their very noses. To keep from having to dwell on Mary’s awful actions, Cora instead found herself thinking of the attics where Dr. Clarkson was currently attending to one Thomas Barrow. She could not help but feel terribly guilty, wondering why on earth she had not noticed that Barrow was drifting lower and lower into despair. Next to her, quietly mulling over a cup of cooling tea, was her husband Robert.

He seemed to be in quite the same predicament.

“How could this have happened?” Cora wondered aloud. Robert shook his head, mystified. “How did it get so bad without our knowing?”

“I can’t say,” Robert replied. He sat his tea aside, clearly not in the mood for a cup. Cora pulled her knees back a bit, twisting her body so that she might look plaintively into her husband’s eyes. In that moment he seemed a little older, the gray shining through in his hair and the bags deep beneath his brown eyes.

“I always knew that Barrow’s life was hard, how could it not be? Still…” Robert shook his head again.

Of course, Cora hadn’t really been talking about Barrow. She’d been talking about Mary and Edith.

“I was referring to Edith and Mary hating one another,” Cora explained, “But yes, I agree with you about Barrow. Dr. Clarkson is with him now?”

“Yes,” Robert said. He stood up, taking his teacup and placing it carefully upon the buffet table normally commandeered by Carson. “I want him kept out of the hospital.”

“Do you think it will work?” Cora asked. In her lifetime, it had been rare that the subject of suicide had come up. If she thought about it for a moment, she could recall one of her father’s friend’s wife having attempted to end her life in 1873. Cora had been quite small then and had only found out about the event in hindsight. But now that she really considered the story, she’d never learned what had happened to the poor woman. She doubted that the ending had been pleasant.
“I don’t know. It depends upon what Dr. Clarkson finds I suppose…” Robert paused. A terrible silence overtook them both, only to be broken by Robert whispering. “What are we going to do about Mary and Edith?”

Cora bowed her head, shamed as a mother. Was this a reflection on her own actions? In raising her children, had she unwittingly shown them that it was normal to be vindictive and hateful? That it was acceptable to be so cruel to a family member?

“I don’t know,” Cora admitted. “It always burns me when my children…”

But she had to pause. The term ‘children’ was a loaded one for her. It brought to mind two terrible gaps within her heart. Two babies she’d had to say goodbye to far too early.

“… When things go wrong.” Her voice was choked on emotion.

Robert was nothing if not a caring husband. He came to her side and took her shoulders in hand. With his touch, he poured into her all the love and caring he possessed. She reached up to touch his fingers, gathering strength in the embrace.

“We will get through this Cora,” Robert said. “We will endure. Our family is strong.”

Was it? Cora was unsure now a days. She thought of Mary, a spine made of steel and a heart of ice. She’d seen Mary bleed, seen her scream for God to kill her when Matthew had been taken too early. But invariably thoughts of Mary always turned to thoughts of another.

She thought of Edith, spineless and exhausted, a heart so worn from being hurt that it seemed impossible that she could be able to love again. But love she did, bruised arms open to embrace her fatherless daughter and the man she adored. All of it was ripped from her, ripped until the fringes of her soul were tattered like the sheets of a worn sailboat. To know that Mary, so steely and cold, had done damage to Edith when she was already on her knees… it pained Cora deeply.

That was not the woman she knew Mary to be.
That was not the woman Matthew had married.

A sudden knock at the library door revealed Carson, who was ashen in lieu of the afternoons upsets. Despite his pallid demeanor, he kept calm and spoke with grace to his masters.

“Carson,” Robert took comfort in the sight of his most trusted man.

“M’lord, Dr. Clarkson wishes to speak with you. He says it’s urgent.”

Cora’s stomach flipped at the thought of Barrow dying in their house. Though her servants were hardly kin or important people, Cora still felt terrible when one of them passed. In particular, poor William Mason had been taken from them far too soon.

“Send him in at once,” Robert commanded. Carson turned away, gesturing for someone outside the door; Dr. Clarkson strode in looking quite perturbed. Cora felt obliged to rise from her seat, joining her husband’s side.

“How is he?” Robert asked. “Spare me no sympathy, if it’s bad I want to know.”

“Sleeping,” Dr. Clarkson replied. “I’ve managed to stitch him up. Ms. Baxter found him in time, though I confess a few more minutes and we would be having a rather different conversation.”

“Thank god,” Cora murmured. At least there would be hope for Barrow to recover.
Still, Dr. Clarkson seemed uneasy in their presence, as if there was still more bad news to relay.

“Is there more?” Cora asked, hoping the good doctor would speak up. Surely if Barrow was sleeping, they were past the danger point?

“…Well…” Dr. Clarkson paused, rubbing at the back of his neck as if embarrassed. “I-"

He became apologetic. “Frankly, I don’t know how to tell you this. When I was tending to Barrow, I noticed something and… I think it would be best if you see it as well.”

Robert was taken aback.

Without much else to go on, for it seemed that poor Dr. Clarkson had lost his nerve to relay the full truth, the pair of them set about following after Dr. Clarkson and Carson up the servant’s stairs. It was bizarre, to step from the comfortable and calm world she knew into the world of her servants. Certain things always managed to stick out to her as she wandered up the stairs: how tight the passage was, scuff marks on the walls, the creaking of rotting wood underfoot. Was it just her, or were the passageways terribly hot? As they reached the attics, it was almost sweltering at Cora dabbed at her brow uncomfortably. Compared to the rooms she dwelled in, these were nothing more than broom cupboards. Barrow, as underbutler, resided at the end of the hall near Carson himself. His nametag was beginning to peel in the heat, horse glue coming away in lieu of the sweltering summer.

“Is it right for us to disturb him like this?” Cora whispered. She felt as if she were at the bedside of a dying man.

“I assure you, Lady Grantham, I put him under with a cocktail of drugs,” Dr. Clarkson said. Carson had his hand on the doorknob, though he refrained from opening it just yet. “He’ll be emotionally distressed when he wakes, not to mention ill, so I thought it best.”

“I quite agree,” Robert whispered. He was elbow to elbow with Cora; there was very little room to mingle in the attic hall. Carson hovered just over Robert’s shoulder fretfully.

“…Lady Grantham…” Dr. Clarkson paused, his demeanor changing to a stony disposition in light speaking about a patient. “I suggest you prepare yourself.”

Cora knew what it was to observe horrid things. She said nothing but pursed her lips and gave Carson a short sharp nod.

Carson opened the door to Barrow’s room, revealing a dismal sight.

It was not that Cora had been entirely naïve to the difficulties of servitude. She had understood implicitly before Carson had opened the door that Barrow’s room would be bare to all but minimum essentials, likely without photographs or trinkets of personality. It was not the cracked walls nor the rotting wood beneath which disturbed her. It was not the cramped bed, the moth-eaten red curtains, or the bedside table bare of anything save a lamp. It was instead the creature curled up upon the bed, so spindly legged and thin that it looked a bit like a bug sticking out from beneath a thin quilt coverlet.

Barrow did not look entirely human in that moment, with gaunt sunken in eyes and cheekbones that could slice through gruyere. The blueish tint to his lips, the way that his skin appeared waxy and stretched, the stiff posture of his limbs… all of it seemed to suggest that Barrow was in fact dead. Yet even so, the tiniest huff of breath could be heard in the silence. Thick white gauze wrapped around his bony wrists was tinged pink at the center, infallible proof that Barrow was in fact alive.
Conscious, however? That was another story.

“My god,” Cora shuddered, withdrawing a little so that she could shrink into Robert’s shadow. There was a terrible sympathy in Robert’s normally warm brown eyes; Cora watched as Robert took the slightest step forward, chin tilted up as if hoping to see Barrow’s face better without getting too close. Cora found herself wanting to have more quilts put on Barrow’s bed, or a vase of flowers at his bedside, or something. Something to show that someone cared, even if they were nothing more than an employer.

“Poor devil,” Robert shook his head.

Dr. Clarkson sidled around Barrow’s bed, coming to stand at his left side so that he might bend over and pluck up Barrow’s arm from the bed. Cradling the limb carefully with both hands, Dr. Clarkson paused as he checked for a pulse at Barrow’s wrist.

“Weak, but stable,” Dr. Clarkson deduced. “I doubt he’ll wake until tomorrow. He has to replenish the blood he’s lost.”

“Really, Dr. Clarkson, if we can avoid all that talk,” Robert murmured. His Victorian sensibilities so despised anything to do with medical maladies. As a woman, however, Cora was no stranger to blood.

Carson gently shut the door to the hall, careful to make as little noise as possible lest attention be roused. Cora caught his eye and noted that he seemed just as shamed as Robert.

Why? Cora wondered, *What, of all men, have you done to Barrow?*

“This is what I wanted to show you,” Dr. Clarkson said, cupping the underside of Barrow’s left forearm with one hand to point at it with another. Cora leaned in, only to pause as Dr. Clarkson held up a hand. What was concerning him so?

“I confess, I didn’t know how to tell you. Even now, I still don’t know how to tell you—“Dr. Clarkson paused, biting his tongue. The good doctor was robbed of adequate words to explain the situation, which only served to make Cora feel more and more confused. Why should Dr. Clarkson have to explain anything? Why should it be so disturbing to Cora and Robert of all people? Naturally, Cora felt for Barrow and wished him well in life, but if he was in too terrible a way then what more could be done? Did she really come across so frail to other men?

“Tell me what?” Cora asked, hoping for a little more clarification.

Dr. Clarkson caught her gaze and held it. Cora was disturbed to find something dire and dark in his eyes. Something that pleaded for her to take him seriously. She watched with care as Dr. Clarkson slowly turned Thomas’ forearm around to show-

A tiny noise fluttered past her lips, something akin to a whimper capped off before an enemy could hear. Cora sucked in a breath, only distantly aware that her head was buzzing from lack of oxygen.

There, on Barrow’s left forearm, was the mark.

So ingrained was it into Cora’s memory, so dark and so broken a moment in time, that she could not forget a single detail even if she tried. Inexplicably, she heard an infant’s wailing chorus in her mind. Heard the doctors calling out to her in praise as they lifted up not one but two babies so heavily intertwined that she’d momentarily feared they were deformed.
All that had remained of their unnatural connection had been a mark upon their arm, where each baby had been tightly wound around the other. A little dark red birth mark shaped bizarrely enough like a skull if one squinted and tilted their head.

Each baby had borne the same mark upon their arm, in the exact same spot. Twins down to the very last hair upon their dark heads.

Mary… and—

“What—“ the word fell from Robert’s lips without care, a disturbed expression upon his face. He even took a step back, as if Dr. Clarkson had brandished a snake at him. But Cora did not step back. Instead, she stepped forward, reaching out blindly with both hands to grasp at Barrow’s abused flesh. The scarring, the clear evident sign of a burn! The way that the edges were dulled soft white, and how it was in a perfectly round shape—! All of it was exactly as Cora remembered. All of it, rushing back at her as a thousand memories compounded upon her until she could not help but collapse upon Barrow’s bed.

Her only son. Her precious boy— how he’d been burned by a hideous maid with a molten silver coin—how he’d been taken from her in the dead of night, his tiny arm still wrapped in healing clothes to ward off infection!

“Oh my—“ Cora blurted out the words without realizing them, her fingers running again and again over Barrow’s burn mark. “Oh my g—“

“Now, Lady Grantham—“ Dr. Clarkson began, seemingly to become panicked at the realization that he’d brought upon such chaos. “Before you upset yourself—“

But Cora’s heart was pounding, her head racing—! She knew this burn mark like the back of her hand, knew it because she’d spent so many a night kissing it and re-wrapping it in fresh clothes. Her son had been burned just the same, had been taken from her in the dead of night. If Barrow had the mark, in the exact same spot and in the exact same shape, then surely that meant—?

Cora could suddenly not draw enough breath into her body. She sagged forward, clutching at her throat as if hoping to tear it open with her own fingers and gain more oxygen.

“My Lady!”

“Cora!”

Both Robert and Carson were at her side, each supporting her as Dr. Clarkson immediately felt for her pulse.

But she did not want these men to touch her. She did not want to be swept away in a tide of Victorian values and womanly concerns. Her mind, heart, and soul were in unison, screaming for her to pay attention to this burn mark and what it must inevitably mean!

“The mark!” Cora blathered, grabbing tight onto Barrow’s arm with both hands. He felt so cold, so terribly still. Why wouldn’t he wake and speak to her? Why was he so limp in her grip? “He has the mark! It’s the mark— the very same mark—!”

“We don’t know that!” Robert took her chin in hand, forcing her to look at him over Barrow’s arm. She tried to squirm away, tried to look back, but Robert wouldn’t let her. “Cora, we don’t know any of that! It could be anything, a burn from any number of things that just so happens to look like—“

“I know that mark!” Cora was indignant. She would not be told she was growing hysterical over nothing. Not now when after thirty years she was almost certain that her son…
Cora paused, growing listless as she was swept up in the memory of holding her newborn son.

It had been just the pair of them, with Robert holding Mary by the fireside. Cora had been a mother only a few hours, yet she’d been so in love with her son that she’d felt ageless. Weightless.

His tiny thatch of dark brown hair, almost black in the light. His little red lips, ever so often parting so that the tiniest squeak could filter out. He’d grabbed at her finger and held tight, determined never to be parted from her.

Renewed in her determination, Cora pushed both Carson and Robert off in order to get closer to Barrow. She held his arm defensively to her chest, determined to be listen to.

“Hello, it’s him! It’s him, Robert!” Cora cried out.

“Cora, listen to me—!” Robert was starting to get angry. The loss of their son was an old wound, a sore wound, and one that he never discussed. To have it pushed upon so unexpectedly, so directly, had caused Robert’s anger to spike.

“You’re being hysterical!” He tried to say. “You’re jumping to conclusions!”

“I’m not jumping to anything!” She said, though her head was still buzzing and her pulse racing. “I’m not getting hysterical. This is my b—But Cora could not even say it, too emotional to get the word out without weeping. She turned, looking to Barrow, and found his face unnervingly similar to Mary’s in that moment.

His dark brown hair.
His red lips.
The sharp curve of his chin and cheekbones.

“It’s my…” She reached out, her heart bleating in pain and love, hoping to touch Barrow’s face. But even as she tried, she paused, a sudden terrible memory sweeping her up in its steely clutches.

The memory of holding her newborn son.
Of loving him, needing him, and losing him.

But where she had grieved, Robert had raged. He’d searched the entire countryside of England, demanding answers where none could give. For three long, painful years, he’d fought and pushed until like a great locomotive he’d come to a shuddering stop. There’d been nothing left for him to give, nor more fight left to plunder, and so now where Cora felt wounded and raw Robert only felt an aching quiet.

He took her in his arms, strong, but unempathetic.

“Cora, come, you’ve forgotten yourself,” Robert demanded.

It was difficult, even now, for Cora to remember just how different English sensibilities were to American mannerisms. It was improper in England for an upper-class lady to show emotion.

“Look at the mark, Robert!” She gripped tight at his arms, pulling at his flesh in the vain hope that his understanding might come along with. “Look at the burn, look at the way it’s shaped! Where it is on his arm! It’s the mark; I know it is—!”

Cora wanted to see it again, wanted to look at it up close without men pulling upon her. She let go of Robert and sat upon the edge of Barrow’s bed once more to take up his arm in her own. The more that she stared at his burn mark, the more that she observed the fluttering pale edges and the rosy
center, the more she felt wholly convinced that she was staring at her son’s burn. That she was looking upon the face of her grown son, who’d somehow been hiding in plain sight for nearly thirty years as her servant.

It was mad. It was bordering on imbecilic, and yet…?

The more Cora thought about it, the more she considered Barrow—Thomas’—mannerisms and how he approached the world, the more she could not help but think of Mary. Mary, who’d always been rather cold and calculating, a strong line against her more emotional siblings. In her dreams, Cora had always imagined that her darling boy would have been rather emotional too, but in hindsight she realized this was folly. Mary and… and…

*James*, she thought irritably. *I must have the courage to say his name, even if only to myself.*

James would be just like Mary. As her twin, James would be just as cold and snappish. This wasn’t to say that there wouldn’t be warmth within him, just as there was warmth within Mary. But it would be hidden, something precious and rare to be shared only with those that he loved best.

“…*James*…” Cora whispered, squeezing Barrow’s pale, limp hand. Robert bristled, as if she’d slapped him.

He reached out, taking her shoulder in hand; Cora jerked away from him. She did not want to be touched. To be taken away from her son.

“*James*… can you hear me?” Cora called out to him. Still, Barrow—Thomas — (or was it James, now?) did not wake.

“Cora, this is poppycock,” Robert tried to pull her away again.

“*James, open your eyes!*” Cora begged. In that moment, as Barrow—Th—James lay asleep upon his bed, Cora saw him like a figure in a fairy tale. He would hear his mother’s voice and wake. He would open his eyes, and this terrible nightmare that she’d been living for thirty years would come to an end. Her son, her baby, would be returned.

But Robert had had enough.

“Cora listen to yourself!” Robert pulled her forcibly from the bed, though she struggled to stay at James’ side. In her unwillingness to let go, she accidentally tugged at James’ wrists.

At once, the bandages turned from soft pink to dark red. Cora gasped, panicking as she saw blood at her fingertips.

At once, Dr. Clarkson sprang into action. Though his movements were fluid, there was a jerking urgency to the way that he pulled his traveling kit back out and withdrew a pair of medical shears. Robert pulled Cora close to his chest, giving Dr. Clarkson room as he tended to James’…

… To Barrow’s wounds.

And suddenly Cora realized just how foolish she’d been in that moment. Just how utterly stupid she’d been to call out to her son who was no doubt long dead. To speak to Barrow of all people as if he was J—

But just like before, Cora could not even so much as think the name of her son without grief building up inside of her. It was all too raw, too fresh, too humiliating to bear.
Unable to restrain her, she bit out, “At least I lost Sybil quickly.”

She pulled away from Robert, unable to keep her misery to herself as she began to weep. She suddenly felt very small, as if she were a child compared to the other men in the room. She wanted to hide, in that moment. To run so far away that no one would be able to find her or know her face.

“Cora!” Robert called out after her. She did not have the emotional strength to answer him.
Chapter Summary

In lieu of Cora's hysteria, Robert attempts to lay down the law on conversation topics. It doesn't go well.

Chapter Notes

Hello all! So just so you know, we're looking at one update a week. I'm going to start adding in artwork that I've drawn. I am definitely NOT a professional artist so critique me all you like on the writing, but don't mention that the art is shit in the comments.

Mainly because... I can't do anything about it.

It was a fine, July afternoon, and tea had just been served at Downton Hospital. Nurse Shepherd’s heels were clacking methodically upon the waxed wooden floors; somewhere down the northern hall a patient with a severe cough had finally fallen asleep. In the silence that had followed suit, not much could be discerned save for the shuffling of aged paper upon a cluttered desk. It could be traced, if one were curious, all the way to the very end of the eastern wing where Dr. Richard Clarkson’s private offices were kept.

He’d not looked at James Robert Crawley’s case files in over twenty years, but today Dr. Clarkson had decided to pull them out once again. He kept running a finger soothingly over the fringes of his gray moustache, eyes narrowed as they danced over pages of medical history and damage reports. Paperclipped to the back of a thick manila envelope were the heavy tin-type photos of the Crawley infant swaddled in his favorite blanket, wailing with a hot fresh burn upon underside of his left forearm.
Dr. Clarkson pulled back from the file, typing at the final line marked at the date of May 18th. It had, initially, been the date that he was to follow up on James Crawley’s health. Their visit, however, had been effectively botched when Dr. Clarkson had been informed that the infant had been abducted. The resulting chaos that had spread through North Yorkshire was something out of a horror novel. Every hovel, every field, every barren barn and hotel room was scoured by police called in from as far away as Manchester. Residents of Downton both inside and outside the abbey had been questioned, including Dr. Clarkson himself. In the end, it had amounted to nothing save for three pain filled years. In the end, James had been given up for dead, mourned deeply by a family that had not been prepared to let him go—

| Name of Patient: James Robert Crawley |
| Date of Birth: 12/10/1891 |
| List of Allergies: NKA |
| Date of Visit: 30/4/1892 |
| Reason for Visit: 3rd degree burn |
| Findings on Physical Examination: 48-72 hours—Burn is sized at two inches by two centimeters by one inch. Burn inflicted by branding iron, duration of contact no more than fifteen seconds, though I have difficulty finding confirmation. Will be watching for tourniquet effect, given that burn is on the inner forearm. Rapid fluid shifts, vasodilation, hyponatremia in occurrence. Airway is clear, initial hypothermia was resolved. Infection is the largest concern as of this moment, though I have taken great pains to keep the wound clean and tightly bandaged. Skin integrity is unknown at this time. I highly suspect there will be keloid formation. Patient was transferred by ambulance from residence to hospital and given sedative for pain relief. Wound was effectively cauterized by brand; have cleaned and re-bandaged wound. Will have to monitor carefully for pain control. Burns were photographed for police evidence. |
| Diagnosis: Third degree burn, with hyponatremia |
| Preventative Services Prescribed: Sydenham’s Laudanum |
| Dosage: Given age of infant, have prescribed a tiny drop to be rubbed on his gum line instead of normal adult dosage. Noted side effects of heavy sleep periods. |
| Follow-Up Plan: |
| May 3rd: House visit to Downton Abbey has concluded end of hyponatremia. Infant still in heavy pain. NV: 10/5/1892 |
| May 10th: House visit to Downton Abbey shows infant is slowly recovering. Scarring is forming over initial burn wound. Have prescribed aloe salve for aid of skin integrity. NV: 15/5/1892 |
| May 15th: Infant was brought to Hospital by his mother and nursemaid. Burns were re-photographed for police evidence. NV: 18/5/1892 |
| May 16th: |
“Dr. Clarkson?”

Dr. Clarkson was jerked out of his reverie, looking up from his papers to find Nurse Shepherd at the door. She bore, upon her aproned hip, a tray full of half-drunk teacups.

“Nurse Shepherd,” He greeted her.

“Lord Grantham is here to see you sir,” She explained. “He says it’s about yesterday?”

Ah. That.

To be frank, Dr. Clarkson had been expecting the fallout out of yesterday for a good six hours. The fact that Lord Grantham was coming so late in the afternoon was slightly disturbing. Usually the family would take tea at this hour. If he’d deprived himself of his afternoon brew, what did that mean for Dr. Clarkson?

Nothing good, he was sure.

“Send him in at once,” Dr. Clarkson didn’t see his prospects changing if Lord Grantham was made to wait too long.

Nurse Shepherd was an expert at hustling down a hallway. As a professional nurse, she’d spent the better part of forty years cleaning up every human fluid imaginable from beneath Dr. Clarkson’s boots. She was invaluable to him, in these trying times.

Dr. Clarkson began straightening his desk, putting away half-finished ink bottles and hiding open cases of opium lest Lord Grantham think him depraved. He was, in fact, in the middle of a rather invigorating experiment regarding the effects of opium when combined with other drugs.

Unfortunately, Lord Grantham arrived at Dr. Clarkson’s door just as Dr. Clarkson’s hands were full of opened opium bottles. As a result, Dr. Clarkson had to hastily tuck them all away, resulting in a few tablets rolling about. He cursed softly under his breath, knowing that he was looking unprofessional in the eyes of his most illustrious client.

“… Dr. Clarkson,” Lord Grantham greeted him with a mild tip of the head. In a fine white linen suit and soft blue cravat, Lord Grantham’s wealth was obvious in every element of his style. In his hands, he carried a cane of ivory that matched his dress; Dr. Clarkson noted his knuckles were pale with lack of blood. Clearly his mind was heavy with the events from yesterday.

If only Dr. Clarkson had known how Lady Grantham would react… he’d have never alerted her to Barrow’s burn. He’d only thought it incredibly odd, certainly the same in shape and size as that of the Crawley infant’s burn.

Oh, if only…

“Lord Grantham,” Dr. Clarkson set his pill bottles aside, re-locking his medicine cabinet so that they might be stored safely till his next free moment. “You’ve caught me in the middle of a tedious exercise. I apologize for my disarray.”

“I hardly in the mood to chat about clutter,” Lord Grantham replied. The icy edge in his tone made Dr. Clarkson bristle on instinct.

His mouth suddenly went dry as he thought of the monthly donations that the Crawley family placed in the name of the village hospital. If it were taken away, Dr. Clarkson knew for a fact that they wouldn’t survive another ten years.
“Lord Grantham, I want to take this moment to apologize for yesterday afternoon,” Dr. Clarkson began. Lord Grantham listened, albeit with narrowed eyes.

“I had thought, given the number of years that had passed—“but Dr. Clarkson trailed off. He knew, regardless the excuse he gave, it would be a feeble one.

“I’m afraid the years passing change very little in regard to my son,” Lord Grantham replied. His tone only grew darker at the verbal mention of the lost Crawley heir.

They needed to change the subject, and fast.

“May I offer you some tea, Lord Grantham?” Dr. Clarkson said.

“No thank you,” Lord Grantham replied.

In an unexpected move, Lord Grantham sat in Dr. Clarkson’s visitor chair, brooding with the head of his cane leaning carefully upon the armrest. Dr. Clarkson watched, unsure, but Lord Grantham seemed to be calming considerably now that he was off his feet.

“…Why did you alert Lady Grantham and I to the burn upon Barrow’s arm?” Lord Grantham asked.

“Well, the evidence that I found was startlingly similar to the wound that your son incurred—“

“But that’s just it,” Lord Grantham replied, cutting Dr. Clarkson off before he could finish his damning sentence. “I don’t think you found evidence. I think you found a coincidence.”

“Quite possible, I admit, but there are ways of finding out for sure either way,” Dr. Clarkson thought of new blood tests slowly becoming available. Of modern medical trials underway in the hospitals of Paris and New York. He’d read papers three months ago of blood linkage, and the new science of serological testing.

“I’d rather not put Barrow through all of that,” Lord Grantham said. Dr. Clarkson had to wonder if Lord Grantham was truly concerned more for Barrow or for himself.

Besides, I’m quite certain that he’s not my son,” Lord Grantham said. There was something oddly final in his voice that Dr. Clarkson did not like.

“If you don’t mind me asking, where does your clarity come from?” Dr. Clarkson asked. “Because I admit, I’m still on the fence”

“Well, I’m unsure if you’re aware of this, but you are a doctor, so I assume I can have your confidence when I tell you that Barrow is… abnormal.” Lord Grantham paused, his tone tender. “Though that is hardly his fault.”

“Ah.” Dr. Clarkson was suddenly very grateful the door to his office was at the very end of the hall. “Yes, I’m aware.” He wondered if Lord Grantham knew that Barrow had tried to cure himself only a year ago. “But you’re not trying to say-?”

“My son was a normal man,” Lord Grantham confirmed. Dr. Clarkson found himself biting his tongue, though it would prove very ineffective.

“Lord Grantham—He tried to keep his tone as calm and submissive as possible. “You cannot tell such things in infants. It takes many years for such abnormalities to occur, and they stem from many different childhood traumas—“
“Still,” Lord Grantham said. “I’m quite certain he’s not my son.”

Dr. Clarkson knew when not to push the envelope. Instead, he offered up the patient file of James Crawley for Lord Grantham to see. “I was wondering if you’d at least like to look at the files—”

“No.” Lord Grantham’s tone was sharp. Dr. Clarkson pulled back at once, nervous he’d overstepped once again. Though Lord Grantham’s eyes never left Dr. Clarkson’s face, they’d taken on a steely edge he didn’t much appreciate.

“No, I know the files, back to front. I’m not eager to look at them again. Too many painful memories.”

That was understandable. Dr. Clarkson closed the files and set them aside so that Lord Grantham would not have to stare at the offending pages.

“Are you sure…” Dr. Clarkson spoke softly, hoping he would not come across overbearing. “Are you sure you don’t want to test, just in case? Just in the tiniest case of the tiniest chance? There are ways we can check through bloodwork. The science is new, but we have a good shot of finding out, given that Lady Mary would technically be his twin—”

“Barrow has already been through enough, as of late,” Lord Grantham said. Once again, this was understandable. “And my daughter, is not a science experiment.”

“I’d hardly treat Lady Mary like a science experiment,” Dr. Clarkson replied. “But I agree with you that Barrow’s been through quite an ordeal. He’ll need time to recover, either way. And if I may be frank with you, I don’t think Rustington’s entirely out of the cards, depending upon whether his mental state continues to deteriorate.”

“I’d rather it not come to that,” Lord Grantham murmured. “Not that I think Rustington a poor institution, but given Barrow’s abnormalities, I fear that any institution he enters he will be unable to walk away from.”

“Quite,” one again, Dr. Clarkson could not help but agree. They were in a very difficult situation when it came to Barrow. There were very few ‘easy’ options.

“I’ve come here today to ask you to put Lady Grantham’s mind at ease,” Lord Grantham said. “She’s been beside herself since yesterday, and given that you were the one to start it I want you to be the one to end it.”

But this was hardly cut and dry. Did Dr. Clarkson want to retain Lord Grantham’s good favor and keep his contributions incoming towards the hospital? Yes. Could Dr. Clarkson lie to a patient and claim that his prior concerns were unsupported and unimportant? No.

“… Lord Grantham, I cannot lie to a patient,” Dr. Clarkson spoke as gently as he could. “If she asks me a question, I am afraid I will have to answer it. I took an oath when I joined the medical practice, I have to uphold it no matter who to.”

Lord Grantham rose from his chair, leaning precariously upon his ivory cane. “Then see to it that she does not ask you questions regarding my son.”

Dr. Clarkson found himself wondering that technically James Crawley was Lady Grantham’s son too.

“As you wish,” Dr. Clarkson didn’t know what else to say.
“Thank you, Dr. Clarkson.” Lord Grantham tipped his head again. “I must get back to Lady Grantham, you’ll forgive me.”

With that, Lord Grantham turned and left. In his wake, Dr. Clarkson could not help but feel a myriad of emotions, from foolish to self-righteous all at once.

He dragged a hand over his aged face, collapsing back into his desk chair to rock soothingly upon its swivel.

“Toffs,” he whispered where no one else could hear, wishing his patients could be a teensy bit less irritating.

~*~

The quiet of Downton Abbey unnerved her, particularly when she was the one who had caused it. Edith had fled to London, and who could blame her when her only living sister had ruined her last shot at happiness?

Mary Crawley found herself drifting aimlessly through the Entrance hall of Downton Abbey on a quiet July afternoon; her papa had gone to granny’s for tea and wouldn’t be back until sometime later. Tom was still in the village, monitoring ongoing issues with the estate. The children were wandering the grounds with their nanny, enjoying the fine summer afternoon. Her mama had suffered some strange fit yesterday though her papa refused to say why, and was no doubt resting on the gallery floor. The servants were below taking their own tea, all save for Barrow… who was no doubt still in bed recovering from yesterday.

This left Mary alone, and she didn’t like it.

She wasn’t a stranger to loneliness. All her childhood, she had felt a queer loneliness that she couldn’t explain. Though she’d kept the company of her sisters in their nursery, and had been spoiled rotten by the servants, Mary had always felt like something (or rather someone) was missing from the picture. At night, when she’d been small, she’d found herself reaching out to touch the bare mattress beside her, wondering if someone would ever fill the space. Someone who could understand her implicitly without needing to be told. Someone who wouldn’t mind her sharp temper or hold it against her.

Matthew had come along and had lifted the veil of loneliness from her cold corner of the world… but that was over now.

Mary didn’t like to dwell on it. The misery was too strong inside of her, even now years after Matthew’s death. The less she thought about him, the less she even considered his name, the better.

She supposed that was why it hadn’t worked out with Henry in the end. He hadn’t been able to fill that gap, no matter how lovely and jovial he’d been.

In her listless wandering about the gallery floor, Mary paused at the pink tea room. This was the same room in which she’d flirted heinously with Matthew through her youth. The room in which Barrow had served her tea a million times.

Funny how rooms in the abbey could hold such memories. It was like they were little vaudevilles, waiting to be opened so that they could play again.

Mary opened the door, wanting a moment to remember the space in which she and Matthew had once inhabited together in a time when Barrow had been strong and Edith hadn’t hated her. She
paused, however, upon realizing that the room was not vacant. Strangely enough, her mama was laying upon the fainting couch in a purple and lace frock, looking utterly miserable with red swollen eyes.

A beat of silence passed between them, without Cora making notice of her. Mary imagined she was still furious as well after her behavior yesterday. She turned, bitter at the sting of disappointment, and made to leave the room.

“Don’t”

Mary paused, one foot still out the threshold. “I should go, you’re unwell.”

“I want to talk to you alone.”

She felt aged in that moment, weary and cold like an old wind was blowing through her bones. Once, she had not felt so alone when she’d stood opposed to her mama. Once, she’d had someone to confide in and rely on when she was on trial for her bad behavior.

But that time was over.

“Edith called,” Cora said. Mary hung back in the doorway, unsure whether she wanted to hear the rest of her mother’s sentence.

“She’s settled back in London,”

Mary did not reply, instead leaning carefully against the wall and staring up at the skylight far above. The reflection of the clouds painted an incredible fantasy, with oiled birds becoming jeweled in the afternoon glow.

“She doesn’t have much to say,” Cora paused, sitting up a little better against the fainting couch. “I was wondering if you do.”

“I believe I’ve said more than enough,” Mary replied Her cold tone did not go unnoticed.

“I believe so too,” Cora replied.

She sighed, pondering some other matter, then looked to Mary again. “Come here and sit beside me. I have something that I want to talk to you about.”

“If it’s about Edith-“ Mary sighed.

“It’s not.”

Slightly soothed, Mary relented and wandered over to the fainting couch. Sitting near her mother’s feet, Mary folded her hands over her knees and waited for her mama to continue.

“Dr. Clarkson is coming to talk to me today about something that… I usually don’t discuss. Before he gets here, I want to speak to you about it.” Cora explained.

“About what?” Mary asked. There were very few things that her mama found difficult to discuss. Sybil, of course, was one of them. But Mary had a feeling that Sybil would not be the topic of conversation today.

Cora let out another sigh, clearly steeling herself for something arduous. She glanced at the door, found it bare, then looked back to her eldest.
“You know… that which we don’t talk about?” Cora asked. “Your…”

She gestured blankly with a hand, unable to say the word.

Mary pursed her lips, internally shocked that the topic of conversation had fallen upon him.

Her twin.

“My twin,” Mary said softly. Cora nodded.

“… Well, if it’s going to be that dark, I ought to ring Carson for tea,” Mary said.

“Don’t,” Cora stopped her. “I’d rather we discuss this alone. I’m not strong enough to stand up to opposition just yet.”

“Who on earth would give you opposition?” Mary asked.

“Your father,” Cora replied.

Mary’s brow crinkled, her gaze darkening at her mother’s words.

Though it was commonly given that her twin was not a topic for conversation, the theory of why was often divided. Partly, it could be said that her mama was the one that couldn’t take it; any mention of Mary’s twin made her mother weep out of grief for her lost child. At the same time, however, her father was just as dismal on the subject. Though he would not cry, he would grow dark and tense. He had a penchant for slamming doors, storming from room to room until he’d calmed down. Mary had to wonder, deep down, who had truly dealt with their grief between the two of them. For all his blather that he was past grieving for her twin, Mary had a feeling that her papa missed him just as much as her mother. He just didn’t have the courage to face it.

“I’m going to tell you this story,” Cora began, “But just once, so I want you to listen well and remember it. Do you recall anything from when you were a baby? Do you remember… him?”

That was a hard question to answer. The earliest memory that Mary had was being in a cot. Someone had been beside her, though she couldn’t firmly say who. All she’d known was that she was safe and warm. That whoever was beside her loved her dearly. She could remember clinging to someone. She could remember being utterly at peace.

“Faintly,” she replied. “I remember how we clung to one another to keep warm. But not much more. Why?”

“You know how your arm has a mark?”

“Oh yes—” Mary looked down to her left forearm, where her birthmark sat covered by powders. It had always brought her great distress as a young woman, for fair unblemished skin had been considered ideal in a suitable bride. She’d covered it with powders from an early age and had tried to forget it most of the time. When in the bath, Mary had often remarked that the birthmark looked a bit like a skull.

“My little devil spot,” Mary ran her fingers over where the powders kept it hidden. It was there, hidden but faintly revealed about the edges.

“Well, he had it too,” Cora explained. This would make sense, after all. They had been twins. “It was identical to yours. Your arms were pressed together when you were born. Like this—“

Cora reached out and took Mary’s arm, pressing it from elbow to fingertip so that they were
completely flush against the other. Then, her mama interlaced their fingers so that they were holding hands.

“You were born holding hands,” Cora explained as she pulled away. She re-settled herself back down on the couch with a dismal air. “You were so wrapped up in one another, it took a minute for Dr. Clarkson to pull you apart.”

She smiled gently, as if recalling a distant if beloved memory. “We thought at first that you were born deformed. I can remember crying, desperate to hold you. But then… you finally let go of one another and we could see that you were perfectly healthy. Two babies instead of one. A boy and a girl. James and Mary.”

Cora’s eyes had grown misty. She blinked several times, pausing until she felt more emotionally controlled.

“There was this servant, you see This maid,” Cora paused, her lips becoming pursed. Mary could hear the anger in her voice. “This idiotic girl. She thought that the birthmark you both bore was a sign that you were demons. I heard rumors that she practiced witchcraft, but I didn’t want to believe it. On April 30th, 1891… everything changed.” Cora shook her head, eyes closed as she steeled herself for the bitter truth.

“I was woken up by Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes. There was a massive squabble in the nursery. That stupid girl had been caught preforming a ritual. She’d burned your brother’s arm, right over his mark. Burned it so bad the skin was charred black.”

Mary sucked in a breath, horrified at the notion. Her poor twin brother…

“Of course, your brother screamed out in pain and the nursemaid woke up. She beat off the maid, but the damage was done. We had to call for Dr. Clarkson and the police. I held him all through the night. My poor baby…” Cora’s bottom lip trembled.

She paused, having to take a moment to collect herself.

“But if this is too much, please do not think you have to continue,” Mary urged.

“I do have to continue,” Cora replied. “Because something happened yesterday, and you need to know about it.”

Mary was taken aback. As far as she knew, yesterday had been rather hellish with her ruining Edith’s life and Barrow nearly taking his. What else could have happened?

“Dr. Clarkson tended to your brother. The burn was rather serious, but it was slowly beginning to heal. He developed this raw mark over where the birthmark had once been. We had pictures taken. The maid was arrested, of course… I thought things would go back to normal. But May 18th proved me wrong.”

Mary nodded, well aware of May 18th’s pull. Every year, her mother would mourn, dressing in black and refusing to socialize. It was her yearly tribute to the day that her brother had been abducted.

Cora sniffed, a slight tear forming in her eye. Sympathetic, Mary reached into her pocket and pulled out a lace handkerchief for her mother to use. She took it with silent gratitude, dabbing at the underside of her eyes. She refolded the handkerchief several times, seeming to find comfort in the feeling of lace beneath her fingers.
“I thought for certain it was that stupid child who had taken your brother. But how could it be when she’d been arrested,” Cora mused.

“And the police never found anything?” Mary asked.

“Nothing,” Cora shook her head. “But we didn’t stop searching for three years, until Edith was born. Then, it was like all the fight went out of your father. He wept for months, but the damage was done. He stopped looking. He gave up. We had to move on with our lives. But I never forgot my son… Never.”

At this, Cora reached to her neck where a slim gold chain could be seen dipping beneath the collar of her purple frock. She pulled it free to reveal a chain so long it might have gone past her breasts; at the very end lay a heavy round locket. She opened it, to show that it was double hinged with four frames inside. She took her necklace off and passed it to Mary so that she might see.

Curious, Mary took it, amazed to find that inside each frame was a tin type photograph that perfectly captured four sleeping infants. Beneath each photo was a name carved into the gold framing: James, Mary, Edith, Sybil.

“Darling Sybil,” Mary whispered, unable to keep from touching the photograph of her deceased sister. But then, she found herself looking at her brother, marveling at how similar they were. Had the photographs not bore names, she wouldn’t have known who was who.

“We were alike in every way, weren’t we?” She mused.

“All but one,” Cora teased. Mary glanced at her mama, unsure, until Cora raised an amused eyebrow.

“Ah, well, we can’t have everything,” Mary snorted, handing her mother back her necklace. Cora put it back around her neck, tucking it deep out of sight so that it wouldn’t impede on the lace collar of her frock.

“So why are you telling me this?” Mary asked. “What happened yesterday to make you feel that this needed to be discussed?”

“Before I tell you, I must warn you that your father doesn’t want me talking about it with you. But I feel that, as his twin sister, you above all have a right to know.”

“Go on.”

“Yesterday, when Barrow attempted to take his life, Dr. Clarkson was stitching him up and he found… a mark… on his arm.”

Cora met Mary’s eyes and held it, her gaze clear. “It was absolutely the same,” She whispered. “In the same place, the same shape. It was the mark your brother bore.”

Mary was taken aback.

It was unnervingly coincidental, but… but it couldn’t be more than that, surely? Barrow was a servant. He’d been a servant all his life. He’d served their family well, and yet the more Mary thought of it, the more she realized how similar they rather looked.

Sharp features, dark hair, piercing eyes, red lips… All of them were the same. Could it be?
But it was preposterous! Absolutely preposterous!

“I- “Mary didn’t know what to say.

“Dr. Clarkson showed me, and I suddenly realized just how… just how similar the pair of you look.”

“You can’t be serious,” Mary whispered.

“Mary.” Cora was plaintive, desperate to be understood. “I would not have spoken about this subject if I wasn’t.”

She needed to think. To pace

Mary rose from the couch, walking back and forth as she considered the implications of this find. The most important thing to do, she reasoned, was to speak with Barrow. She had a good rapport with the man, she understood him well. She knew that most below stairs found him to be obnoxious, but the same could be said of her above stairs so what did it matter? Barrow adored George, treating him like his own son. Mary had always found Barrow to be resourceful and smart. Clearly the misery inside the man had taken hold of his senses, but who could blame him after all he’d endured in his life. Mary had no idea what it felt like to be attracted to the same sex, but she had a feeling it wasn’t pleasant even with today’s modern views.

“Does Barrow know?” Mary asked

“No,” her mama replied. She was watching Mary, keen to how she reacted.

“Well then,” Mary decided, turning back around to face her mama square on. “We have to talk to him and find out about his life. If there are any more similarities, we have to know.”

“I agree,” Cora said at once, talking quickly as if she feared someone might enter the room and cut their conversation short. “But your father is hard pressed for me to let it go. He visited Dr. Clarkson earlier today in the village and I’m certain it was to tell the man off. That’s why I called him here.”

“Well he can’t make me let it go,” Mary scoffed. “I want answers.”

“So long as you share them with me,” Cora urged. But that had never been in the question. Mary knew implicitly just how much her mother had grieved over her brother. If this is what it took for them both to find some peace, then so be it.

The door to the entrance hall opened to reveal Carson, his livery pressed, and his hair smoothed flat with pomade. He looked oddly somber, something heavy and weighted behind his kind brown eyes.

“Dr. Clarkson is here to see you, My Lady,” Carson said.

“Thank you, Carson,” Cora sat up better upon the couch. “We’ll take tea.”

“Very good, My Lady,” Carson said. He stepped away from the door, leaving the two women in peace. Yet their solitude was short lived as Dr. Clarkson entered, carrying his briefcase and looking, in a word, ruffled.

“Lady Grantham, Lady Mary,” Dr. Clarkson greeted them both, closing the door behind them so that they might have some solitude. “I understand Lord Grantham is away?”

“In the village, yes,” her mother replied. “That’s why I’ve called you here now.”

“So, it seems you’re already aware of the problem,” Dr. Clarkson said. Mary could hear the tiniest
edge of irritation in the man’s voice.

“I gather Lord Grantham has been less that hospitable on the subject?” Mary asked.

“You could say that, yes,” Dr. Clarkson grumbled. He sat down across from Mary, putting his briefcase upon his lap only to open it at the clasps. “He visited me earlier this afternoon with a lot to say on the subject of yesterday.”

“Please don’t listen to him,” Cora urged. “I still have things to discuss with you.”

“Well, before we get into all of that, how are you feeling?” Dr. Clarkson asked.

“Determined, Doctor,” Cora replied. Dr. Clarkson smiled, but he wasn’t finished. “You’re not dizzy, no emotional upsets or crying spells?”

“No,” Cora replied. “Not since yesterday. I woke up with a bit of a headache though.”

“A beechams will solve that,” Dr. Clarkson assured her. He rifled through his briefcase, pulling out a powder packet to hand it over. Cora accepted it with a nod of thanks.

“How is Barrow doing?” Mary could not help but ask. “Have you seen him?”

“I just got finished looking in on him,” Dr. Clarkson replied. “You’ll forgive me that I didn’t’ come to you directly.”

“Certainly,” Cora said at once. “I completely understand. How is he?”

Dr. Clarkson opened his mouth, but then closed it. Clearly words were failing him. Suddenly Mary’s heart began to pound in her throat, anxious at the thought of Barrow dying.

“Will he live?” She begged.

“It’s not a question of ‘will’, M’lady,” Dr. Clarkson explained. “It’s a question of ‘want’. I can keep a man alive easily, but giving him the mental and emotional strength to live himself? That’s completely different.”

“We’ll help in any way that we can,” Cora said.

“Well, I confess that Rustington isn’t out of the question as of yet,” Dr. Clarkson explained. Mary winced, thinking of padded cells and tins full of hot gruel.

“He wouldn’t make it a week,” Mary mused.

“So, you see our predicament,” Dr. Clarkson replied. “I don’t know what to do with him, but I can’t send him anywhere else. For better or for worse, I think Barrow should remain at the abbey until he regains the mental and emotional strength to fend for himself.”

“I completely agree,” Cora said. She ran her finger absently over the beechams packet in her hand.

The door opened once again to reveal Carson bearing a tea tray. Normally, this would be the job of Andrew the footman or even Barrow. Today, however, it seemed that the staff was stretched thin. The center piece of the tea tray was a three-tier curate stand, glimmering in silver. At the top, raspberry scones and cheese biscuits held court. Beneath were cucumber sandwiches and little savories. At the very bottom were a selection of tiny petite fours, gilded with little yellow lemons.
made of painted sugar.

Carson began to pour tea, only to pause when Cora offered him the beechams.

“Carson, would you be so good as to pour me a glass of water?” Cora asked. “Dr. Clarkson wants me to have a beechams.”

“Certainly, My Lady,” Carson took the packet from her, working with haste to create a tonic. “I hope that you are well, M’lady?”

“I’m perfectly fine,” Cora soothed. “Just a bit of a headache.”

“How is Barrow doing?” Mary asked. Carson paused, in the middle of stirring the beechams into a cup of water for her mama.

“Dr. Clarkson seems to think we’re not out of the clear,” Mary explained. “I was wondering how you felt on the matter.”

“I feel it is a miracle that he is alive, My Lady,” Carson replied. There was a peculiar timid edge in his voice that Mary did not find comforting to hear. Carson offered her mama the beechams, which she drank only to grimace.

“Why must medicine be so foul,” She muttered. She offered Carson back the finished glass, which he replaced at once with a soothing cup of rose hip tea. Her mama sighed, soothed by the taste.

Mary accepted her own cup, stirring in a splash of honey. Dr. Clarkson abstained, clearly having had his own tea back at the hospital.

“Before we begin, I feel it’s pertinent for me to say that Lord Grantham has explicitly asked me to tell you that this cannot be stretched out,” Dr. Clarkson said. “He doesn’t want this to be a topic of discussion.”

“Well he can’t dissuade me,” Mary replied. “I’m an adult, and if I care to speak on such things then I shall.”

“… I suppose that’s true,” Dr. Clarkson shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“Then shall we discuss?” Mary offered.

“Well, as a matter of fact, I brought something for you,” Dr. Clarkson reached back into his briefcase, withdrawing a manila folder with photographs attached. He took one out and offered it to Mary, who accepted it to find it was of an infant swaddled in cloth with a terrible burn him his left forearm. He was captured mid-wail, toothless mouth opened wide and eyes glimmering with tears. Mary winced, unable to keep from feeling sympathy for the poor babe. Her poor twin.

“That’s the picture of your brother Master James,” Dr. Clarkson explained. “Along with the wound that was inflicted by the maid Carney.”

“Carney?” Mary asked, confused.

“That was her name,” Cora muttered bitterly into her teacup. “Laura Carney. Idiotic child.”

“I see,” Mary returned her attention to the picture, noting how pale her twin’s skin seemed to be. He was practically the color of milk, the tin type photograph revealing him as pure white.

“We can use that photograph to compare,” Dr. Clarkson explained. “But I should add that there is a
"A foolproof way to test for paternity," he added. "Given that you would technically be his twin, Lady Mary, we could take a sample of your blood and compare it with Barrow’s. There’s a modern invention called the serological test. It can detect hereditary traces within a person’s blood."

"Then we must do it!" Mary urged. Dr. Clarkson shook his head, unsure.

"Forgive me for being blunt, but Barrow suffered a great loss of blood yesterday," Dr. Clarkson urged. "It will take several weeks before he is well enough to undergo a serological sampling."

Mary suddenly felt very foolish; of course, Barrow wouldn’t be able to give blood a day after slitting his wrists. Where had her head been?

"Maybe we should talk to Barrow first," Cora said. "Just to see what his past is. It may be that... that we don’t even need a serological test." The misery in her voice was a terrible thing to hear. Suddenly Mary felt terribly sympathetic for her poor mama, desperately searching for her son even thirty years after he’d gone missing.

"Forgive me, M’lady," Carson interjected, causing everyone to look around. The aged butler looked quite nervous in that moment.

"... I wonder if now is the best time to approach Thomas," Carson murmured. It was strange to hear him use Barrow’s Christian name. "He’s... not himself."

"He’ll talk to me, Carson," Mary assured him. "We understand one another."

"Of course, M’lady," Carson would not fight against her on any issue. "But I worry that he may not be able to handle intense conversation. He’s deeply shaken. We can’t even get him to eat."

At this, Dr. Clarkson was concerned, "Has he been taking the supplements I left?"

"I’m afraid not, sir," Carson said. Dr. Clarkson pursed his lips, drumming his fingers in thought upon the arm of his chair. "He won’t even touch the spoon. Mrs. Hughes and Ms. Baxter have tried to get him to eat but... I’m afraid he’s just not interested in living."

"Right," Dr. Clarkson rose from his chair. "Then I ought to go see him at once and discuss that with him."

"Let us go with you," Mary urged. "We won’t press Barrow hard."

"Mary help me up," Cora asked. Mary did as her mama bade, though Carson abdicated his post to assist on her other side.

"M’lady are you sure that you should test yourself?" Carson murmured.

"Don’t worry Carson," Cora gave him a loving smile. "I’m an American. Have gun, will travel."

Carson could not help but snort a bit at that.

The four of them left the pink tea room, taking their time as they wandered to the servant’s stairwell. As soon as Carson opened the door, they were greeted by the sounds of babbling laughter echoing from below and the banging of pots and pans from the kitchen.

"Daisy, where are your eyes?" Mrs. Patmore was squawking. "Stop being dozy with Andy and focus on the paté!"
Carson lead the way upstairs; Mary noted the temperature rising to an awful sweltering heat as they reached the attics. She could not help but fan herself a little bit. How on earth could the servant’s sleep in the summer months?

“Goodness, it’s hot up here,” Her mama complained. “How on earth do you stand it, Carson?”

“I’m very lucky to live in a cottage now with your ladyship’s blessing,” Carson said. “But we tend to open the windows at night to tempt in a breeze.”

“I wish there were a way of keeping rooms cool in the summer,” Cora lamented.

“And hot in the winter,” Mary added. No doubt the colder months of England brought the attics to a bone chilling temperature.

They paused beside Barrow’s room, with Carson carefully rapping on the door before entering. Mary winced at the sight that greeted her eyes.

Barrow, normally so proud and tall, was now hunched over in bed. His gaunt, listless expression seemed more like that of a smashed porcelain doll than a human being. Though his chest rose and fell every so often with an indication of breath being drawn, he seemed dead. Like his very soul had fled from him in a desperate attempt to be free somewhere else.

Mary couldn’t stand it.

“…Thomas,” Dr. Clarkson pushed to the front of their group, taking up Barrow’s bedside chair to sit beside him at eye level. “Mr. Carson has just informed me that you’re not taking your supplements or eating. You need to do both if you want to get well.”

Barrow did not answer.
It unnerved her.

Mary let go of her mama’s arm, though Cora reached out to bring her back in. She avoided her mother’s hands, stepping around Carson and Dr. Clarkson so that she could sit on Barrow’s bedside before him.

Her memory was a traitorous thing, reminding her of how Barrow had lifted George in his arms to pretend to be an airplane; of how he’d let George ride on his back to tea time as his personal pony.

“…Thomas,” Mary whispered. “Can you hear me?”

Barrow’s listless blue eyes swiveled a bit in her direction, landing upon her face. When he realized that she was beside him, he grew distressed.

“Please,” He croaked out. “Don’t. I can’t find work-“

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mary soothed him at once, reaching out to put a hand upon his shoulder. “This isn’t about your position in the house!”

“You’re quite safe here, Thomas,” Cora added from the doorway. “No one is going to make you go anywhere.”

“We just want to talk to you for a moment,” Mary said. “Can you sit up?”

Barrow tried, though it was a terribly pathetic thing to watch. So weak was he, so exhausted, that he could not manage to move his arms very far. When attempted to push his body into a sitting position,
his strength crumpled, and he ended up falling back onto bed with a soft ‘oomph’.

Carson stepped around Dr. Clarkson’s chair, taking Barrow’s shoulders in hand to forcibly help him into a sitting position. Mary aided him as best she could, moving a few pillows so that they rested behind Barrow’s back and supported him.

Able to relax in a sitting position, Barrow shuddered. He was suddenly breaking out into a thin cold sweat, his pale skin growing green at the tinge.

Mary remembered how Matthew had become violently ill in front of her during his time recovering after the war. Of how he’d looked just the same.

Mary snatched up the wicker bin at Dr. Clarkson’s feet, and put it in front of Barrow just in time as he heaved and vomited.

“It’s alright—Dr. Clarkson soothed his patient, taking Barrow’s pulse at his neck. “Just a bit of dizziness.”

But Barrow’s stomach was so empty that he couldn’t even through up. Instead he just kept dry heaving, coughing and desperately sucking in air whenever he could. Carson looked stricken.

“This isn’t the time to ask him questions,” Dr. Clarkson said.

“Just give him a moment,” Mary whispered. “Let him breath.”

When Barrow stopped dry heaving, Mary tentatively set his wicker bin aside to offer him a glass of water instead.

Barrow shook his head, turning his face physically away so that the glass could not touch his lips.

“Thomas, you have to eat something,” Dr. Clarkson urged. “If you don’t, I’ll have no choice but to call for Rustington. Is that what you want?”

Barrow shook his head again, tears sparkling in the corners of his eyes.

“Well then, eat!” Dr. Clarkson demanded. “Or drink some water at the very least.”

Barrow looked back at Mary; when their eyes met, something terrible and dark sparked deep inside of her. Some strange implicit understanding that she could not ignore. Barrow and she existed in two opposite worlds, yet their positions were unnervingly similar. Their outlooks, their attitudes, their situations and how they handled them.

They were like shadows of the other.

“Please,” Mary whispered, offering the glass of water again. Barrow finally made to take it, but his grip was weak, and his fingers shook. Mary helped him to sip for a moment, a wave of relief filling her up as Barrow finally consumed something.

She set the glass aside, soothed.

Cora was having difficulty standing by herself. She wandered over to Barrow’s bedside, and Dr. Clarkson abdicated his chair at once so that she could take it instead. Barrow refused to meet her hopeful gaze, instead shivering against his headboard with both eyes closed.

“Barrow, Lady Grantham and I wanted to speak to you about something,” Mary explained. “If you’re up to it.”
Barrow slowly opened his eyes, looking at her with a quizzical expression. She took that as an indication to continue.

“The burn on your arm. May we see it?” Mary asked.

“Burn?” Barrow croaked, looking down to his left forearm which lay atop his thin coverlet. He slowly turned it over to reveal the scarred wound now white with age.

At once, Cora handed the photograph over to Mary so that she might compare Barrow’s wound with her brother’s.

She did so, only to draw back unnerved. They were identical.

“…My god,” Carson was staring from over Cora’s shoulder. “They’re identical.”

“Identical?” Barrow repeated the word, utterly confused. He looked down at the picture in Mary’s hands, reaching out to take it with trembling fingertips. But before he could, Mary rolled up the sleeve of her own frock to reveal her left forearm. She wiped away her concealing powders with her handkerchief, tucking it safely away into the pocket of her skirt before pressing her arm against Barrows. His skin was clammy and cold, but more to the point Mary was shocked to find their skin colors were the same milky white shade.

What was more, her birthmark aligned perfectly with Barrow’s burn mark. They were in the exact same place, the exact same shape.

Cora gasped, a hand at her throat. Mary looked back at her mother, shocked, and found her in tears. Cora did not make to hide her emotions, tears spilling down her pale cheeks as she prostrated herself before Barrow’s bedside.

“Thomas, tell me about your childhood,” Cora begged.

Barrow blinked, mouth open but unable to speak. He was too weak, too confused to truly get words out.

“But…” He couldn’t make out much more.

“Tell me about your parents!” Lady Grantham begged. “Your family! Were you adopted?!?” Her voice reached an unnerving pitch. She was close to shouting.

Barrow withdrew, terrified.

“How did you get the mark on your arm?!” Cora reached forward, grabbing at his arm. Barrow brought his arms up around his face, looking frightened as if he thought her mother might strike him.

“I don’t know-“He managed to get out.

“Look at my face!” Cora begged. She managed to bat Barrow’s arms down, and in a shocking move cupped his face in her hands. She was forcing him to look at her, forcing him to stare at her tears despite his terror. “Look at my face, do you not remember it?!”

Barrow said nothing, petrified.

“Mama, you’re frightening him,” Mary reached out and brought her mother’s hands away from Barrow’s gaunt face.
“M’lady-” Carson reached out to brace Cora, though she crumpled beneath his hands and began to wail.

“James-!” Cora reached out with her hands again, only to be stopped by Mary. At this point, Barrow looked close to fainting from fright. Mary could not help but feel terribly sorry for the man.

“I think we need to stop,” Dr. Clarkson urged.

Cora broke down, sobbing hysterically into her hands.

“My baby-!” She howled through her fingers. “Why my baby?! Why not me?!"

Carson helped Cora from her chair, holding her close to his side as he helped her to walk away. Dr. Clarkson went with him, leaving only Mary at Barrow’s bedside. She could not deny her mother, not when she was in need, but as Mary looked back to Barrow she knew that he deserved a full explanation.

“I will come back,” She promised him. He blinked, mouth still slack with confusion. “I’ll come back and explain everything to you, I promise.”

Barrow nodded. He seemed unsure of what else to do.

Mary left him, harrying after her mother and the others before she could be left behind. In her haste, she forgot to take with her the picture of her infant brother. It remained in Barrow’s lap, who picked it up to stare at it.

He slowly ran a pale thumb over the written name: *James Robert Crawley IV*

It felt oddly familiar.
A Dead End

Chapter Summary

Mary looks further into the hope that Barrow is her brother, only to be disappointed... so she turns to the one man that knows her best.

Chapter Notes

No trigger warnings for today. My collaborator for Volver is recovering after flying internationally to resettle in her new home. She'll be ready to rock and roll in a little while, but I do ask for your patience as she recuperates and regains her strength.

“Have you lost your mind?!”

Mary stood stony faced and silent, unflinching in the face of her irate father. It really was poor luck that Robert Crawley had returned home from tea with Granny only to find his wife in hysterics and Dr. Clarkson desperately trying to calm her down. As it stood now, dinner was postponed, and Cora was in bed, sleeping off a small dosage of Laudanum prescribe to her by Dr. Clarkson.

“I told you to dissuade her, and instead you not only put her into another panic, but you also drag poor Barrow into it as well! As if he hasn’t got enough on his mind already! I ought to inform the board about this-!”

“Oh, honestly papa!” Mary cried out. Dr. Clarkson was the color of a sheet next to her. “It’s not Dr. Clarkson’s fault that this occurred, it’s mine. I was the one who asked to speak to Thomas, and I don’t regret it! The mark on his arm matches mine in every way, and Dr. Clarkson says that there is a test we can take to confirm-“

But Mary was cut off by her father blustering about, each realization more angering than the last.

“You- you did what-!?!” Robert cut Mary off before she could even begin to explain, “And what test could possibly peel back decades of my family’s pain-!?"

“There is a blood test, Lord Grantham,” Dr. Clarkson spoke up. He was absolutely haggard by this point, looking in need of a stiff drink and a soft bed. “It’s called the Serological test.”

Robert narrowed his eyes, pausing in his pacing as he considered the outcomes. “And is it fool proof?”

“No, but-“

“So, in other words, it’s useless!” Robert cried out, resuming pacing. Mary let out an exasperated huff, smacking her forehead with a gentle palm.

“It’s better than nothing, M’lord,” Dr. Clarkson urged. “And if I may be entirely frank with you, you’re acting entirely out of character! What if Barrow was your son-? What if- “
“I’ve already made my position quite clear regarding that matter,” Robert wouldn’t hear a word of it, “His proclivities deny all paternity.”

“What are you talking about?” Mary narrowed her eyes, noting that her father seemed slightly embarrassed. What was he hinting at that he couldn’t say outright?

“…Barrow is…” Robert gestured for a moment, only to lamely add, “More of an artist than a sportsman-“

“Oh Papa!” Mary cried out, exasperated. Of all the things to deny paternity over, Robert had chosen that?! “Honestly, who cares about all that?!"

“Your brother—my son—was a normal baby!” Robert’s cheeks were bright red, heat flooding his aged face at being called out. Dr. Clarkson was making irritable noises in the background, clearly fighting down his own opinion.

“I thought you didn’t judge men like Barrow!” It was no secret that Robert did not hold Barrow’s peculiarities against him. Mary had once heard her father claim to Bates that he himself had been kissed on the mouth at Eton.

“When it’s someone else’s son, it’s a different matter,” Robert explained. For a moment, Mary could not help but feel slightly disgusted by her father. What a shameful thing to say!

“… I don’t believe you,” Mary turned away, taking a moment to recompose herself. Dr. Clarkson let out a breath, pulling at his starched collar to ease his own discomfort.

Robert tried to gain the moral high ground again, always unhappy to be viewed in a less than generous light. Mary, you’re older you’ll understand.”

“I’m thirty-five!” Mary turned, rounding on her father at once. “How much older do you want me to be? Or am I to wait until I’m on a cane like Granny to understand how you can be so cruel to a man who has served you nearly all his life!”

“I won’t discuss this anymore,” Her father turned away, striding towards a crystal decanter full of whiskey. Though it was hardly time for supper, he poured himself a glass.

“Lord Grantham, your ulcer!” Dr. Clarkson urged, even as he put the glass to his mouth. Robert let out a tiny groan of disappointment, setting his glass back down next to the decanter only to stare at it longingly.

“Well you might be willing to throw in the towel, but I am not!” Mary could not help but think of her mother’s locket. Of how she kept the pictures of her children close no matter the time of day.

“Mary-“Her father tried to cut her off, but Mary would not listen.

“It’s my blood in question, and Barrows!” Mary declared. “He’s too ill to give blood now, but I’m still going to speak with him-“

“I forbid it!” Robert shouted from the bar.

“I don’t care!” Mary shouted back.

Dr. Clarkson looked eager to sink into the floor and not be bothered again. Robert was taken aback, shocked by Mary’s tone. There were many things in this world that Mary was willing to back her father on… her brother was not one of them.
He was like some deep black wound inside of her, a secret place only her ugliest demons knew about. Somewhere in her soul, pressed tight to her breast where she kept an image of Matthew the last time that she had seen him alive, was the memory of a hand she’d held in a warm cot. A soft dewy breath upon her cheek of her twin asleep beside her.

“What I do, I do for my twin, and for mama. And frankly, I do it for you too!” Mary added, just for effort.

“If you cared about me, you wouldn’t hurt me in such a way!”

“What do you have to lose, papa?” Mary demanded, hands outspread between them. “The worst outcome is that my brother is dead, and you’ve already lived under that notion for years.”

“You don’t understand!” Robert smacked a hand down upon the bar, causing the glass decanter to rattle ominously. Mary bristled, irritated and wary in the face of her father’s notorious temper. Next to her, Dr. Clarkson caught Mary’s eye and silently implored her to be silent.

Robert recovered himself after a moment, touching his temple to smooth back a stray curly gray hair that had fallen out of place.

“You don’t know what it is…to have hope and lose it,” Robert sighed, pausing as he braced himself upon the bar. The weight of his own memories seemed to be dragging him into the earth. “To have nothing but a photo of a child that you loved, and even that be a photo of a burn some vile harlot imposed. Your brother’s memory deserves better.”

“…I agree,” Mary replied. Her tone was calm, but cold. “Which is why I’m going to try and find out what happened to him. For better or for worse. Even if Barrow’s a dead end, I want to try and find out what truly happened to my twin.”

Her father did not move from the bar, still bracing himself.

When the terrible silence continued on Dr. Clarkson tentatively spoke up.

“…Lord Grantham, please understand I did not come here today with the intent of bringing chaos into your home,” he said. “Lady Mary and Lady Grantham were determined to speak to Barrow. I… I didn’t feel comfortable with it, but I didn’t know what else to do.”

Robert sighed, looking way from both Mary and Dr. Clarkson.

“…But I agree with Lady Mary,” Dr. Clarkson said. “As the doctor who delivered your son, I tell you now that you have nothing to lose by investigating- “

But Robert had had enough. He jerked up from the bar and strode away from Mary and Dr. Clarkson at such a clipped pace that he nearly knocked over a newspaper on a side table. He slammed the door to the ante library shut behind him, leaving Mary and Dr. Clarkson alone to commiserate together.

“…Well…” Dr. Clarkson sighed and pursed his lips. “It was nice running Downton Hospital.”

“Don’t throw in the towel yet,” Mary muttered.

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Quiet pervaded his bedroom, broken only distantly by the muted sounds of maids walking up and
down the attic stairs.

Thomas Barrow had suffered many horrid things in life, from a vicious domineering father to emotional blackmail at the hands of a lover. Now, however, at the age of thirty-five, he found himself suffering something entirely new. He had not expected to live, and yet he had been forced to by intervening workmates. He supposed, if he had common decency, he might feel compelled to be grateful to Phyllis Baxter and Andy Parker. As it stood, he found himself lying in bed feeling nothing.

No anger.
No sorrow.
No fear.
Nothing.

There was this queer little hope inside of him, more of a hypothesis than anything, that told him if he simply kept from feeling emotion he would eventually cease to exist all together. He’d fade away, like too little tea in too much water, till nothing was left. Not even a stain on the wall to insist he’d once been there.

His wrists itched mercilessly. Though Dr. Clarkson had been good enough to wrap his wrists and stitch his cuts closed, Thomas had resisted all forms of kindness by pulling the wraps forcibly away to reveal the garish wounds beneath. He’d picked at the stitches, wishing he could rip them out, and as a result had incurred a bloody mess (quite literally). When Dr. Clarkson had returned the day before, he’d had to wrap Thomas’ wrists back up again. He’d not said a word, but his visit had served as a prelude to Thomas’ second visitation which had been entirely…

Disturbing.

Thomas had absolutely no idea who James Crawley was, though his imagination had been spinning in circles for a day. But Lady Grantham’s breakdown was downright frightening. To have her begging him to remember her face, as if he hadn’t seen it every day for the past fifteen years of his life, was like something out of a surreal nickelodeon.

What had it all meant?
Why had it even happened in the first place?

Thomas might have figured that he’d hallucinated it, but the photograph of James Crawley had been left behind. It was the damning evidence that the confrontation had in fact occurred.

Thomas had sat it on his bedside table face down so as not to have to look at the infant. The burn mark on its arm looked grizzly and put his stomach into knots.

A gentle knock on the door ought to have roused him from bed, or at least given him pause. Instead, Thomas felt nothing. He contemplated closing his eyes, pretending to be asleep, but in the end could not summon up the energy to try.

So, he simply lay in bed, eyes open but gaze distant, and allowed his intruder in without comment.

“May I come in?”

It was Lady Mary, which was a surprise. Thomas blinked, unable to summon the energy to rise up and greet her properly.

“Have you come to fire me?” Thomas mumbled. He wondered how long he could get away with impertinence.
“Hardly,” Lady Mary shut the door so that the two of them could be garnered some privacy. Drawing up his bedside chair, Mary sat down tentatively by his head so that they could look at each other without Thomas having to strain himself.

She seemed exhausted, though she had no right to be. Thomas wondered what she’d spent her day doing; taking tea and making house calls no doubt.

“Is her ladyship alright?” Thomas mumbled. He found it was easier to stare at Lady Mary’s knees instead of her face. She was wearing a dark green frock in a cotton fabric. Stitched details in white gave a geometric design to the trim and neck.

“She’s resting,” Lady Mary said Thomas took that to mean that no, Lady Grantham was not alright. “I wanted to explain what happened yesterday, and why everything fell apart so unexpectedly. But before I do, I was wondering if you might tell me how you are.”

“T’m alive,” Thomas muttered, damning himself for it.

“Are you happy to be alive?” Lady Mary asked.
For a moment, Thomas did not respond. Then, with biting sarcasm, he managed to say, “Chuffed.”

Lady Mary shifted in her chair, leaning forward a bit so that the fringe of her bob swayed by her chin. “What would make you happy?”

Now that was an interesting question. Thomas debated on it for a moment, considering all the things in life that he did not have, but wanted.

A loving relationship, children, better pay, workmates that didn’t loathe him, a family that embraced him…

“A new life,” Thomas finally said, for it was the only thing that could encompass all the other tiny details.

“Strange,” Lady Mary mused. “Sometimes I feel the same.”

“I’d take your life in a pinch,” Thomas mumbled. Men falling over her, George at her side, riches, a loving family, fancy dining, and no work? Please and thank you.

“You wouldn’t if you knew the half of it,” Lady Mary warned. Thomas found himself far from convinced.

“… The picture is on my bedside table,” Thomas said. Lady Mary looked around with a start, clearly having looked over the picture in her intent to be a good visitor. She took it at once, and carefully pocketed it so that it would not crease.

“I promised I’d tell you what the kerfuffle was about yesterday,” Lady Mary paused, a tiny wry smile gracing her thin lips. “Shall I whisper secrets to you like a naughty child?”

“Who would I tell?” Thomas shrugged.

“It’s only that it involves a deep family secret,” Lady Mary explained, “And it can never be repeated to another. A few know about it already… Mr. Carson, Mrs. Hughes, and Mrs. Patmore. But that’s the extent of it. None of the younger staff were here at the time. As a matter of fact, they weren’t even born.”
Thomas blinked, taken aback.

If there was one thing he adored, it was a good secret. Particularly one the rest of the staff didn’t know about. But there was something in the way Lady Mary said it. Something in the way that she met his gaze and held it. She was imploring him, trusting him with something that clearly bothered her deeply. A younger, more brash Thomas might have been gleeful at the idea of having blackmail over a member of the family. But Thomas was older knew, feeble and broken himself. He didn’t know if he could handle any more secrets.

“Born, M’lady?”

Lady Mary sighed, pursing her lips for a moment as she internally searched for the correct words to best convey her grief.

“When I was born, I was born a twin.”

Thomas’ eyebrows were in danger of vanishing into his hairline. She was what?

“Lady Grantham had both a boy and a girl… My brother and I,” Lady Mary explained. “His name was James Robert Crawley, and he was the heir to Downton from birth. We were entangled from the beginning, you see. We had matching marks on our forearms. I’ve always hidden mine with powders, but I’ll show you now.”

Lady Mary paused in her store to hold out her left forearm. She rolled up the sleeve of her olive frock to reveal a slightly dark patch of skin that was barely hidden by a light dampening of paste. She wiped the residue away, revealing the mark to be quite dark and in the queer shape of a skull. Thomas stared, entranced through he knew it was vulgar to look at a lady in such a way.

“When we were around a year and a half old, an insane maid decided that our marks were the sign of the Devil,” Lady Mary rolled her sleeve pack down, delicately cleaning her fingers with her handkerchief. Her tone was growing tense, a dark anger flickering behind her beautiful blue eyes.

“She crept into the nursery one night and burned my brother with a hot iron upon his birthmark.”

Thomas hissed through clenched teeth on instinct. What a beastly thing to do to a child!

“Of course, she was caught, but the damage was done,” Lady Mary explained. “She was arrested and imprisoned, that goes without saying, but not two weeks later my brother was stolen from his crib in the dead of night. He vanished, practically into thin air. Lord Grantham searched desperately for three years, but when Lady Edith was born he simply…”

Lady Mary paused, shaking her head a little. Her tone was bleak. “He simply lost all hope. My brother was gone, in his eyes. I suppose he’d been heartbroken for too long. We never found my brother. To this day, I don’t know where he is, or if he’s even still alive. That’s why when Dr. Clarkson saw this burn mark upon your arm, he told mama—” Lady Mary caught herself. “Lady Grantham, rather.”

She sagged under the weight of her admission, exhausted by her own grief. “That’s why the fuss ensued yesterday,” Lady Mary explained. “I apologize for it, but I hope you understand now.”

It was with the intention of showing his empathy for her struggle that Thomas slowly sat up in bed. Lady Mary watched him, unsure as he struggled against the pillows and headboard. When he finally rested upright, Thomas had to pause until his head stopped spinning before he could reply.

All the while, Lady Mary watched him with caution and care. It seemed that he was torn between wondering whether he would snap at her or be kind.
But for all of Thomas Barrow’s many ugly and vicious flaws, he was not apathetic when it came to children. Thomas’ childhood had been so cruel, so cold, that now as an adult he could not help but dote on every child that he saw. They were his weak spot. His fleshy underbelly in a world full of cacti.

“…I’m so sorry, M’lady,” Thomas finally said. “For all of it.”

Lady Mary nodded. “thank you for saying that,” she replied. “We don’t talk about it. It’s considered something of a taboo subject because it makes Lady Grantham cry.”

“I don’t blame her,” Thomas said. To have an infant branded with a hot iron, and then lose them to a kidnapper two weeks later? It was practically a form of torture.

“Can you tell me a bit about your childhood?” Lady Mary asked. She spoke with a gentle tone, but Thomas could not help feeling the slightest bit irritated. Obviously he was not the missing Crawley, so why bother with the details?

Still, her expression was piteous, and it rubbed at an inflamed wound inside him.

“There’s not much to tell, M’lady,” Thomas said.

“Perhaps, where were you born?”

“Stockport, M’lady.” Suddenly the image of a foggy sea side town with bitter coastal air came to mind. It had been nearly thirty years since Thomas had last seen Stockport. He had a feeling it hadn’t changed much. “It’s near Liverpool on the coast.”

“I see,” Lady Mary sat back in her chair, perplexed. “And your parents?”

“…Nathaniel and Alice Barrow.” The names were like acid upon his tongue.

Lady Mary seemed to sense the animosity, “And what did they do, out of curiosity?”

“Professionally?” Thomas gave Lady Mary a wry smile. “M’father was a clockmaker, and m’mother was a nervous wreck.”

That made her crack a smile at least.

“Then… how did you burn your arm?” She asked.

“Oh-“ Thomas looked down at the dulled mark. He couldn’t actually remember the event, he’d been far too young; his mother had never had time for his questions anyways. “It was before I can remember. Something about the stove, I think. M’mum never said.”

Lady Mary took a breath, perhaps summoning up the courage to sound foolish, “And… you weren’t adopted to your knowledge?”

“No, M’lady,” Thomas said.

She looked terribly disappointed in that moment. Thomas did not know why, but he felt oddly guilty. “I’m sorry… truly.”

“It’s not something you should have to apologize for, Barrow,” Lady Mary smiled, but Thomas could see that it didn’t reach her eyes. Though she hid it from him, she seemed to have been holding out hope that Thomas might hold some kind of answer for her. “This is a family issue, and so I shall deal with it as such. I shouldn’t have bothered you with it. I know your mind has already been
burdened enough as of late.”

Burdened. What a funny word for wanting to die.

“...What a funny word…” Thomas murmured, unable to stop himself. “I just call it… wanting to die. Don’t you?”

Lady Mary was taken aback.

“…Even still? When you’ve been given another chance?” Lady Mary asked.

“Chance is not the word for what I’ve been given, M’lady,” Thomas said.

Mary didn’t quite know what to say to that.

~*~

“Chance is not the word for what I’ve been given, M’lady.”

Mary had never heard such emptiness in a man’s voice before. Never seen such lack of life.

Sitting with Thomas Barrow and speaking to him about the future had been like speaking to a boulder. The more Thomas had conversed, the less Mary had known what to say back. She could hardly promise him a better life, or an answer to his deepest problems. She was just as confused as he, just as unsure about what the next day would bring.

Fortunately for Mary, there were certain people she could look to for guidance regardless the severity of the situation. Thus, she found herself traveling down the servant’s staircase to Carson’s office. She always felt like she was trespassing when she went downstairs, though as a child it had been her favorite place to hide. She could remember being a child, still in frilly frocks and padding underskirts. In those days, Carson had been like a giant, and she’d reached out to him constantly in order to ride on his shoulders. Upon his lap, Mary could remember watching him write letters with fancy handwriting and decant wine upon a golden cradle. She’d even napped once or twice with her face pressed to his livery. The smell of ink and port had been as good a lullaby as any.

Now, Mary was an adult and could no longer nap against Carson’s shoulder. Instead, she could only stand upon them in the hopes of one day summing up to his greatness.

She knocked upon his office door with care, and smiled as she heard him call “Enter,” from beyond.

Mary opened the door and found Carson decanting wine. He was surprised at her appearance and stood with a warm smile all his own.

“M’lady!” He said, “What a pleasant surprise.”

“I hope so,” Mary teased. She shut the door behind her, giving them some privacy if only just. “Am I bothering you?” She asked, gesturing to the wine decanting upon his desk. He was halfway through the job, with sifted port turning the bottom of a crystal holder a deep purple red.

“You never bother me,” Carson assured her. It felt good to hear, after all the terrible things that Mary had done as of late. “Please, sit,” He urged. She did so, taking his visitor’s chair. Carson sat back down across his desk, carefully twisting the knob of the decanter to raise up the neck of the wine bottle so that the flow of port stilled to a stop.

“I can remember being small and watching you decant wine,” Mary said. “Nanny said it was
improper for me to be down here. She didn’t understand our relationship.”

“She didn’t understand much else, as I remember it,” Carson said. Mary couldn’t help but laugh a bit at that.

“Carson I… I hope it’s not too much, but I wanted to talk to you about Thomas.” Mary said. Carson was surprised, his bushy eyebrows rising up.

“M’lady?” He asked, curious.

“I just went up and spoke with him about the other day to explain why Lady Grantham was so distraught. I only thought it fair, after all,” Mary explained. Carson made a soft ‘ah’, nodding as he listened. “But now I’m more concerned. He thinks he’s going to be fired, and frankly he… well…” Mary didn’t know how best to put it, “He doesn’t look good. I confess I’m terribly worried about him.”

“Try to put him out of your mind, M’lady,” Carson murmured with sympathy. “Dr. Clarkson is looking after him, and Mrs. Hughes is aware of the situation.”

“Will he be fired?” Mary asked.

“No,” Carson shook his head. Mary released a breath she had not known she’d been holding.

“His Lordship and I have decided that it will be best for him to stay on indefinitely. I hope you don’t mind?”

“Me?” Mary scoffed. “I didn’t want Barrow to go in the first place. I like him, though from what Anna tells me I hear that’s a unique experience in this house.”

Carson pursed his lips, clearly holding back from saying more, “You could say that, M’lady.”

“But… then again…” Negativity seemed to pour from her mouth at times. “Some would say the same about me.”

“I wouldn’t say so,” Carson replied with kindness.

Mary pursed her lips, “Edith would.”

For a moment, they were caught in an ugly silence that Mary had created. Carson didn’t know what to say, and Mary couldn’t take it back, so until one of them plucked up the courage to go forward, they were kept at an awkward pause.

“… I did something terrible, Carson,” Mary whispered. She kept her eyes averted, unable to look him in the eye when admitting her shame.

But Carson would hear none of it. “We all make mistakes, M’lady.”

It wasn’t said with cold indifference to Edith’s feelings. Instead, there was great weight in Carson’s words as he registered both Mary’s shame and Edith’s unfortunate outcome.

“It seems a terrible mistake to make,” Mary replied. When she dared to find the nerve to raise her head, she looked up to see Carson watching her cautiously.

He wanted to know that she was okay. That she wasn’t too broken up from her own guilt.

“Do you think my twin would hate me if he knew what I’d done?” Mary whispered. If her voice
wobbled with emotion, neither she nor Carson admitted to it.

Carson tilted his head, a sweet worry filling up his gaze at Mary’s question. “Your brother adored you with every fiber of his being,” Carson said. “Just as I do, M’lady.”

And it was good to hear, after the awful things she’d done. “Thank you, Carson, I needed that.”
A Cold Case

Chapter Summary

Mary decides to take matters into her own hands, but finds the road daunting when traveling solo.

Chapter Notes

Hello! Hope you guys continue to enjoy this fic. Just as a note, you will receive one weekly update, usually on Friday but at the latest on Saturday. My co-worker for Volver is settling into her new life in England. Just keep your hopes up, Volver-lovers! We won't let you down!

Maybe it was the fact that she'd been denied an answer all her life, but having Thomas Barrow turn out to be a let out didn’t deter Mary any less from her goal. The way she saw it, walking to the police station by herself, she knew nothing that she hadn’t known before. Her brother had vanished, no one knew to where or why. It was clear that her father had given up hope, and that her mother was too emotionally distraught to handle the strain of investigation. Sybil was dead, Edith was in London, and Mary was alone. If ever there were a moment, if ever there were a time, it was here and now. Mary looked upon the Downton Police Station with queer hope, as if likening it to an ancient tome yet to be plundered. Somewhere inside these ancient halls of piss drenched stone and yowling drunks was a file on her brother.

And the good news about files was that they didn’t have to be coerced into talking.

Mary entered the police station, clutching her red handbag tight. Outside, the chauffeur was waiting for her in the family motorcar, having driven her to her errand alone. She found the entrance lobby dusty and quiet, save for an exhausted woman asleep upon a bench and a policeman behind the front desk working on an enormous stack of dirtied paperwork. He glanced up, found Mary in the doorway, and promptly gave a start in his swivel chair.

“My lady!” The man exclaimed.

“Good day,” Mary gave him a polite if cool smile, “I’m wanting to see some files relating to my family.”

“Of course, M’lady,” The policeman stood from his desk, gesturing aimlessly to a door on the left barred with a heavy iron handle. “Let me fetch the book keeper for you. Would you care for a cup of tea?”

“Yes please,” Mary doubted it would be a good brew, though. “Lemon and honey.”
She sat gingerly upon a soiled chair, wondering if it might leave a stain on the back of her maroon frock, and carefully primped at her hair. It was starting to curl at the edges; the summer humidity never did her any favors. She wondered at the woman across from her, who was clearly a maid of all work with a stained apron and hands worked to the bone. She had deep bags beneath her eyes, and her blonde hair so obviously kept into a bun had fallen loose into a greasy tangle upon her shoulder. Mary could not help but imagine who the woman might be, and why she was at the police station asleep during the middle of the day. Could it be she’d run afoul of the law, or was she here for someone else?

The answer came in the form of the door on the right opening; it swung wide to reveal a sandy haired youth with a scowl upon his face, and a heavily irritated officer.

“Alright, get out of ‘ere,” The police officer warned. “And don’t let me catch you at it again.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” sneered the youth, rubbing at the back of his neck as if there was a crick in it. He caught Mary’s eye and leered, shucking his hands in his pockets.

“See somethin’ y’like, princess?” He jeered.

The policeman smacked the youth around the head with the back of his hand; the youth winced at the sting in his ear.

“Watch your mouth around a lady of the county!” Snapped the policeman.

The police officer’s command awoke the young woman, who gave a start to glance about the room only to see the youth in the lobby.

“David!” she exclaimed, rising up to embrace him. Though he’d shown Mary nothing but crude manners, the youth embraced the young woman with kindness. Perhaps they were sweethearts.

“Da’s doin’ his nut,” The girl said. “You have t’come home right now.”

“Think I’ll have a drink before I go,” The youth said.

“No, David!” The girl urged. “That’s what got you into trouble last time! You’re comin’ home with me an’ you’re havin’ a wash. You smell horrid.”

“Pissed m’self,” David said by way of explanation. The girl was exasperated.

“Honestly!” She squawked, grabbing him by the ear and dragging him along. “Mum will have your hide for that!”

“Sis let me go!” He begged, trying to stand up straight if only to get away from the woman’s hands. So it seemed they were siblings, not lovers.

Even as they stumbled out the door, Mary could not help but think of her own brother. She wondered if, as an adult, they might have squabbled over errant behavior. She highly doubted her brother would have ever been arrested for drunken behavior. Yet it gave her pause as she thought of her own shoddy behavior with Edith. What would her brother have said if he’d seen her shoot down Edith’s dreams? Would he have been horrified? Would he have disowned her as his twin?

Would he have thought her a coward, like Tom?
“Sorry about that, M’lady,” The policeman murmured.

“I’m hardly troubled,” Mary replied with a cold smile.

At that moment, the first police officer returned with a young man in tow. He was handsome if older gentleman with a snow white beard and a three piece suit. He was a bit like Carson, in Mary’s eyes, if Carson were more relaxed in his posture and attitude.

“This is the bookkeeper, Lady Mary,” the first police officer said. “He’ll take you back to his office, we have tea waiting for you there.”

Mary rose and offered her hand to the bookkeeper, who gently clasped it in a show of class and deferment. Clearly he knew how to mingle with his uppers.

“Lady Mary,” The bookkeeper introduced himself, “I’m Mr. John Bailey. I keep the books for the police here in Downton. Won’t you please come with me?” He gestured to the door through which he’d arrived. Mary followed him at once.

“I keep my office in the back,” Mr. Bailey explained. “I prefer the quiet and don’t like to be near the holding cells.”

They came upon a heavy wooden door, much like all the others save that its handle was slightly different with a gentler metal. It seemed that these doors were meant to withstand a rampage; Mary had to wonder if there was truly a threat in Downton village of armed men forcing themselves upon the law. Mr. Bailey opened the door to his office to reveal a cramped desk in the middle of a sea of files. Much like a lonely raft floating upon an ocean of paper, Mr. Bailey clearly worked amid a raging storm. All four walls of his office were taken up from floor to ceiling by towering filing cabinets, each of which were filed meticulously. Just as the policeman had promised, a cup of tea was waiting for Mary upon Mr. Bailey’s desk, kept company by a few stale biscuits and a wedge of lemon.

“You’ll forgive us, M’lady. We don’t have any honey, “Mr. Bailey shut the door behind them and retook his seat at his desk. Mary sat in his guest chair and gingerly picked up the tea cup and saucer to let her lemon wedge float atop her cooling tea. “I can call for sugar?”

“No need,” Mary waved off the notion, uneager to stay longer than strictly necessary. The smell of Mr. Bailey’s office reeked of sweat and dust, and it set her teeth on edge. If only Carson could have seen the state of this room, he would have had an aneurism.

“Then what may I help you with today, M’lady?” Mr. Bailey asked.

“I’d like to see the files regarding the kidnapping of my brother, James Robert Crawley,” Mary explained. Mr. Bailey was slightly crestfallen at her explanation, as if saddened by her family affairs.

“Ah,” Mr. Bailey rose up with a sigh and began to pilfer through his files, rifling through aged paper with nimble fingers. “Of course, I’ll fetch that for you now.”

Mary sipped the tea, only to nearly spit it out at the foul taste. She was spoilt, and knew it, so she tried to swallow the tea as best she could.

It was not an easy affair.

“Now, I warn you M’lady this is a rather large file,” Mr. Bailey looked over his shoulder. “Perhaps you’d only like some of the papers?”
“The initial report, I should think,” Mary said. “I’ll come back for the others later.”

“Very good,” Mr. Bailey turned back to the filing cabinet and pulled out a sheaf of documents the width of a novel. Mary grimaced, knowing full well the task ahead of her was a precarious one.

“These are the files on your brother’s disappearance,” Mr. Bailey explained, handing the packet over for Mary to shuffle through. “Normally I don’t allow people to take files out of my office without an official note, but naturally I’ll make an exception for you.”

“You’re very kind, Mr. Bailey,” Mary stood up, taking the papers with her. “I shan’t trouble you anymore. I’ll take my business to an associate in town and look over the files there.”

“Tea not to your taste, M’lady?” Mr. Bailey teased. There was a gentle smile upon his face, and Mary knew implicitly that he spoke in jest.

“You don’t sound surprised,” Mary said.

“Perhaps your family would see fit to donate some tea to the police station.”

“And some honey too, I gather.”

Mary left Mr. Bailey in his office, heading out the way she’d come to be greeted by a vacant front room. The police officer was back at his desk, and bid her good day with a tip of the hat. She was grateful to step out into the fresh, open air, leaving the bitter mold of the police station behind. The chauffeur opened the door for her so that she might relax against the backseat of the motorcar.

“Where to, M’lady?” he asked, retaking his own seat.

“To Branson’s office,” Mary decided. She would keep her files away from the house lest her father or mother see and throw another fit.

As she rode through the village, Mary could not help but think that there had been something decidedly off about Mr. Bailey. Perhaps she was taking an ungenerous attitude, but he’d been different from the police officers somehow. Maybe it had been in the way that he’d been dressed, still lower class but obviously tasteful. Maybe it was in the way that he’d spoke, so smooth and carefully like he’d polished each word over before she’d arrived. The cheek at the very end, gentle and in good taste but still miles different from how any other police officer would have treated her.

She couldn’t put her finger on it, but something was decidedly off.

She arrived at Tom’s office to find it just as she’d left it on the day she’d ruined Edith’s life. Though there was no wanted poster on the front door plastering an odious image of her face, Mary still could not help but feel unwanted. She allowed the chauffeur to open the door for her and turned to bid him adieu.

“I’ll have Branson drive me home,” Mary decided. She was unsure how long she’d be at Tom’s office, anyway. “You may return to the abbey without me.”

“Very good, M’lady,” The chauffeur tipped his hat again. “Ring if anything changes.”

He left, driving the car away with a gentle putter down the cobblestone street.

Mary gave a sigh, turning and carefully knocking upon Tom’s office door. She wondered what she would do if Tom did not want to speak to her; if he closed the door on her face and told her to leave him be. She supposed she would simply walk to a café and read her files in privacy before ringing
the chauffeur back. In truth, it would sting her terribly if Tom did not want to talk to her anymore. His friendship had meant a great deal to her, allowing her to feel a sense of freedom she’d not experienced since after Matthew’s death.

The door opened to reveal Tom with his shirt sleeves rolled up to the elbows. He was taken aback by the site of her, neither displeased nor entirely happy.

“Mary!” He exclaimed, looking around for the chauffeur. “What on earth are you doing here?”

“Yes, I wondered if I might garner a moment to talk?” Mary asked. “I have something on my mind, and you’re really the only one I can discuss it with.”

Tom mulled it over for a small second, in which Mary feared she might break into a sweat from anxiety. Then, Tom stepped back and allowed her entry. “Alright, although I don’t know why you’re being so nice to me. I did technically yell at you and call you a coward.”

“It’s nothing I didn’t deserve,” Mary muttered as Tom shut the office door. He had several chairs around his office, most of which were taken up by files for the estate. He cleared one next to his desk, allowing Mary to sit down as he fetched her a proper cup of tea.

“I just made a brew,” Tom said. “Want a cup?”

“Please,” Mary urged. “The tea at the police station was utterly dreadful.”

“They’ve got tea?” Tom teased. “I thought they just used water from the lavatory.”

“Don’t tease,” Mary grumbled. “It was simply dreadful to digest. I require something to bring my tongue back to life.

“Well this is from the house, so it should do nicely,” Tom offered her a cup of jasmine tea, garnished with honey and lemon. “You take it with honey and lemon, right?”

“Very good,” Mary smiled, grateful as she took a sip of tea. Oh, what a glorious thing to enjoy a delectable brew.

Tom relaxed back into his desk chair, jaunting an ankle over the opposite knee. He stirred his own cup which was laced with milk. “So what brings you to my door? I thought I’d scared you off a few days ago.”

“Like I said before, I deserved it,” Mary pursed her lips. “But I’m not here to talk about that. I assure you everyone and their governess has let me know their displeasure on the other.”

“Fair enough,” Tom would not drag a cart sideways. “But if that’s the case what’s on your mind.”

Mary looked down at the aged file in her lap, bound with twine.

“I’m about to tell you a family secret.” Mary said. “And you can never reveal it to another soul. Never tell anyone that you know, especially Lord and Lady Grantham.”

Tom narrowed his eyes, unsure. “Did Sybil know about this?”

“She didn’t,” Mary shook her head. “Even Edith doesn’t know.”

“Then how do you know?”

“Because it involves me. And my twin brother.”
Tom stared, agog. “…What?”

Mary told him the whole sorry affair, allowing Tom to take a look at the files in her lap when he did not believe her at first. His complexion grew grey, sorrow filling up his lovely brown eyes as he realized the weight of Mary’s burden. She even told him of the run in with Thomas Barrow, and how the poor man had been dragged into everything despite his weak health.

Tom shook his head, bitterly disappointed. “My god,” Tom whispered. “No wonder Lady Grantham lost her mind. God, I’m so sorry for all of it.”

“I’m rather sorry for Barrow,” Mary said. “He didn’t deserve to be plucked into the middle of that. Not after the horrible day he’d had.”

“Barrow’s been in the middle of enough stews to know how to handle himself,” Tom said. “But I have to admit the idea of him trying to commit suicide is disturbing. He’s one of those sorts that I figured would rage until death.”

“I believe that was rather the point,” Mary said. “Eventually the rage gave out.”

Tom shrugged, taking a long sip of tea. “I never liked Barrow but I’m sorry that he tried to kill himself. But you should know that Barrow is a bully, and everyone downstairs has felt his wrath at some point.”

Mary would not be budged in her good opinion. “Well I’m a bully too, as you so eloquently said. So forgive me if I’m gentler on him. Maybe I understand why Barrow feels the need to be so mean.”

Tom smiled, setting his tea cup aside. “Maybe. Sybil never disliked Barrow, even if I did. She said the same thing as you; that she knew he was a sorry sort but she couldn’t help having pity on him. That he was a good man where it counted. I just wish it counted more.”

Mary could not help but wonder in that moment if Barrow would find Tom’s assessment of his character ungenerous.

“So, what are these files?” Tom asked. “I’m assuming they’re to do with your brother?”

“They’re files from the police station,” Mary explained. “I want to find out what happened to my brother, even if it comes to nothing in the end, but I can’t bear to give mama and papa more grief. Would you mind terribly if I used your office as a place of refuge?”

“Why not,” Tom said with a pleasant smile. “We can take tea breaks together.”

“Then I ought to get to work,” Mary said, gesturing with the file in her lap.

“Take my spare desk,” Tom said. It was covered in boxes, stamped with dates and wrapped in twine; Tom abandoned his cup of tea to move them out of Mary’s way onto the floor. In a show of good will, Tom even turned on a lamp for Mary to use, tilting its green glass shade so that she could have the best light.

Mary used her swivel chair to role across the floor, smirking as she sidled up to Tom’s desk. She unlaced her own packet of files and lay them flat, turning over the cover to begin on the first page. At once, she was assaulted with a jumbled mess of cramped typewriting. The papers were yellowed with age, lined with handwriting where an officer had clearly scribbled extra notes.

Tom peered over her shoulder, curious.
The pair of them read in silence:
Case No: 021290
Date: May 18th, 1891
Reporting Officer: Constable Alfred Bennett
Prepared By: Officer Lewis Ward
Incident: Abduction of Infant Male
Detail of Event:

On first May 18th at 03100 hours, I was dispatched to investigate a disturbance between the occupants. Upon arrival, it was revealed that CARSON states he was woken at 0200 hours by Clara W. ALBRITE, Elsie M. HUGHES, Barryl PATMORE, HOPPER, Holly DAVIES, Alice CARNEY, Emmaline GOOD. An inspection revealed no trace of James R. CRAWLEY. At 0400 hours, the 14th precinct was notified to organize a county-wide search. Thirsk, and Holds were gathered. The 0500 train that was all set to leave was delayed. All main roads in and out of town were blocked, and all individuals were questioned. Witnesses CARSON, ALBRITE, CARNEY, CRAWLEY were interviewed.

Actions Taken:
18/05/91- search of Downton Abbey, Downton Village
18/05/91- Interview of witnesses CARSON, ALBRITE, CRAWLEY
19/05/91- 40 man search of Downton village, Downton
20/05/91- Interview of witness CARNEY
“Vanished without a trace,” Mary whispered the words.

“Well no one can vanish without a trace,” Tom grumbled. “There’s a trace here, and if you’re willing you’ll find it.”

Mary titled her head, fringe tickling at her sharp jaw line. “Willingness is not what I am lacking.”

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Mary returned to the abbey that night full of questions. They burned inside of her, like a brand sizzling upon gentle flesh. More than ever she wished she had someone to talk to. Someone who understood her ways of thinking and didn’t hold them against her. Yet as Mary sat at the dinner table, gazing at her family and servants, she found herself oddly hollow without relief.

Her father took his time slicing through a piece of lemon ice box pie. Mary knew instinctively that she could not reveal anything to him regarding her investigation. Her mother was much the same, sitting opposite her father with reddened eyes. She barely touched her own food, instead taking comfort in her third glass of white wine for the evening. Granny was watching her warily, eyebrows furrowed as she noted that Cora was not holding conversation like her status required. Mary had to wonder if perhaps she could go to Granny for comfort but felt rather peevish at the idea. Granny was much too dominant and forbearing. She’d either tell Mary to give it up or hound her until she found an answer.

Tom knew, but Tom would never understand her. Tom was too much like Sybil, full of optimism
about the world and unable to see the facts clearly. When Henry had been in the picture, Tom had loved playing the go-between. It had been rather annoying by the end, with Tom unable to understand why Mary just couldn’t fall in love with the suave and sultry race car driver he’d picked out.

That left Isobel, who was the only one attempting to make conversation at the table. In a gown of cheery periwinkle blue, she pestered Cora for thoughts about the hospital, or Tom’s advances with the estate. When no one would bite, Isobel began to grow moody.

“I hear there’s been much to do at the abbey,” Isobel said. For a moment, Mary felt acid burning at the back of her throat with anxiety that Isobel might mention Edith. Instead, she said. “I was so terribly sorry to hear about Barrow.”

Granny blinked rapidly. “Barrow? What’s he done now?”

“You didn’t hear?” Isobel asked.

“Obviously, as I’m not prone to repeat myself,” Granny said. “Has something occurred of which I am unaware?”

“It’s not table talk,” Robert said. Granny tentatively rubbed her withered fingertips together, grey eyes narrowing at her son.

For a moment, there was absolute silence broken only by the gentle tick of a mantel clock upon the buffet table. Then, Cora leaned over and whispered something in Granny’s ear.

Granny gave a start, eyes wide.

“What?” Granny demanded. “When did this occur?”

“A few days ago as I understand it. The poor man hasn’t been doing very well,” Isobel paused, mulling over their difficult predicament. “You know, I might look in on him-“

But Mary had a feeling Barrow would not appreciate that. The pair of them shared a queer kinship, and Barrow did not like being pressed upon by people like Isobel.

“I think it would be better if you didn’t,” Mary advised. Isobel was taken aback.

“Why?” she asked. “Barrow clearly needs someone to talk to. Perhaps I can buck him up.”

“Thomas isn’t the type to be ‘bucked up’,“ Mary explained. “At least… not like that.”

“you sound very familiar with him.”

“We are, I confess,” Mary explained. “He’s always been dear to George, and… I feel a kinship to him that I cannot deny.”

“That’s not a good thing,” Tom warned.

“Well we can’t just let him sputter out,” Granny urged. “For heaven’s sake, Barrows been on staff since 1912. It’s terribly difficult to find servants of quality now a days. Most of them would rather pinch the silver than polish it.”

“Maybe he could help me with my charities,” Isobel offered.

“He’s not the charitable type,” Tom warned.

“That’s rather ungenerous,” Isobel said.
“He’s ungenerous.”

“Oh, leave Barrow alone!” Mary snapped.

She had not meant to sound so bitter, not after Tom’s generosity earlier that day, but she found herself growing irate at all the times Barrow’s name was drug through the mud. Yes, Barrow was sharp. Yes, Barrow could be a bit of a bully when he wanted to. But Barrow had also suffered terribly in his life, and Mary knew what it was to be labeled a black sheep by the ones you cared for.

“I’m only stating the truth,” Tom said, hands up in slight defense. “You don’t know him like I do.”

“Well I know he attempted to end his life less than a week ago,” Mary would not listen to this anymore. “And if he could hear you now, it would probably spur him into a depression again. So please keep your grudge to yourself.”

Cora stood up. At once, the others followed, wary as she put her napkin down atop her plate.

“Cora?” Robert asked.

“I’m terribly sorry, but I’m not feeling well,” Cora mumbled. She stepped away from the table, leaving them to their own devices. “Goodnight.”

The rest of the family watched her go, embarrassed at their squabbling when Cora was clearly still emotionally frail. Though she did not slam the dining hall door, the noise still made Mary wince.

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There was nothing to be done but wait, and breath. Neither required much energy.

Thomas kept to himself, which was nothing new, existing in a wraith like state amongst the staff so that he was hardly seen lest you looked out of the corner of your eye. There was no work for him to do. There were no jobs for him to take up. He had no money to procure his own way in the world, and nowhere to go even if he did. It a hazy malaise, Thomas stumbled around the downstairs from room to room, sitting absently at the edge of the servant’s table or hiding in the pantry until Daisy came along and shooed him out. No one wanted him around. No one wanted to speak to him, to look at him, to contend with his odious personality. The only place where Thomas could find some margin of peace was the area yard, where he sat for hours on end staring at nothing in particular. This was the table where he’d smoked and schemed with O’Brien. The table where he’d attended lovingly to many a clock.

The table where he’d shook Jimmy’s hand goodbye.

On a gray and ugly day, Thomas sat at the area table rolling a cigarette between his hands instead of his lips. He couldn’t sum up the energy to smoke. He couldn’t do anything save sit and wait for the rain to fall. With the way storm clouds were rolling in overhead, Thomas had a feeling he wouldn’t have to wait long.

It had been a sunny day, when he’d tried to kill himself. Maybe that had been some kind of omen.

He heard the area door open and close but did not turn around to look. Often, during random times of the day, the lone hallboy would come out to chop wood or the scullery maid would fetch more coal for the ovens. Neither would make to speak to Thomas if they saw him, heeding the warnings of their elders. It didn’t matter if new people came into the house. People like Mrs. Patmore or Mr.
Bates always found a way to keep Thomas isolated.

Which was why Thomas was surprised when he felt someone sit down beside him. He glanced about, confused, only to find it wasn’t a servant at all but Lady Mary in a light tweed frock. She seemed just as exhausted and irritable as Thomas felt.

“I heard you were out here,” Lady Mary explained. “Thought I might pop in.”

“I’m hardly good company, M’lady.”

“You are to me,” Lady Mary said. “I can’t stand to listen to anyone else right now. All I hear is ‘Lady Edith’ or ‘Mr. Talbot’. I don’t suppose people badger you about your mistakes, do they?”

“Oh no, they just tend to ignore me and treat me like a criminal. I passed by audible disdain around oh… 1921,” Thomas said. Lady Mary shuddered audibly at the notion.

“That’s vile,” she said. Thomas didn’t know if he fully deserved her sympathy. “You don’t deserve that.”

“…Neither do you, M’lady,” Thomas said. Lady Mary smiled, oddly touched by his words.

“How are you feeling?” Lady Mary asked.

Thomas would not lie to her, “Dead.”

“I don’t blame you,” She said. “I know you’ve had it terribly hard. I suppose that’s why I came to talk to you. I find I can understand you, and you me.”

Thomas supposed that was a fair assumption. He and Lady Mary were eerily similar, even if they weren’t twins.

“I’ve been looking into the files of my brother’s disappearance,” Lady Mary explained. “They’re all jumbled… I can’t make any sense of it. I have no one to talk to about my troubles. I thought maybe I could come to you. Do you mind?”

“I don’t mind at all, M’lady,” Thomas said. In a way, it felt nice to settle on someone else’s problems instead of his own. “But why are you looking at your brother’s files—I mean to say… I don’t mean impertinence.”

“Oh honestly Barrow, I think we’re past that,” Lady Mary said with a smile. It was good to know, in any sense.

“I want to find out what happened to him,” Lady Mary explained. “But it seems like too big a task to take on myself. I need help, I admit it. I need someone to find out what happened to my brother. Someone who doesn’t mind dirty work, some arm pulling. I’m not fit for that. I don’t know how to intimidate people outside my class without appearing snobbish.”

“… You need a servant,” Thomas mused.

“I need someone who can see eye to eye with my methods. Whose not afraid to go where I go.”

At this, Lady Mary paused and looked up at him with newfound admiration. “…Barrow… you’re rather on the mark for my needs.”

He caught her gaze and held it. Overhead, thunder began to rumble. “Am I, M’lady?”
“I think so,” she said. “And it would get you out of the house. I could even pay you. You could be my assistant. Would you like to do that, Barrow? Would you like to help me as my personal detective?”

Would he like to leave the abbey, earn money while doing it, and twist someone’s arm just for good measure? Christ, it was like Christmas come early. “You hardly need to ask me such a thing, M’lady.”

“Then how much does Lord Grantham pay you?” Lady Mary asked.

“Thirty a year,” Thomas said. “Why?”

“… If you can help me find out what happened to my brother, I’ll pay you forty pounds,” Lady Mary said. Thomas was taken aback.

Forty pounds?! My god, the things he could do with forty pounds. It wasn’t much, but it was a tidy sum and he could use it to buy his time! He didn’t want to leave, by god Downton Abbey was the only home he’d ever known, but he wasn’t earning a wage. How long could he rely upon Carson’s slim charity?

“Are you serious, M’lady?” Thomas wondered. Lady Mary gave him a quirky smile.

“You sound surprised.”

“Lord Grantham will murder me,” Thomas warned. “That’s if Carson doesn’t get the chance to first.”

But Mary wasn’t put off. “Then we’ll have to make the money worth it, won’t we?”

“And what would I do, M’lady?”

“Whatever I say, I suppose.”

“So essentially, what I already do?”

“Precisely.”

Thomas was dumbfounded by this sudden stroke of luck. He could not help but feel greedy for forty pounds, imagining how it might serve as a safety net until he could find stable work again. If he was lucky, he wouldn’t even have to leave the village.

Part of him even wondered if he might dare to open up his own shop. To sell clocks just as his father had done—

But this was lunacy. Madness. Thomas hardly had the energy to smoke a cigarette and now he was contemplating opening up a store? He wouldn’t make it. He’d probably fall into the dusk and lay there to rot. What was more, if Thomas dared to take up Lady Mary, he’d still end up without a job when the work was done. Where would he be then?

“It won’t last, M’lady,” Thomas could not bear to meet her eye. His poverty shamed him in that moment. What would he give but to have the tiniest taste of her wealth! “And then I’ll be out of a job again.”

But Lady Mary wasn’t swayed. She, like Thomas, prided herself on being strong in the face of trial. It just so happened that, in this moment, Thomas was fresh out of strength. She was like a mirror
Thomas could look in to remember what he’d once been like.
“I promise you, when the time comes, I’ll help you find another job.”

Thomas was taken aback by her generosity. His confusion must have shown on his face, for Lady Mary added, “We’re both dark horses, Thomas. We have to support one another.”

The corner of his lips twitched. It was as close to a smile as he could get in that moment. But where Lady Mary had only just recently been determined, she suddenly turned sorrowful. A strangely bitter expression crossed her beautiful face as she looked out at the area yard. Her eyes drifted over the wood pile, sodden from recent rain, and the deep grooves in the cobblestone from years of wagonette deliveries.

“… I have to find my brother, Thomas,” She whispered. “…Or at the very least, find out what happened to him.”

There were some in the house, like Mrs. Hughes or Lady Edith, who might claim that Lady Mary was heartless and cold. That she had little empathy for her fellow man, or interests outside her slender social sphere. But they were wrong, and here was the proof. Here was a young woman struggling with the loss of someone she’d never even known. Here was a woman unable to stop loving someone she hadn’t seen in thirty years.

“… Then let’s begin,” Thomas said.
Lady Mary gave him a grateful smile.
Complications

Chapter Summary

Thomas and Mary begin their crusade, only to experience setbacks in the ways of family and coworkers.

Chapter Notes

Exciting news! Volver is now officially in the hands of a new writer! She is currently working on chapter 28. As more news comes along, I'll make it known!

Thomas’ problem of a temporary income might have been solved, but his issue of explaining it to Carson was most decidedly not. Without a job to occupy his waking hours, Thomas had more than ample opportunity to corner Carson and explain to him that he now had a new job working alongside Lady Mary. But every tea time or hour decanting wine found Thomas making some random excuse as to why he couldn’t tell Carson.

Oh-! It just wasn’t time. The tea was half drunk and going cold- Carson wouldn’t be in a receptive mood to hearing about Thomas’ change of plans and after this dreadful summer Thomas couldn’t take any more shouting.

No, no—he couldn’t do it now. Now Carson was decanting wine, and if Thomas interrupted him he’d only get Carson riled up. Carson loved to decant, it put him in a good mood. Thomas would be a fool to spoil that and risk getting scolded.

Well, maybe later. Now it was time to go to bed, and Carson looked exhausted. He wouldn’t have time to hear Thomas’ story, and he wouldn’t have the energy to reply. Thomas would get around to it tomorrow. Perhaps in the morning over breakfast.

Actually—that was a rather foolish idea. Breakfast was much too hasty. Thomas would wait until tea.

Well, tea was really a time meant for relaxing. Carson needed to get off his feet for a moment. Thomas would wait until the servant’s took their resting hour at four.
So Thomas found himself, on the hour of four, watching the servant’s hall fill up and wondering what his excuse would be this time. Carson was in a relatively good mood (although that didn’t count for much) and there wasn’t anything looming over the staff’s head. Of course, Carson was in his office doing some paperwork. Thomas probably shouldn’t interrupt him until the paperwork was finished so that way—

“Mr. Barrow?”
He bristled at the sound of Mrs. Hughes’ Scottish lilt. Looking about from his favorite rocking chair by the fire, Thomas found Mrs. Hughes approaching him with slightest caution. It set his teeth on edge.

“Mrs. Hughes,” He grumbled.
How he hated that she’d been one of the staff to find him in the bathtub. Why had Baxter thought to intervene? Had she really thought that when Thomas awoke in his bed he would have some kind of life changing discovery? So blissful overtaking of a realization that life was precious? It was nauseating to offer no solutions but to demand that one make peace with the problem.

“Mr. Carson wants to see you in his office,” Mrs. Hughes said.
Thomas chewed on his tongue, wondering if he ought to claim illness and walk away.

“You know, I’m not-“
“It’s nothing bad, Thomas,” Mrs. Hughes murmured. She braced the back of his rocking chair with a withered if comforting hand. “He just wants to talk.”

Oh goody. When had that ever boded ill before?

Thomas followed behind Mrs. Hughes at a plodding pace, winding his way through chairs filled with day maids that would leave after dinner. Carson’s office was open, with the door wide to behold the man working hard at his desk. He had several pieces of paperwork laid out and was scanning through them meticulously for any lingering details. He paused, noting the shadows upon his floor, and looked up to find two visitors in his doorway.

“Oh, come in,” Mr. Carson urged. Mrs. Hughes led the way and shut the door behind Thomas just as soon as he’d crossed the threshold. He never liked being alone in a room with Mr. Carson, particularly when the door was closed. He always felt like he was being caged with an angry lion.

“Mr. Barrow,” Carson rose up from his desk in a form of greeting. “Please, take a seat.” He gestured to the chair across from him.

“I prefer to stand sir,” Thomas said. Carson was slightly taken aback.

“Very well,” Carson remained standing through he looked slightly uncomfortable. To regain control over the situation, Carson walked around his desk so that he, Thomas, and Mrs. Hughes might speak to one another frankly without the guise of politeness.

“I trust you’re starting to feel back to normal?” Mr. Carson asked.

The phrase was on the verge of blistering, and it insulted Thomas deeply to know that these people cared so little for his pain that they were willing to imagine it would all be gone with just a few passing days.

Thomas’ lack on answer seemed to disturb Carson. He waffled for a bit, looking to Mrs. Hughes to clear up his mess. Mrs. Hughes just gave him a beady stare as if to say ‘I told you so’.
“I have spoken with his Lordship, and he has agreed that you ought to be kept on permanently until you can find suitable employment elsewhere,” Mr. Carson explained. “So you needn’t fear losing your wage or your living situation any longer. You’re quite safe in Downton’s embrace.”

Ah.

“…Well…” Thomas felt like he was treading over cracking ice, each step taking him closer and closer to a chilly plunge. “That’s just it, Mr. Carson. I actually have found employment of a type.”

“You have?” Mr. Carson was flabbergasted. “But- where? I thought no one was hiring!”

“They aren’t,” Thomas said. Mr. Carson was by now heavily perplexed. “But Lady Mary approached me the other day with a proposition. With a job, as a personal assistant, and I—”

“She what?” Carson’s sore spot was well known for being Lady Mary. Any mention of the eldest Crawley daughter always sent him into a muddle.

“What on earth?” Mrs. Hughes wondered.

“I was just as shocked as you are, Mr. Carson,” Thomas said. “But it was what she wanted, and what is more she says she’s going to pay me forty pounds to do it.”

Mr. Carson spluttered, eyes bulging in their sockets at the mention of such ludicrous pay.

“Forty pounds?!” Mrs. Hughes repeated in shock.

“Did she speak about this with his Lordship?!” Mr. Carson demanded.

“… I’m not sure, Mr. Carson,” Thomas replied. He had a feeling the answer would be a resounding ‘no’.

“And still you accepted?!”

“I thought it would be foolish not to!” Thomas couldn’t understand the man. A few days ago he’d have been well shot of Thomas. Now he was getting dicey over job proposals? “I thought I’d lost everything! You think I’m going to throw away an opportunity to gain forty pounds when I’m practically destined for the streets?”

This sobered Mr. Carson up. He huffed, shuffling uncomfortably as Mrs. Hughes glared at him. Clearly, they’d been arguing about Thomas’ person before now.

“… Well you’re not destined for the streets,” Mr. Carson finally said. His tone was calm, his demeanor settled once more. “Let me speak about these matters with his Lordship. Until then, don’t breathe a word of it in the servant’s hall. It’s improper for a Lady of the nobility to have an assistant of the opposite sex.”

Yet another ridiculous rule he couldn’t quite understand.

“But I can see that you were trying to make do for yourself, and I am understanding” Carson said, in a way that Thomas supposed might have been gentle and compassionate if Carson were speaking to anyone else. As it stood, Thomas had a feeling that were he on fire Mr. Carson would not so much as deign to spit on him.

“I also wanted to speak with you on another matter,” Mr. Carson said. He paused, as if searching for the proper words to an improper feeling.
“I wanted to say that I am sorry for how I have treated—“

But Thomas couldn’t stand to listen to a word of this. He put a hand savagely over his eyes to rub away a non-existing pain, turning if only to avoid staring at Carson’s face. Carson paused, nervous at Thomas’ reaction. Mrs. Hughes had a finger to her lips, unsure of what Thomas would do next.

“I can’t.” Thomas finally said after a moment of unnerving quiet. “I can’t talk about that. It’s too much.”

“So long as you are aware,” was Mr. Carson’s only reply.
But that was just the point. He was painfull aware.

He needed air. He needed space. Thomas turned for the door, a half-brained excuse tumbling from his mouth as he walked. “I need to walk down to the village Mr. Carson. I have to post a letter.”

“By your leave,” Carson granted permission, clearly relieved to have their difficult conversation ‘over’ with. “When can we expect to see you back?”

“After dinner, I should think,” Thomas said. “I just… need to…” but he couldn’t even finish the sentence. He didn’t have a letter to post. No one even loved him enough to spare the paper or the postage.

He left Mr. Carson’s office, taking a hard-left turn and heading out the area door. He didn’t even bother to take his coat and hat.

It was a quiet afternoon, with the sun determinedly poking its face around heavy cloud cover. A brisk breeze was filtering through the trees, and a far-off rumble of thunder threatened the approach of rain. Thomas was therefore drawn to the woods which lay around the outskirts of Downton Abbey, cloaking the fertile land in a deep coat on heavy green. Striding down the sloping hills, Thomas vanished amongst the thicket to be swallowed up by heavy limbs and overhanging vines.

He did not know why, but he felt a strange sense of kinmanship with these woods.

Ever since he’d arrive in Downton, the woods had been a sort of home away from home. He’d spent his half days frolicking amongst the leaves, and when fate had been kind to him and he’d known love, they’d been a necessary refuge. Thomas knew where certain hollows lay. Where the dark recesses of the forest turned dangerous and ought not to be explored. He’d even given them funny names like the Black Lagoon and the Witches’ Cauldron. Honestly, he ought to have made a career writing children’s stories.

As Thomas walked through the forest, he could not help but find himself entranced by the beauty of the footpaths and the sounds of animals close by. He could hear something walking, though he couldn’t say what. Perhaps a deer or a squirrel? He passed through the other side to emerge at the edge of a farmer’s field, where baying cows were rubbing their heads against the trunks of aging trees. They barely gave Thomas a passing glance, their woeful glassy eyes sliding over him with little care. He made his way back to the main road, just outside the village proper, and melded into the trickling crowd of farmers.

Though he knew implicitly that he would not be received with a warm welcome, Thomas still made his way over to Branson’s office. He’d never been there before, but knew it was rather plain brick building on the outskirts of a park where women often walked their infants in strollers. Lady Mary had mentioned that she was keeping her files on her twin brother in Branson’s office to avoid
upsetting her family, so if that was the case then Thomas wanted to see them as soon as possible. It would help him to know what he was up against and would give him time to prepare his initial thoughts. He might have agreed to help Lady Mary, but he still didn’t know how he was going to do it. If he failed, Thomas would not only be out forty pounds… he would lose his only ally in the house.

He approached Branson’s door, and warily knocked upon the sill. Fixing his face into an expression of indifference, Thomas let out a steadying breath through his mouth to soothe his nerves.

Branson opened the door, smiling, only to be heavily taken aback.

The man stuttered, unhappy to find Thomas paying a call. “Barrow? What do you want?”

“Lady Mary has asked me assist her a personal matter regarding some files being kept here,” Thomas replied. Though his voice remained calm, he could not help but feel hurt at Branson’s reaction. Was he really such a bad omen?

“May I see them?” Thomas asked.
Branson leaned against the sill, clearly thinking it over.

“… Wait here,” Branson said.
He shut the door in Thomas’ face.

Thomas bristled, turning away to rub delicately at his temple. He drifted away from the door, passing carelessly close to the window only to pause when he heard Branson on the telephone.

“Mary, it’s Tom. Did you send Barrow here?”

Thomas listened with rapt attention, his heart pounding a little though he had no reason to feel anxious. Why was he worried?

“He wants to look at the files. Should I let him?” Branson’s shadow drifted along the wall. Thomas stepped back so as to avoid being seen lest Branson look out. “I know but-!”

Clearly Lady Mary was angry about something. Thomas could hear her garbled voice over the phone.

“Alright, alright, don’t yell at me,” Branson grumbled. “I’ll tell him. Yes, goodbye.”

He hung up with a huff.
Thomas returned to the door, unsure what all the hubbub had been about.

Branson returned to the door to open it wide with an irritable scowl. He held in his hands a rather thick file which he passed over in a brusque fashion.

“Mary’s on her way down,” Branson said. “You can sit in the park and read if you like.”

Clearly he wasn’t welcome in Branson’s office.

“… Mr. Branson,” Thomas said in way of goodbye. He wondered if Branson could hear his acidic disdain in the phrase.
Judging by the way Branson closed the door in Thomas’ face, he assumed his point got across.
The park was vacant during this time of day. Most women were at home, getting dinner prepared for their husbands who would soon return from work. As a result, Thomas was left to his own devices and picked a tree at random to sit near the base. He relaxed along the spine, closing his eyes for a moment to release all the tension he felt.

Branson rubbed him the wrong way far too often. He reminded him too heavily of Gwen… that stupid little parasite.

He opened the file and began to read, blue eyes narrowing as he scanned over dates and names. It was such a queer thing, to read about Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes being alive when he’d only been an infant.

He paused, noting the final line:
“Witnesses Carson, Albrite, Carney, Crawley (f), and Hughes were detained for further questioning.”

All the other names made sense. Carson was in charge of the staff, Mrs. Hughes the same. Albrite was probably the nanny, and Crawley “(f)” no doubt referred to Lady Grantham.

But who was Alice Carney? And why had she been detained out of all the other staff members?

Thomas looked down at the actions taken, and noted that not only had Alice Carney been detained on the initial night, she’d likewise been questioned three more times.

Why?

Down at the very bottom of the page, where there had been no more room left to type, a note had been scribbled by Lieutenant John Ward.

“I can find nothing. Absolutely nothing. No trace in surrounding estates. No leads from witnesses. Nothing from Carney. The only thing I know is that a scrap of the boy’s blanket was found on the lawn. I am forced to call this a cold case, though as God as my witness, I do not want to—Lt. John Ward”

“Carney,” Thomas mouthed the name, allowing his finger to touch the capital ‘C’. Why had Lieutenant Ward thought Carney might be a lead of all the other staff members? What had she known that the others had not?

He was resolved to find out.

A shadow loomed over Thomas, momentarily throwing him into a gloom. He looked up to find Lady Mary smiling down at him. She carried a parasol the color of the sky and wore a frock of blue with matching square heels. She looked slightly miffed about something.

“M’lady-“ Thomas made to stand up, only to be halted by Lady Mary.

“Don’t trouble yourself,” Lady Mary urged him. Thomas was surprised when she even made to sit down next to him, folding up her umbrella to lay it at her side. She relaxed against the tree, her shoulder touching his own, and let out a soft sigh of relief. Clearly she enjoyed having a pause in her hectic day.

“I should have you know, I scolded Branson for not letting you work at his office,” Lady Mary said.

“It’s alright,” Thomas said, for if he thought about it he wasn’t entirely thrilled about sharing breathing space with the man. “I like the sun, M’lady.”
But it was overcast.

“Papa and Carson were whispering when I left,” Lady Mary explained. “I’ll have some explaining to do when I get home, but I don’t mind. So—” she turned to him with a coy smile. “What have you deduced so far?”

“Well I don’t know about deductions, but I admit a few things have been sticking out to me, M’lady,” Thomas said. His conniving brain, so often used for scheming in the past, was beginning to whirl back to life like a rusted engine choking with dust. “We need a game plan, or an agenda. We need to track down as many of the people in this document as we can and interview them. “

“See, you’re already making headway,” Lady Mary said. Thomas just shrugged.

“We also need to set up a timetable, if we can,” Thomas used his hands like spacers in the air, “If we ask people where they were on that night, we can use a map of the abbey to trace their footsteps.”

“But surely it was someone who broke in?” Lady Mary asked.

“Not exactly,” Thomas said. Lady Mary listened with rapt attention. “First of all, no one would have been able to break into the house from the outside after the doors were locked for the night. Downton Abbey was originally a monastery, so it’s impenetrable. Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes are the only two people who have a set of keys. Mrs. Hughes carries hers on her hip from dawn until dusk and they rest by her bedside in the evening, so they couldn’t have taken hers without waking her up or getting her permission. I highly doubt either would have been achievable. She might be warmer than Mr. Carson but that doesn’t count for much. As for Mr. Carson himself, his keys are in his pocket and I swear he sleeps with them around his neck at night like a cowbell.”

Lady Mary snickered behind a gloved hand.

“Even Mrs. Patmore doesn’t have keys,” Thomas explained. “So whoever took your brother either snuck in during the day and hid, which I highly doubt would be possible in a household full of people moving about and cleaning …or…?” He gestured with a hand, allowing Lady Mary to make her own deductions.

“…Or someone in the house was an accomplice,” Lady Mary murmured, her eyes growing wide. All trace of a snicker was gone from her lips. “My god, do you really think so?”

“I don’t see how any other option could be correct,” Thomas said. “It doesn’t matter how unbelievable it is if all the other options can’t fit.”

“Well we can certainly cross off a few names,” Lady Mary was beginning to talk rather animatedly, her eyes gleaming with the scent of a fresh lead. “Lord and Lady Grantham, Carson, Mrs. Hughes, Mrs. Patmore… but what about the others?”

“Clara Albrite was the one to initially discover your brother was missing. So she was probably the nursemaid. Harry Palmer, Jonathan Barnes, all these other people- we have to find out who they were and what they did after they left the abbey. I can get the files from Mr. Carson’s office and do a bit of digging.”

“Good,” Lady Mary gave a nod of permission. “I can ask the police for their help as well. The interview files should be in the records office. A Mr. John Bailey keeps the files for the police.”

“No trouble, I’ll do it,” Thomas said. He might as well earn his forty pounds as best he could before Carson and Lord Grantham tried to take it away.
“We also need to look into the maid who was arrested,” Thomas said, recalling how Lady Mary had spoken of the maid who burned her infant brother. “The one who burned your brother. She might have been in jail, but she attacked him not two weeks before he was taken. It’s too suspicious, if you ask me,” Thomas explained.

“I can look into that,” Lady Mary offered.

“No, no, I need to earn my forty pounds,” Thomas said.

“You’re a hard worker,” She praised.

“I’m indebted,” at this, he tried for a smile but failed. It was still much too hard to know any type of warmth. He supposed it would be a long time before he truly ever smiled again.

“That was almost a smile.”

“It was a grimace of pain, M’lady,” Thomas said. At this, Lady Mary could not help but snicker again.

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It gave Mary a great sense of relief to know that Barrow was on the case. He was so sharp! A natural little detective. Yes, the more that Mary thought about it upon her vanity stool the more she reasoned that she’d made a wonderful choice accepting Thomas as her accomplice.

“I swear he sleeps with them around his neck at night like a cowbell.”

Mary nearly snickered again, giving Anna pause as she brushed her hair with an ivory comb. Anna raised an eyebrow, testing the heat of her curling comb before carefully sculpting Mary’s hair back into its perfect bob.

“Something funny, M’lady?” Anna aske with a coy smile.

“Something Barrow said to me today,” Mary explained. “He really does share my sense of humor.”

Anna paused mid-curl, her smile faltering. Mary tried not to take notice.

“He’s very intelligent too,” Lady Mary added just for good measure. “I’m glad he’s my assistant in my work.”

“Mr. Carson hardly knows what to think of it,” Anna set the curling iron aside and unplugged it so that it might begin to cool. Picking a string of pearls from Mary’s multiple sets of necklaces, Anna carefully laced it around her neck and resumed combing her now cooling hair. “I hear His Lordship isn’t very happy about it.”

“He doesn’t have to be,” Mary said. “It’s my money, and my life. I can spend either how I choose.”

“Is it true you’re giving him forty pounds, M’lady?” Anna asked.

“He’s more than earning it, trust me,” Mary said. If Barrow managed to find out what happened to her brother, by god she might just double his pay and call it charity. Their work was too important to be trifled with over something as mundane as money.

“What’s he doing, M’lady?” Anna asked. “If it’s not too impertinent?”

“You could never be impertinent, Anna,” Mary said. Anna held a special place in her heart, as one of
the few that understood she did (in fact) possess a heart. Anna smiled warmly. “But for now, I’d like to keep it quiet. Depending upon what Barrow finds out for me, I’ll be having to tell a great deal of people and I’ll inform you then. Until then, Mum’s the word.” Lady Mary placed a finger to her lips with a smile.

“Of course, M’lady,” Anna wouldn’t question her further on the topic.

And yet, even as she finished combing Mary’s hair and allowed her to rise from her vanity stool, Anna paused. She held Mary’s elbow length gloves in her hands, but was yet to give them over. She seemed to be internally struggling with some great trial.

“Anna?”

“Only that… I want to say something M’lady, just between you and I,” Anna said.

At once, Mary gave her her undivided attention. “Of course. What is it?”

“It’s about Barrow—Thomas-“ Anna said. She spoke frankly, but there was a pleading note to her gaze. She was trying to convey something to Mary, even if only through her eyes. “He can sometimes be a little not nice. I should be friendly, but not too friendly. I wouldn’t want you to get on the wrong side of him.”

Mary bristled, reaching out to take her gloves from Anna. She pulled them on, careful to make sure that her fingers were completely encased. “Lady Edith would say the same about me.”

“That’s different,” Anna wouldn’t even hear of it. “Sisters will be sisters M’lady.”

“Will they?” Mary did not know if she could even rightly call herself Edith’s sister now. What was a name you gave to someone who tormented you and destroyed your only shot at happiness? “I wonder.”

As Mary joined her family for dinner, she could not help but find her thoughts transfixed on the parallels between herself and Thomas. Why was it that everyone seemed to insist that he was a bully? That he was cruel and conniving? Mary was under no illusions as to the mysteries of servitude. Beyond the green baize door there lay a world that she could only dream of (though it was more like a nightmare). What went on in the attics was the servant’s business.

As Mary took a sip of claret, she was brought to a pause by the site of her father staring at her from across the table. Granny was joining them for supper (hardly a shocking occurrence), but was without her normal sparring partner Isobel. As a result, she kept looking back and forth from Robert to Mary, wondering what on earth was going on.

“Carson says that you’ve hired Barrow to be your personal assistant,” Robert said. Mary finished her sip of claret, lacing her finger delicately upon her lap.

“I have,” she said with a gentle smile. She made no illusions as to why.

“May I ask what for?” Her father wouldn’t take the hint, or rather he knew that Mary was avoiding him and wanted to know why.

“It’s a surprise, so I’m afraid I can’t,” Mary said, which was a ridiculous way to label what Barrow
was actually doing.

_Surprise, Papa! I’m investigating the disappearance of your infant son!_

Robert narrowed his eyes. “And this surprise is worth forty pounds?”

At this, her mother looked up in shock from her plate of steamed vegetables in white wine sauce. “Forty pounds?” she demanded. “For what?”

“Oh wonderful,” Granny grumbled, rolling her eyes at the lack of taste, “Let’s talk about money like middle class social climbing bankers.”

“It’s payment for a great deal of work,” Mary explained.

“Whatever it is, it’s too much,” Robert scoffed. “Nothing he does could be worth so much money.”

Mary bristled, a little stung by that. She wasn’t the only one. Next to her, Tom shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

“I think it’s a little tasteless to speak about the salaries of servants,” Tom added. “Given that I used to be one, I can tell you a great deal of work goes into running this house.”

“No, no, of course-“ Robert said apologetically. “I’m not saying that Barrow doesn’t deserved to be paid for his work in the abbey. But whatever he’s doing for Mary cannot possibly be on the same scale.”

“That’s your opinion, papa,” Mary warned him. “I asked him what he made and he told me, so-“

“He told you he made forty pounds?” Robert demanded rather hotly.

“No,” Mary snapped. “He told me he made thirty and I offered him ten more so he accepted to work for me instead of you.”

“He’d have been a fool not to,” Tom scoffed around a dip sip of claret. “I didn’t get forty as the chauffeur. I think Carson makes sixty-“

“Stop this at once!” Granny demanded with such a hot tone that all fell silent in reproach. She seemed positively furious in that moment. “Servant’s salaries are not something to be discussed at the dining table, or any table! What Barrow or Carson makes is beside the point. It is their affair, and we ought to respect their privacy by not indulging their personal wallets at the table. Or do you forget Carson is standing right behind you?” Granny looked pointedly at Tom.

A hot blush grew across Tom’s handsome face. He slowly looked around, as did Mary, and the pair of them found Carson glaring at Tom’s head like he wished to light it on fire.

“Mr. Branson,” Carson sneered. Had they been alone, Mary was certain Carson would have eaten Tom alive.

“Sorry-“ Tom raised his hands up in surrender. “Sorry, you’re right. It’s none of my business.”

“Let’s move on from this ghastly topic,” Robert urged. “I want Barrow to continue working as a footman. Carson will need extra hands now that Moseley is a teacher.”

“Well,” Mary took another slow sip of claret, “You’ll have to best my offer of forty pounds.”

Robert was slightly stung. “Now that’s harsh even for you.”
“Business is business, papa.”

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Downstairs, Thomas Barrow was blissfully unaware that his salary was a topic of heated debate over the dining room table. In day dress, Thomas still felt queerly naked in the servant’s hall. While Carson and Andy were upstairs holding court, the maids were turning down beds. Anna, Bates, and Baxter were all pulling out sleeping clothes for their personal charges. Mrs. Patmore was snarling in the kitchen for Daisy to sprinkle extra sugar on the sliced peaches headed up for dessert.

With a moment to himself, Thomas had decided to use it as best he could. It was risqué to walk into Carson’s office when he wasn’t presiding over his desk, but Thomas didn’t care. It wasn’t like his reputation could sink any lower in this sodden house. He was determined to make some headway on his case tonight so that he might have something new to tell Lady Mary tomorrow. He wanted to learn more about the staff that had resided in Downton during the time of James Crawley’s abduction.

Carson’s office was quiet and dark, with a lone oil lamp giving light on the desk over a mountain of paperwork yet to be sorted. For whatever reason, Carson had taken off his pocket watch and had it sitting on his desk; Thomas bent over it to register that one of the hands had stopped ticking properly. The gears needed to be re-tightened and oiled no doubt.

The filing cabinet was his main prize, and he opened the top drawer at random to see what lay inside. He was greeted by a distressing amount of estate papers, which seemed to be filed underneath expenses. They stretched back for at least a decade, with the furthest year citing 1910.

Thomas closed the top drawer and tried the second drawer. He felt a wave of satisfaction when he saw a list of names. Having memorized the names of staff from the police report currently hiding upstairs in his chambers, Thomas began to scan through the names in the far back to pluck up dusty folders.

He noticed his own name near the front; Carson had alphabetized them by last names. Part of him desperately desired to go through his own file, to read Carson’s private thoughts with dark vindication, but he had a job to do. He pulled out the files for Albrite, Palmer, Barnes, Davies, Carney (Alice and Laura), as well as Good and Burton. It ended up being an enormous stack in his arms, with two files in particular heavily laced. As he pulled the files away from cabinet, a loose photograph tucked in between two folders dropped down to the floor.

Thomas paused, setting the files down on Carson’s desk to pluck it up.

There was something eerily familiar about it which set Thomas’ teeth on edge.

A group of servants sat cloistered around what was undoubtably the front steps of Downton Abbey. There were around fifteen of them, each in starched Victorian dress. A few were clasping hands, even daring to smile. In the center, three figures loomed over the others.

Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson looked disturbingly young and handsome. Thomas was shocked to even see Mrs. Patmore, who seemed to be at least fifty pounds lighter. The uniforms were similar, the dresses were common enough, but the faces… the faces were disturbing.

These people had dined in the servants hall. They had slept in the attics. They had lived their lives in Downton Abbey just as Thomas had. Had they regretted it? Had they wanted to die too? Had they wished they were free?

His eyes lingered over two women at the outskirts of the photograph. They looked so similar, they
had to be sisters. However, one had dark haunting eyes with a strange maddening gleam. Thomas knew implicitly he’d seen those two women before. They were was familiar to him as Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes—but why?

Someone had written in fine blue ink at the bottom of the photograph an entire slew of names, and traced the list to find his two subjects: Alice and Laura Carney.

Laura Carney, the maid who had harmed James Crawley, was the one who looked absolutely mad.

Alice Carney, on the other hand, looked disturbingly like Thomas’ own mother. This was, of course, impossible, but it was still creepy. Perhaps there were traces of the Barrows to be found even in North Yorkshire, though Thomas doubted it. As far as he knew, the Barrows were Stockport folk through and through. Liverpool was the only home they’d ever known since before William the Conqueror.

“Thomas!”

He jumped, nearly dropping his entire stack of files, and whipped around to find Anna in the doorway of Mr. Carson’s office. She was glaring at him over her enormously swollen belly, angry to find him trespassing in a place that she knew he didn’t belong. “What on earth are you doing??”

“Some paperwork for Lady Mary,” Thomas rubbed at a stitch between his ribs, his heart rate returning to normal.

Anna would not be moved; she was like a guard dog blocking the only exit out. “Why on earth would Lady Mary want you to go through Mr. Carson’s files?”

“That’s Lady Mary’s business,” Thomas snapped. He shut the second cabinet drawer with a bump of the hip and held his files close as he made to physically push past Anna. She had very little choice but to let him, too pregnant to put up much of a fight without toppling over.

“Does Mr. Carson know you’ve done this?!” Anna demanded. Thomas did not answer her, heading for the stairs.

“Thomas!” she cried out, even as he mounted the first flight. He did not make to look back.

It was a great relief to find some semblance of privacy in his room. Thomas shut the door, though he did not have the opportunity for a lock (it was forbidden in the house for servants to have lockable doors). He sat down at his desk where the police report lay waiting, allowing his new files to make a neat pile near the corner. Though it pained him to take from Mrs. Hughes, Thomas had stolen a few pages of her personal stationary (he had none of his own) in order to write down notes. In pencil, Thomas wrote down the list of names from police file, propping the picture of the prior staff against his wall so that he might look at it while he wrote.

Those two women were staring at him; their eyes seemed to burn into his flesh. Thomas felt an ache in his arm over his scar where he’d burned himself in his youth. He rubbed it vigorously to soothe it, and continued with his work.
So he had been right! Albrite was the nursemaid after all, and if her picture was anything to go by she looked like a lovely young woman. Palmer had been the first footman, Barnes the second, and Felix the third. At the bottom of the picture, they were clearly in cahoots with each other. They looked like they might be best friends. Davies had been the head housemaid, Good and Burton just plain housemaids… but the Carney sisters had been second housemaids.

So why had a second housemaid been interviewed so heavily? What had Alice Carney known (or what had the police suspected she’d known).

“Alice Carney,” Thomas whispered the name, allowing the sounds to tumble from his lips a few times until they were familiar. Why was she so familiar? What was it about her person that made Thomas think of his own mother? Maybe it was because his own mother had been named Alice.

It must just be some kind of name hoodoo. Thomas was investigating a case of an infant where the mother had been Lady Grantham. He was probably just subvertly thinking about his own infancy. It wasn’t too much of a stretch, was it?

Yet even as Thomas made to open Alice Carney’s file, the sound of pounding footsteps brought him to a pause. Who in the hell was storming around the-

His door burst open so forcefully that it banged into the wall and shook up its rusted hinges. Thomas jumped in his chair, his heart pounding wildly at the intrusion as Carson, Mrs. Hughes, and Anna all spilled over the threshold.

“There!” Anna cried out, pointing to the files on Thomas’ desk like they were live snakes. “There, I told you-!”

“What in the devil are you doing with my personal files?!” Carson roared. “How dare you think to steal personal information from me!”

“Christ!” Thomas swore, furious at being interrupted yet again. Did these people ever take a break from haranguing him?! “I’m trying to get work done for Lady Mary! Are you trying to murder me or
“How dare you give me cheek when you break into my office-!?”

“I didn’t break into anything!” Thomas shouted back, jerking from his chair so that he was nose to nose with Carson. Their squalling was so loud and vicious that it was causing Anna to put her hands over ears. “The door was bloody well open wasn’t it!?”

“You went in without my permission!” Carson shouted, purple in the face. “That makes it breaking in! And you took files without even asking! Like a stoat rummaging through the bin!”

“Well skin me like one!” Thomas roared; his cheeks were burning from embarrassment and fury. Oh, how he hated them all in that moment. “I was ordered by Lady Mary to take your bloomin’ files! I have a job to do! Why is that so ruddy hard for you all to accept?!”

“A job indeed!” Carson scoffed. “We’ll see about that-!”

He snatched the files from Thomas’ desk, opening them up to see what they were of. Yet where Thomas had been expecting more anger and shouting, Carson went stiff and fell silent.

He held the file for Harry Palmer, confused as to why it was in Thomas’ room in the first place.

“What…” Carson grabbed the next file, which happened to be the one for Jonathan Barnes. The next one was for Felix Hopper. “What are these?”

“They’re employee files,” Thomas sneered, as if this were not entirely obvious from the start. Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson stared at one another agog. Clearly they hadn’t thought him the common culprit for personal files. Why then had they been so frightened? What other files did Mr. Carson keep in his cabinet? What had he been so scared of Thomas seeing?

Carson stooped over Thomas’ desk, but before he could see the notes or the police file Thomas grabbed them both up. Carson made to snatch them; Thomas outmaneuvered him.

“These don’t belong to you!” Thomas snapped. He put them in his desk drawer, locking it only to pocket the key. Carson was scarlet in the face, furious at being denied. “They’re police reports, given to me by Lady Mary.”

“What police report?!” Carson demanded.

“My work for Lady Mary is private!” Thomas said. “It does not involve you, or you-!” Thomas added angrily at Anna. She withdrew a bit into Mrs. Hughes’ side, unwilling to be chastised so publicly.

“Now just a minute, Mr. Barrow!” Mrs. Hughes would not stand to be talked to like a child. “We have every right to be concerned with your history of thievery! Your position in this house is not a strong one!”

“Well then you should have let me die, shouldn’t you?” Thomas snapped.

Mrs. Hughes went white.

She gaped, her mouth open, but eventually closed it when she had nothing to say. Even Carson was taken aback, unsure of what to do as Thomas sorted away the two files for the Carney sisters. He slid the rest back over to Mr. Carson.

“Take the ruddy things,” Thomas snapped.
“What are those two?” Carson asked.

“I’m not finished with them,” Thomas said.

“That is not the question I asked—“

“They’re the files for the Carney sisters.” Thomas said.

Once again, Carson froze. Thomas looked up in time to see Carson and Mrs. Hughes swap a frightened glance. Mrs. Hughes had a hand over her breast, playing nervously with her ivory broach. It featured an angel resting upon a cloud.

“. . . If you want to know more, you’ll have to ask Lady Mary,” Thomas said. “But until I finish reading these two files, I need to keep them. I was just trying to sort out the prior staff roles.”

He plucked up the picture of the staff and laid it atop the files for Mr. Carson to take. He picked it up, his thin lips pursed as he viewed the younger photo of himself.

He shook his head, handing it over to Mrs. Hughes to investigate. For whatever reason, she sighed as if filled with a great sadness. Why?

“Is that you?” Anna wondered, pointing to Mrs. Hughes.

“It was,” Mrs. Hughes said.

“You’re beautiful,” Anna declared. Mrs. Hughes scoffed, waving her off as if she were silly to insist such things.

“Why do you need the files for the Carney sisters?” Carson asked. Unlike before, his tone was layered and calm; there was an unnerving edge to all of it though like he was two seconds from shouting again.

“I don’t,” Thomas replied, “Lady Mary does.”

“And why does Lady Mary need them?”

“You need to ask her, Mr. Carson,” Thomas said. “She told me to keep it a secret from everyone. I won’t disobey a direct order from her.”

Carson tutted irritably, taking up all the files that Thomas had pulled so that they were in a heavy bundle underneath his arm.

“I expect the file for the Carney sisters back before the end of the week,” Carson said. He did not apologize to Thomas for yelling, nor did he make to explain his anger. Instead, he left Thomas’ room without another word. Mrs. Hughes followed swiftly after him, leaving only Anna who seemed slightly sheepish.

Good.

“. . . I didn’t think I could trust you,” Anna tried to explain.

“You should have left me to die then,” Thomas replied.

Anna fiddled with the hem of her black frock, unsure of what to say. Thomas did not make her job any easier, instead unlocking his desk drawer and pulling back out all his files. He began to work just as before, only know he had the unwelcome company of a pestering pregnant lady’s maid.
“… I only…” But Anna didn’t seem to know what else to say. Her sentence trailed off into silence, and when she couldn’t finish it she decided instead to leave. Thomas was left alone with a hollow sense of victory, wondering what on earth he would do come morning.

Why did every accomplishment in his life have to be blackened by someone else’s distrust?

~*~

Tucked away in bed, Mary thought little of Barrow or any other servant as she instead read a copy of The Portrait of a Lady. Henry James always had a way with her imagination. He might have kept having his wicked way with her fantasies had it not been for the sudden unexpected knocking at her bedroom door.

Mary faltered mid page, brow furrowed at the sudden intrusion. She looked at her bedside clock to find it touting the time of 11:39. Who on earth would be calling for her at a time like this?

“Who is it?” Mary called out, unsure if she would like the answer.

“Me, M’lady!” Mary bristled at the sound of Anna Bates’ worried voice. She roused from bed at once, snatching her night coat and throwing it over her shoulders. As she went to the door, Anna was still talking, “With Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes. May I enter and help you into your robe?”

“Certainly,” Mary said. The door opened just as she reached it, only for Anna to slip inside. Mary’s heart was beginning to race within her ivory breast. Her papa-! Had something happened in the late hour? Was George well?

“What’s going on?” Mary begged as Anna helped her to straighten her robe upon her shoulders and tie her sash. “Papa-?”

“No, M’lady,” Anna replied. She looked oddly sheepish. “It’s Mr. Barrow. He’s been caught taking files from Mr. Carson’s office, and he says he told him to. Mr. Carson wants to speak with you.”

“I see,” Mary sighed. This was all getting rather exhausting. Honestly, couldn’t the others just let Thomas get on with his work? “Let them in.”

Anna did so, opening the door wide to reveal a pained Carson and Mrs. Hughes. It was Carson to speak first, clearly distressed at having stepped so widely out of protocol to knock upon her door at a late hour.

“My lady, I apologize deeply for disturbing your rest, but I find that I am terribly concerned about your employment of Mr. Barrow,” Carson might have kept his words civil, but Mary had spent a lifetime learning to read through Carson’s words. He could not stand being outside the know when it came to Mary. He didn’t like Barrow enough to trust him, and now he was having to contend with more insanity than he could stand. Mary didn’t like the idea of telling her father or mother… but Carson was different.

Carson could be trusted in all things.

“Anna, shut the door,” Mary ordered. Anna obeyed at once. Now the four of them had some semblance of privacy.

“I am sorry that you’ve been disturbed, Carson,” Mary said, and she meant it. She did not like bringing the aged butler any sort of pain. “I suppose Thomas told you to speak to me?”
“Yes, he did!” Carson bristled at this, puffing up with irritation. “And he was very cheeky about it too!”

“I think I know what he took from your office,” Mary said thinking on their last conversation in the park. “If I’m not mistaken, they were employee files?”

“That’s just it, M’lady,” Carson said. “But did you tell him to do such a thing?”

“I did,” Mary said. Carson deflated like an old tire, sagging under the weight of Mary’s complacency with the man he hated most.

“Why, M’lady?”
The hurt in Carson’s voice stung her, even if only a little. She did not like to disappoint him.

“…Because, Carson,” Mary began with a weighted if calm tone. “I’ve hired Barrow to privately investigate the disappearance of my brother James.”

Mrs. Hughes gave an audible gasp, a hand suddenly at her slim throat. Carson was so surprised, his mouth fell open and he did not make to close it.

Yet the greatest of reactions came from Anna, who had been utterly oblivious to the fact that Mary had even had a brother.

“What?” Anna demanded, completely out of character for a servant in front of nobility. “You had a brother?”

“Anna,” Mrs. Hughes whispered, “Remember yourself.”

“Only—” Anna flushed scarlet, quickly bumbling over an excuse she’d never had to make before in her life. “I’m terribly sorry, M’lady, only that I’m awful surprised because I’d never heard of such a—”

“Don’t trouble yourself,” Mary waved her off before her apology could ramble on any further. “I understand. Yes, Anna, I had a brother. A twin brother named James. He was kidnapped when he was only a year old. Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes were still butler and housekeeper at the time. I’m sure they can tell you of the particulars later.”

Anna looked quickly to Mrs. Hughes, blue eyes brimming with excitement for new gossip. Mrs. Hughes nodded, but likewise pressed a finger to her lip for silence. Whatever they were to say to one another, it would have to wait until they were alone.

“I don’t want to go into my reasons, nor do I want Barrow disturbed,” Mary continued on. Carson was crestfallen at this. “Barrow understands the grave implications of his work. That’s why he’s been keeping everything private, and probably giving you cheek. Although he is a little cheeky naturally.”

“…M’lady…” Carson did not know what to say. He had to take an unnatural pause before carrying on, as if rehearsing his words in his mind first. “What happened that night so many years ago was a terrible terrible thing. But I don’t see how Barrow of all people can assist you when even the York Chief of Police couldn’t.”

“Barrow is a servant of this house, and knows it inside out,” Mary explained. “What’s more, he’s not a chief of police. He’s a servant, and a man of the common wealth. He knows how criminals think. He might be cheeky, but he’s invaluable to me. And I believe this work will help him to keep his mind occupied. I feel a kinship to Barrow, I shan’t deny it. We work well together, and he’s already proving himself as a detective.”
“But he’s looking into things that are not his business, M’lady!” Anna begged. “He’s being terribly nosy and secretive!”

“But that’s just it, Anna,” Mary said. “They are his business. I made them his business. And I require everyone’s cooperation on the subject in assisting him. I want this kept quiet, below stairs. Lady Grantham is distressed already, and I don’t want her to hear any more on the subject.”

“And what if Barrow does find something, M’lady?” Carson asked. He spoke to her more like a father than a butler in this moment, and it made Mary feel an odd sense of security. “Have your prepared yourself for that? And how will we tell Lady Grantham?”

“Leave it to me, Carson,” Mary decided. “But if Barrow needs anything else from your office, please… let him have it? For my brother’s sake?”

Carson let out an exhausted sigh, raising his eyes skyward as if asking God for strength. “Oh… I cannot pretend that I am soothed by it, M’lady. But I’ll certainly do as you ask. But if Barrow needs anything else from my office, will you kindly remind him that he is to ask me for my permission and not go rummaging like a stoat through a bin!”

Mary held back a little chuckle. Carson could be so amusing when he was grumpy.

“I most certainly will, Carson,” Mary assured him. “Now if we are concluded, I should like to return to bed.”

“Very good, M’lady. I wish you pleasant dreams,” Carson said. He turned to Mrs. Hughes, gesturing for her to silently follow him. This left only Anna behind, who once more helped Mary out of her housecoat to drape it back across her desk chair.

“I wish I knew why you trusted him,” Anna mumbled. She helped Mary back into bed, careful to drape her covers evenly. “He can be so horrid.”

“I trust him for the very same reason that Lady Edith despises me,” Mary said. “Because we are the same.”

Unable to reply lest she risked impertinence, Anna had no choice but to let Mary return to her novel and bed.
A Wicked Paintbrush

Chapter Summary

Thomas makes a 'friend' at the village police station, only to discover something shocking upon returning home.

Chapter Notes

Sexual content in this chapter. :3

In lieu of Thomas' poor interactions with Carson, he decided that the best thing to do would be to avoid the butler's files as much as possible. Lady Mary had made it clear that there were still more files to be had at the Downton Village Police Station. With this in mind, Thomas combed his hair, put on fresh pants, and headed out to town. In lieu of summer storms, a cooler wind was beginning to blow through the air. He caught a ride with a farmer heading into town, easily saving himself about half an hour of walking, and arrived shortly after noon in the center of town.

He didn’t like going into the village police station, or even remotely near it… but needs must.

There was something oddly cruel and slummy about the station. The whole place reeked of piss; it was a common village dare to urinate on the sides of the building when the officers weren’t looking. As a result, the smell on Saturday nights could bend nails.

Thomas entered the station, lips pursed and stance slightly too tense to pass for normal. It felt horribly risky to get this close to officers, even though none of them had any reason to suspect Thomas was different. In fact, they hardly noticed Thomas at all as he passed through their numbers. Too much attention was taken up by a gaggle of teenagers who were shouting obscenities from their cells:

“Mutton Shunter!” They cat called.

“Look at the fly rink on that one!” Another jeered as a copper with thinning hair walked past.

Thomas coughed, attempting to catch the attention of the policeman behind the receptionist desk. The man glanced up, looking thoroughly bored.

“You here for the boys?” The man asked.

“No,” Thomas said. “I’m here on business. I would like to speak to your records keeper. A Mr. John Bailey, I believe?”

“May I ask the nature of your business?”

“I’m Detective Thomas Barrow,” Thomas lied. “I’m a private investigator hired by the Lady Mary Crawley of Downton Abbey.”

At once, the man sat up straight in his chair; this was the common reaction you got amongst the
village. The name Crawley always stirred a reaction, sometimes of loyalty other times of annoyance.

“Very good, Mr. Barrow.” The policeman rose up, heading for a door on the left which lead to god knows where. “If you’ll wait here, I’ll fetch Mr. Bailey promptly.”

So Thomas was left to his own devices with little company save for a group of mafficking teenagers.

“Crawley’s in the counting-house, counting out his money! Cora’s in the parlor, eating bread a honey!” The teenagers leered, each singing in a different tune and none of them harmonizing well.

“The maid was in the garden, hanging out the clothes. Along came a blackbird and snipped off her nose!”

At this, they all started howling, egging one another on.

“Quiet, you lot!” Roared a policeman. He took out his baton and slammed it hard against the iron bars of the jail cell so that the men hushed up at once lest they get a smack. For whatever reason, the policeman gave Thomas an apologetic look.

“Sorry,” The man added. “Have to keep the upper hand, don’t you?”

Thomas didn’t know what to say to that.

The door opened to reveal an elderly man with a full graying beard and a warm smile. At once, Thomas knew this was Mr. John Bailey, for the man looked at Thomas with such pointed interest that his intentions could not be denied.

“Detective Barrow,” Mr. Bailey shook his hand gayly, “I’m John Bailey, the records keeper. Shall we step into my office for some privacy?”

“Let’s,” Thomas said, eager to get as far away from the youths as possible. He followed Mr. Bailey down the hallway to the very back end and found it a quiet relief from the babble up front. Mr. Bailey’s office was a cramped corner, stacked from floor to ceiling with filing cabinets, but it was private and cozy. Mr. Bailey shut the door behind them, and at once the yowling of the teenagers was cut off.

“So what can I do for you?” Mr. Bailey asked.

“I need to access certain criminal files,” Thomas said. “For case 021290.”

“Ah,” Mr. Bailey gave a sad little smile, and at once turned to his filing cabinets to rifle through them. It was clear the man was meticulous, keeping all his papers in order for quick reference. “Can’t say I enjoy looking at this case again. I remember it like it were yesterday. A somber affair it was.”

Mr. Bailey pulled out heavy file, laden with what looked like a tome worth of information. He laid it on a dusty heap upon his desk.

“Here you are,” Mr. Bailey said. “Arrest records and criminal interviews.”

Thomas opened the file at once, only to pause as he caught a glimpse of a severe looking woman in a mug shot.
She was staring directly at the camera man with a lewd smile. It disturbed him.

“So are you from around here?” Mr. Bailey asked. Thomas carefully flipped through the different interview files. Cor, it would take days to sort through all of this!

“I am,” Thomas said. He sat down in Mr. Bailey’s visitor chair, grateful when Mr. Bailey offered him a complementary cup of tea. He took a small sip, relaxing as he pondered the first of many interview files. The writing was so aged it was hard to make out.

“I haven’t seen much of you in the village.”

“I used to work in the big house,” Thomas explained.

“Ah…” Mr. Bailey relaxed against the spine of his desk, arms folded over his chest. He seemed… intrigued.

“Funny that, you hear all sorts of things about people up at the big house,” Mr. Bailey said.

“Do you,” Thomas couldn’t care less.

Mr. Bailey licked his lips, eyeing Thomas with great intruige. “I even hear one of ‘ems an artist.”

“Oh.”

He wouldn’t dare make a comment. He couldn’t even afford to look Mr. Bailey in the eye. Every muscle, every memory in Thomas’ body was screaming at him to take notice of how close Mr. Bailey was standing to him. Of how the man seemed to be ogling him, in particular his backside. Or was he?
Thomas could never be sure.

Mr. Bailey took a small sip of tea, still trying for conversation. “See, I’d love to meet an artist m’self. I like painters.”

Well good for him. Thomas struggled for words, still nervous that he was reading the signs wrong. He needed to hear Bailey say the words. He needed to know that he wasn’t jumping the gun.

“….Do you paint…?” Thomas asked.

“I do,” Bailey said. Thomas’ hands began to tremble about the documents he held. “I’ve painted all m’life.”

“What do you paint?” Thomas asked.

“… Men.” Mr. Bailey said. “Naked men. Suppose you could say I’m eh… captivated by the subject.”

Thomas slowly turned his head to look at Bailey. He found the man watching him with an intent gaze and a coy smile.

“Do you paint?” Bailey asked. That smile was only growing sharper by the minute as Thomas fumbled for words.

Dare he say it?
What if it was a trap? What if Bailey had been ordered by his fellow officers to widdle the answers out of Thomas only to then incarcerate him?

No, Thomas shook his head. He wouldn’t fall for such a trap.

“Spend my time readin’,” Thomas grumbled, returning to his documents. “Read a real interesting book the other day about a wicked record keeper who tried to trick a man into revealing something dangerous just to have him-”

Mr. Bailey took the documents forcibly from Thomas’ hands. For one tiny second, absolute terror leapt into Thomas’ heart as Bailey pulled him up from the chair. What on earth-?! They were nose to nose, with Thomas’ quivering breathes lacing the Bailey’s furrowed brow.

“I’m a painter, Thomas,” Bailey whispered. “Not a trickster.”

“I don’t trust you,” Thomas whispered back. “I can’t make that move until I’m sure.”

“… Then be sure,” Bailey paused, tilting his head slightly to the left. He seemed to be drinking Thomas in, or sizing him up, his eyes focused upon Thomas’ swollen red lips.

The tiniest moment of caution passed between the two men.
Bailey leaned in.
Thomas did not stop him.

The last time Thomas had been kissed, it had been by a steward on the passage to North America. He’d spent quite a lot of time that week holing himself up in different rope closets, kissing the pants off of one particular steward who had looked unnervingly like Jimmy’s older (if less attractive) brother. But Mr. Bailey was not young, nor was he anywhere near as attractive as Jimmy had been.

But he was a man, solid and real, with hard muscles and a wiry beard upon his face. He kissed
Thomas like a man possessed, like a man determined to have his fill of a delightful treasure. When Thomas reached up to feel at Bailey’s bearded face, Bailey pulled Thomas tight and began to knead rather brusquely at the globes of his arse.

Goodness, someone moved fast!

Thomas broke back, gasping for air. His heart was hammering in his ribs, but Bailey had this dark, delighted look upon his face.

“God I’ve eyed you for years, you know that?” Bailey whispered. “Years I’ve seen you wanderin’ around the village. Oh I’ve wanted you for a long time.”

Thomas didn’t know what to say to that.

“You’re daft.” He whispered.

“… Nah, I’m an artist,” Bailey joked.

Thomas tried to turn away, tried to pick up the files on Laura Carney again, but Bailey stopped him.

“You know technically I’m not allowed to let prisoner files out… but… if you eh… help me with a painting, I’ll let you take the whole lot of ‘em. Interview files too.”

Was the man suggesting they touch toes right in his office? Have their greens not five hundred feet away from actual police cells? Cor, he was mad!

“We’re in spittin’ distance from cells, an’ you want to have a dance with me?” Thomas wondered.

“No one comes back here,” Bailey grinned. Just for show, he turned around and carefully turned the lock on his door so that even if someone were to come along they wouldn’t be able to get in.

Trouble was, now Thomas couldn’t get out either.

“I…” He didn’t like this. “I can’t. It’s… it’s too dangerous.”

“If it wasn’t dangerous would you want to?”

Christ, would he ever. Thomas hadn’t had sex since Phillip Prevet. That had been ages ago, and frankly he’d been dying to get laid ever since.

Thomas nodded. He dare not even say the words out loud.

“Well then…” Bailey grinned. “Come t’me, beautiful. Let me make a masterpiece with you.”

Thomas scoffed. Honestly, what a nance!

But Bailey surged forward again once more kissing Thomas as passionately as if they were long lost lovers instead of absolute strangers. Bailey was fumbling at Thomas’ trousers, desperate to get them down and off his hips. Thomas squeaked against Bailey’s mouth, shocked when the man’s greedy fingers managed to make their way beneath his pants. He held tight to the front of Bailey’s vest, gripping the man like he were afraid of drowning in a raging sea. Bailey’s fingers were hot and hard, searching incandescently for the core of his being.

He found it sure enough, cursing against Thomas’ mouth in delight as he began to explore his treasure in earnest.

“Wait, wait, wait-!” Thomas begged, pulling back.

At once, Bailey stopped.
His trousers were almost completely off his hips. His core was burning from Bailey’s fingers. He was trembling all over, absolutely gob-smack terrified.

He couldn’t do it. It was too soon after… after the incident.

He shook his head, clutching at the corner of Bailey’s desk so that he might have a perch until he could regain his footing.

Bailey said nothing, clearly too nervous to make the first move.

“… I uh…” Thomas took another breath, trying to calm himself. “… Sorry it’s not you, it’s me. I think I need t’move a bit slower.”

“I didn’t mean to frighten you,” Bailey urged. “but you’re so young and beautiful. I guess I couldn’t control myself. I was a beast, I apologize.”

“No,” Thomas sniffed. Honestly when had he gotten so soft. “No it’s alright, let me… let me make it up to you.”

“Honestly, you don’t have to-”

“No, I want to” Thomas said. He did, in fact, want to have a taste of wickedness. But the idea of having sex with a stranger, so soon after… well… it just wasn’t time. “I uh… keep it to yourself but a few weeks ago… I tried to…” Thomas shook his head. “I’m just… I’m not any sense am I?”

“Take your time,” Bailey smoothed his hair back, expelling a long breath as if hoping to cool himself. “Honestly just being this close to you is an absolute treat.”

What a numpty.

“… Let me move at my own speed,” Thomas said. “I can paint a masterpiece alright, but just not a whole canvas.”

He looked pointedly at the rather obvious tent in Mr. Bailey’s trousers. Bailey looked down, then back up again in surprise.

“Do you want to?” Bailey wondered. Thomas could hear the pained hope in the man’s voice.

He nodded; it would be a pleasurable act, but one not performed on his own body and much shorter in exertion than full out wild wiggling. Yes.. yes Thomas could see a Yorkshire hello being very nice.

“Cor,” Bailey whispered. “I won’t say no to that, will I?”

Thomas sniffed, pushed his hair out of his face, and spat upon his palm. At once, Bailey undid the clasp of his trousers, relaxing against the edge of his desk so that he in effect swapped places with Thomas.

He pushed his pants down, or as far down as he could manage when he was sitting. It more than did the job though, revealing the treasure inside.

It had been quite a while since Thomas had seen another man laid bare before him. Bailey was thick, but sagging slightly from age; Thomas wouldn’t hold that against him. Instead, he pressed himself upon Bailey, allowing the man to kiss him as roughly as he liked while teasing at the taut flesh
It felt good to have control. To possess the thing which normally so possessed him. To sin with the very same hand that he served tea.

It was easy to give Bailey what he wanted. Thomas had the act of bringing a man off with his hand down to an art. He was rewarded with Bailey yanking his tie free so as to have better purchase on his slim neck. Thomas had to hold back the tiniest laugh; Bailey’s beard tickled the underside of his chin.

Bailey fished for Thomas’ hips, sticking his own hand beneath Thomas’ pants to feel for a prize. Thomas gasped as sensitive flesh met calloused fingers.

“How old are you-?” Bailey mumbled into Thomas’ ear.

“Thirty six,” Thomas whispered. It was a weird question to ask someone when they were giving you a Yorkshire hello.

“Christ,” Bailey’s voice turned into a moan. “You’re so young!”

“Wait, how old are-“ But Thomas’ question never got finished. Bailey kissed him so passionately on the mouth that Thomas had no choice but to hush.

They were close, the pair of them. Any second might be the end to their little rendezvous.

“Thomas-“ Bailey was in his ear. “Call me- call me Da-“

Thomas kissed him hard again to keep him from saying something ridiculous.

He had no intention of calling a man he slept with ‘da’.

Bailey grunted, seizing. The sudden wetness in Thomas’ hand left little to the imagination. He, however, was yet to finish and that was something Bailey clearly couldn’t contend with.

“C’mere-“ Bailey grunted, yanking at Thomas’ belt loops to haul him around so that they were back to front. With newfound passion, Bailey set about jacking Thomas off with such speed and dexterity that Thomas nearly cried out.

His eyes fluttered closed, he laid his head back upon Bailey’s shoulder. Bailey kissed him upon the ear and neck, whispering hotly into Thomas’ ear in a hope to inspire passion.

“C’mon darlin’, c’mon baby boy-“

Christ, not this nonsense again. Thomas took matters into his own hands, mentally blocking Bailey out to instead think of the most sexual image he could contend with. He fantasized Jimmy Kent was naked, writhing upon the servant’s table. He’d be covered in sauces and boiled fruit, the perfect little centerpiece.

“Come have a taste,” He’d whisper.

Thomas came, gasping for breath and shaking in Bailey’s arms.

For a moment the pair of them simply came down from their high. Thomas let out a shaky breath, pulling way from Bailey’s slackened grip to wipe his hands clean upon a handkerchief. Bailey did the same, grunting under his breath as he struck up a cigarette and took a deep drag.
In a moment of charity, he offered a fag to Thomas who accepted at once. They were his age-old vice, after all.

Thomas perched his cigarette between his teeth, hastily doing up his trousers and shirtsleeves till he looked presentable again.

“I believe we had a transaction?” Thomas asked.

“Ay, we had somethin’,” Bailey grinned. He relaxed along the spine of his desk, reaching around to hand over an enormous package of interview files. Thomas took it at once, careful not to singe the pages with his lit cigarette.

“Cor, you’re a pretty baby,” Bailey said.

“An’ you’re a daft old man,” Thomas replied. Bailey let out a sharp barking laugh, even slapping his knee.

“Ah, you’re a treat,” Bailey praised. “Bring those back to me when you’re finished and uh… we’ll have another go at paintin’ that masterpiece,” Bailey said.

“About that-” Thomas suddenly felt sheepish. “I’m sorry I-“ But he just didn’t know what to say.

“Nah-“ Bailey waved it off, a dopy grin plastered on his face. “You don’t owe me nothin’ lad. I’m happy with what I got. Leaves somethin’ for next time, eh?”

“Ehe…” Thomas didn’t know if there would even be a next time. “Sure.”

He tidied his hair, stowed his handkerchief in his pocket, and left. He had a feeling Bailey was watching his arse all the way down the hall.

~*~

The walk home was particularly embarrassing, though Thomas couldn’t understand why. It wasn’t the first time that he’d flirted with danger around the abbey, but it was the first time since his little incident a few weeks ago. After Carson outright declaring Thomas a pedophile for being different, Thomas could not help but feel ashamed every time he indulged with the dark side. The fact of the matter was, Thomas had never been and never would be a pedophile (indeed he found such acts to be vile on the same level as torturing an animal); but Carson likened him to one and that was all that mattered. No matter how many times Carson hinted at an apology, no matter how contrite he acted when they were alone, Thomas would never be able to forget Carson snapping at him in the servant’s hall.

“That’s all good and well, but we’re talking about a vulnerable young man here-!”

Vulnerable to Thomas.
Vulnerable to attack from Thomas.

As Thomas returned to the Abbey and hid himself in his room, he could not help but wonder if Carson had thought the same thing when he’d seen Thomas playing with George. Had he envisioned Thomas preying upon a child no bigger than six? Had he thought Thomas so despicable, so vile, that he would do such a depraved thing?

It put a sting of acid in Thomas’ mouth. He desperately buried himself in his paperwork, trying in vain not to dwell anymore on Carson’s prejudice.
*I will never forgive him,* Thomas thought, even as he opened Laura Carney’s criminal file. *For as long as I live, I shall never forgive him.*
Incident Report: File #021290
Criminal Offenses:
- Assault
- Arson
- Attempted Manslaughter

Notes:
- Charles Carson
- James Robert Crawley

Race: White
Eyes: Yellow
Build: Slight

Address: Downton Abbey (domestic servant)

Last known whereabouts: Incarcerated, York Women’s Prison

Note:
Is ruled a one of a kind in every way, caught everyone by surprise, and will make for an interesting tale in later years.
“… She assaulted Carson?” Thomas wondered aloud. He tapped his finger upon the incriminating line. Yet even as he mulled this newfound insight over, he noticed her address and paused again.

Stockport.

Thomas was original from Stockport, though he’d never heard of the Carney family during his time there. This was uncommon, because his father had been in cahoots with most village men. There were a few farmhouses on the outskirts of town, perhaps the Carney’s had been amongst them. But if she truly was from Stockport, Thomas stood a good chance of using his insight to find out more about her family. What was more, he knew she had a sister named Alice. Could it be that Alice had returned to Stockport after finishing her time at Downton Abbey? If so, could Thomas seek her out and interrogate her about her sister’s nefarious deeds? Admittedly, the crime had happened in 1890, but he highly doubted that Alice Carney had forgotten about that dreadful night.

Either way, Thomas needed to talk to Mr. Carson and find out more.

Thomas headed downstairs with Laura Carney’s arrest file and a notepad underneath his arm. When he passed by Anna heading up the stairs carrying fresh linens, he did not spare her a second glance. He had no desire to speak with her anymore, after her ridiculous meddling the other day. If she paused on the step and looked back at him regretfully, that was her own affair.

He wondered if she thought he was a pedophile too.

As Thomas reached the main floor, he decided to check the library for Carson first. The hour was close to the end of tea, and Carson was known for frequenting the library to refill teacups before taking the trays downstairs. The family tea ending harked the beginning of the servant’s tea, so this was Thomas’ best chance of catching Carson before he barricaded himself in his office and started decanting wine for dinner.

He paused at the door of the library, attempting to school his face into an expression of indifference. It was difficult, in lieu of all that had occurred as of late.

He knocked, then opened the library door to find Lady Mary relaxing upon the couch taking a cup of tea. Sure enough, there was Carson at the buffet table, guarding a china teapot as if he’d been bidden to defend it with his life. Lady Mary looked up from her magazine, saw Thomas in the door, and broke into a wide warm smile. It was an expression she rarely revealed.

“Thomas!” She stood up, setting her magazine upon the sofa cushion. She joined him before Carson so that they were toe to toe. “How goes my favorite detective.”

“I’ve found a few leads, M’lady,” Thomas replied. He ignored the way that Carson rolled his eyes, as if he found Thomas’ inquiries ridiculous. Lady Mary, on the other hand, was captivated.

“Tell me more!” She urged at once.

“Well, this is Laura Carney,” Thomas offered her the file so that she might gaze upon the face of her brother’s attacker. She curled her lip in disgust before handing the file back.

“What a vile woman,” Lady Mary tutted.

“I quite agree, but there’s three things about this file that I find important to note,” Thomas said, pointing to each in turn. “First of all, Carney’s imprisoned in the York Women’s Prison—"

“That’s where Anna was taken,” Lady Mary mused. “I wonder if they ran across one another.”
“I’m not thrilled with the prospect of bringing that up to her,” Thomas said. As much as Anna annoyed him, he did not want to bring up the past. She might be a pest, but she hadn’t deserved arrest. “Besides, this file states that Carney’s mad. It’s recommended she not be in the company of other inmates. They’ve probably got her isolated in her own cell. But what it means for us is that I could in theory schedule an interview with her.”

“Let’s,” Mary agreed with a nod.

“Secondly, take a look—Thomas showed her the file again so that Lady Mary had to lean in close. “She attacked Carson as well.”

At this, both Thomas and Lady Mary looked at Carson expectantly. He was far from thrilled.

“Carson?” Lady Mary urged. “Will you tell Thomas more?”

Just to annoy the man, Thomas opened his notepad and poised his pencil over the paper expectantly. If they’d been alone, Thomas was certain Carson would have strangled him.

“… It was on the night of her offense, M’lady,” Carson pointedly did not address Thomas. Thomas tried not to take it in stride.

_I hate you so much_, Thomas thought, even as he wrote down Carson’s details.

“What happened, if you don’t mind me asking?” Lady Mary asked.

“The wretched woman was caught attempting to kill your brother,” Carson shuddered from the vile memory. “The nanny, Albrite, attempted to hold her off, but the woman was mad. I entered and found her holding your brother over the fireplace, and tackled her. From there, I regret to say it was quite a brouhaha.”

“That was very brave of you,” Lady Mary soothed. Carson puffed up with pride.

“I would gladly shed life and limb for this family, M’lady,” was his smooth reply.

“Good for you,” Thomas muttered. “What about this nonsense that she chanted Latin and was a witch. Does any of that ring true to you, or is it just babble?”

“Of course it’s babble!” Carson snapped, affronted at Thomas’ question. “Witchcraft is nothing more than a fairy tale!”

Lady Mary was slightly taken aback at the rudeness in Carson’s tone. Carson noted this, and became slightly more bashful.

“…What I mean to say, Mr. Barrow, is that I do not personally believe those accounts are true. Though I admit, she was speaking Latin when I found her.”

Thomas tutted under his breath, jotting the detail down. He wondered if she actually was, in fact, a witch.

“She sounds absolutely dreadful,” Lady Mary said. “Why ever did Mrs. Hughes hire her?”

“I assure you, M’lady, she did not appear a criminal at first,” Carson said.

“Mrs. Hughes wouldn’t hire anyone shady, M’lady,” Thomas said. “But I plan on asking her about the other sister, Alice. She can probably shed more light on what happened to her.”
“Good idea, Barrow,” Lady Mary praised. “What next?”

“Well, it says here that Carney was from Stockport,” Thomas said.

“So it does.”

“… I’m from Stockport, M’lady,” Thomas said. Lady Mary gave a start.

“You are?” Her blue eyes gleamed with delight. “But then you must take me there at once! We must track down the Carney family and find out more about them! Did you know them?”

“Let’s hold off on that until we interview Carney in prison,” Thomas offered. “Stockport is a long way from here… three hours by train. And I don’t fancy returning there unless I have to?”

“Why not?” Lady Mary asked.

Thomas didn’t know how to properly respond to that. But Lady Mary seemed to grow aware that Thomas was uncomfortable on the topic of his past and quickly smoothed it over.

“Don’t worry, Thomas,” Lady said. “We’ll handle that when the time comes.”

“Thank you, M’lady,” Thomas said. “Shall I call the prison and schedule an interview?”

“Certainly,” Lady Mary said, “Use the phone in the hall.”

Thomas left without another word. Unfortunately, Carson was right on his tails.

“Mr. Barrow-” Carson snapped, striding after him as fast as he could. “Thomas- just one moment-!”

Thomas reached the phone in the hallway and reached out to pick it up; Carson crushed his hand atop Thomas’ own so that he could not dial the operator.

“Stop it-!” Thomas stepped away from the man. He hated being so close. “I don’t like it when you’re right atop me.”

“What are you doing?” Carson demanded. “Digging into this dreadful affair? Can’t you take up a more pleasant hobby? I hear watercolors are soothing!”

“I am doing what Lady Mary wants, Mr. Carson!”

“She doesn’t know what she wants.”

“Really? Why don’t you talk to her about that-“

He tried to pick up the phone again. Once more, Carson stopped him.

“I’m warning you, if you bring any grief to this family I will not hesitate to kick you out-”

“Then you should have let me die.” Thomas said. Carson paled, bristling visibly at Thomas’ retort.

He did not know what to say. Thomas took his silence as an opportunity to pick up the telephone, and at once dialed the operator so that even if Carson had something to say he would have to wait till Thomas was off the phone.

Thomas wondered how ‘then you should have let me die’ had become his punchline. It felt oddly
vengeful and wonderfully sharp. He knew that the staff had been panicked to find him dead in the bathtub upstairs, but in lieu of his suffering they hadn’t necessarily changed their attitudes towards him. Maybe they were softer at times, but they still despised him. By reminding them of how they’d forced him to live, Thomas felt almost justified in his anger towards them.

It was their fault he was still alive.
It was all their fault.

So long as he blamed them, he did not have to blame himself.

“Operator!”


“Hold please.”

So he did. Next to him, Carson shuffled from foot to foot, awkward in his dance.

“Thomas, I am only trying to protect the family-“

“Yes you like to protect people from me, don’t you?” Thomas replied icily. “I’m amazed you haven’t ripped George out of my arms before.”

“Why on earth would I do a thing like that?” how dare Carson sound so wounded. Thomas glared at him, so that the butler blushed in reproach.

“Don’t you remember, Mr. Carson?” Thomas hissed. “I can’t be trusted around young men like Andy. Surely you put George in that category too.”

Carson was dumbfounded. He looked down at his polished shoes, mouth opening and closing several times before he finally found the inner strength to speak again.

“…Thomas, I told you before, I’m sorry-“

“I don’t believe you,” Thomas said.
Carson closed his mouth again, oddly somber. How dare he look sad, as if he were the only who was being isolated?

“York Women’s Prison,” Came a bubbly female voice. At once, Thomas snapped back to attention.

“Good day,” Thomas replied. “I am Thomas Barrow, a private investigator of Lady Mary Crawley of Grantham. I’m calling to schedule an interview with one of your inmates. A Laura Carney, file 021290.”

“021290, Please hold,” The operator replied.

“You’re hardly a private investigator,” Carson scoffed.

“I’m being paid to investigate privately,” Thomas hissed, placing a hand over the receiver of the telephone so that the operator could not hear him on the other side. “What other title would you have me take?”

“A stoat,” Carson grumbled.

“Oh yes, I’m sure the title ‘stoat’ would get the information Lady Mary wants,” Thomas hissed. Carson held up his hands in mock defense before folding his arms over his chest and waiting
“Investigator Barrow?” the voice had changed. Suddenly, Thomas was not talking to a bubbly woman but to a grown man who sounded just a tad bit surly.

“Yes,” Thomas replied. “I’m here.”

“My name is Officer Roland,” Officer Roland introduced himself. “The secretary mentioned your request to me and I had her forward your call to my office. I hate to say this sir, but Laura Carney has long since been gone from our facilities. She escaped from imprisonment only two weeks after being transferred here from Downton. We never caught her.”

…Escaped. Two weeks after being transferred.

Two weeks?

Thomas’ heart was starting to pound wildly in his chest. Could it be that he’d actually caught a lead? A true and honest lead?

Carson had noticed his expression. “What is it?” Carson whispered.

Thomas did not answer, instead focusing on Officer Roland. “What day exactly did this happen?”

“May fourteenth,” Officer Roland replied. “God help me sir, the door of her cell was melted. I have notes here that say the other inmates were screaming she was a witch. I can’t explain it sir.”

“… May fourteenth” Thomas whispered, a breath hitching in his chest. May fourteenth! By god, he had hit a lead!

“Thank you sir!” Thomas gushed. “Thank you, you’ve been incredibly helpful!”

“I have?” Officer Roland was shocked by this.

“Yes! Yes, god bless you and good day!” Thomas almost laughed as he slammed the phone back down on its cradle.

“What’s happened?” Carson demanded, now in a rush. “What have you found?” Was it Thomas’ imagination, or were his eyes suddenly gleaming with hope.

“Come with me!” Thomas urged. He headed back to the library at once, bursting with pride. It had seemed so fruitless at first but now after only a few days of being on the case Thomas had found a lead! Could it truly be he wasn’t useless at all?

He burst back into the library to find Lady Mary refilling her own teacup. She looked around, startled.

“What’s happened?” She wondered. “What’s happened.”

“M’lady I’ve got a hit!” Thomas cried out.

“The interview-“

“Forget the interview-“ Thomas swept the notion aside. “Forget it, it’s not important! I have something much better than that.”

“Then for god’s sake tell us!” Carson demanded, closing the library door so that the three of them had some privacy.
“I just spoke with Officer Roland of York Women’s Prison. He told me that Carney escaped from prison only two weeks after being transferred… on May fourteenth.” Thomas declared.

Carson sucked in a breath of disbelief. “No,” he blurted out in shock. “No it cannot be.”

“Yes!” Thomas snapped, burning with an inner fire. “I told you before, Lady Mary, no one would have been able to break into the abbey unless they had an accomplice, and the other Carney sister was interrogated three times more than anyone else! Don’t you see!!?”

Lady Mary’s expression was slowly shifting from one of shock to one of wild hope. She reached out, unwittingly grabbing onto Thomas’ arm as if hoping the touch would anchor her to the earth before she floated away.

“You think she did it?” Lady Mary asked in a breathless voice.

“God I’m willing to bet every brass I own,” Thomas scoffed. “Carney slipped through the police, but she won’t slip past by me! I’m heading to Stockport tonight, and I’m going to start tracking her down!”

“I want to go with you!” Lady Mary gushed. “Let’s leave right now and stay overnight!”

“M’lady!” Carson squawked. “Anna needs time to prepare!”

“I don’t need Anna,” Lady Mary wouldn’t hear of it. “Not for this. I have Thomas, he’s all the help I require.”

“But surely you need help to dress, M’lady.”

“Not this time, Carson.” Lady Mary was beaming. “I’m on the case! I shall dress accordingly. Ring for Anna, and have her pack my valise at once.”

“M’lady, I am unsure if this is wise,” Carson urged.

“I won’t get in over my head, Carson.” Lady Mary assured him. “I have Thomas with me! What could go wrong?”

Carson was none too sure.

It was a harried affair, with Anna hurriedly stuffing a valise that Lady Mary could handle on her own. Thomas, on the other hand, was left to his own devices as he headed back up to the attics. He had very few clothes, and so he chose those that would best handle the elements. Nothing too soft or ratted. Even as he placed his toiletries into his valise, he could not help but wonder at the prospect of returning to Stockport with Lady Mary of all people in tow. Would he recognize the town, or would it be foreign to him? God forbid, would people in the town recognize him?

Memories were sliding like melting butter across the back of his weary eyelids. He rubbed at them, praying the awful thoughts would go away.

A camp fire showing the decaying roof of a forest canopy in the dead of night.

A coffin floating in three feet of water, threatening to drown him. Thunder drowning out his screams.

A sharp knock upon his door jerked Thomas out of his reverie. He looked up to find Anna in the doorway, a fine cream leather valise in hand. She seemed oddly uncertain.
Thomas pursed his lips, then pointedly ignored her to resume stuffing his own valise. Anna took a small step into his room, setting Lady Mary’s valise down upon the floor.

“I wanted to talk to you before you left with Lady Mary for Stockport,” Anna said. “If that’s alright.”

Thomas did not reply, instead taking his time to place his files atop his clothes so that they would not jostle out of order during the journey.

“Lady Mary is overjoyed,” Anna said. “She thinks you’re onto something.”

“I am,” Thomas replied coldly. He closed his valise with a curt snap, squatting down next to his bed so that he was eye level with the leather straps. He buckled each one closed, still pointedly avoiding looking at Anna.

“The other day, you told me I should have let you die.”

Thomas paused, hands upon the last buckle.

“I wish you wouldn’t say such things, because I didn’t act out of blind generosity. I genuinely didn’t want you to die.”

Thomas finished the last buckle off, then rose up. He finally deigned to look at Anna, only to find her wilting in the doorway of his room. Why did she appear so sad? Why did she and Mr. Carson both think that they had any right to appear unhappy when he was the one who was suffering? Were they really so ignorant?

“There is no point in living- no point at all- unless you have something to live for,” Thomas said. Anna listened, oddly mute as she grappled with his words.

“If you force someone to live, but don’t give them any hope for living well… that’s not charity. That’s torture.” Thomas said. “Plain up, straight torture. Even demons know that people are not happier in hell.”

“… Is this place so horrid?” Anna asked.

“Any place is horrid when you’re alone,” Thomas replied. Anna didn’t know what to say to that.

Thomas headed for the door pausing to take Lady Mary’s valise from her. Anna let him, too pregnant to put up much of a fight. She followed him out of his room and down the servant’s staircase, passing by Bates who was holding one of Lord Grantham’s top hats that needed brushing.

“What’s going on?” Bates asked. Thomas did not answer him, brushing brusquely past him so that Bates had to move or be hit.

“I’ll tell you later!” Anna assured. She had not time to stop and chat with her husband. She had to keep up with Thomas or risk losing the opportunity of chastising him (god forbid).

Lady Mary was at the front door, wearing a traveling coat of softest doe skin. When she saw Thomas approaching with both valises in hand, she broke into a smug smile.

“Good!” Lady Mary left the house, with Thomas and Anna hot on her crimson heels. The motorcar had been brought around, with Carson out front speaking in hushed tones to the driver. Neither looked amused to have to cater to Thomas’ whims.
No matter.

Thomas buckled down both valises onto the back of the motorcar, listening intently as Anna and Carson both begged Lady Mary with worries.

“Please ring to assure us that you’re safe, M’lady,” Carson said.

“And if you need anything, don’t hesitate to have Mr. Barrow fetch a maid for you,” Anna said.

“On that note, if Barrow gives you any trouble, ring to inform me at once,” Carson said. “I won’t hesitate to come down to Stockport to keep him in line.”

Lady Mary just shrugged at this, “I doubt Barrow will put up much of a fuss, Carson.”

It was one thing to have people talk about you when you were out of earshot. But Thomas was only feet away taking care of the luggage. Surely Carson knew he would hear such things.

Thomas tried to swallow down his anger, but it was hard. Stiff in his gate, he stormed around the side of the car and wrenched open the door of the front seat to hop inside. Carson held open the door for Lady Mary, with Anna making sure that her coat did not catch on the door. Before Carson could close the door, however, Lady Mary called out to Thomas from the back.

“Barrow, come sit with me.”

Carson froze, eyes wide at Mary’s insistence. He looked at Thomas, as if assuming that all this were somehow one of Thomas’ hairbrained schemes to gain power in the house. The fact of the matter was, he was just as surprised as Carson. The driver, sitting next to Thomas, had his lips pursed and was clearly nervous.

He looked around, peering over the headrest so that he could address Lady Mary face to face: “Are you certain, M’lady?”

“I wouldn’t have asked if wasn’t,” She replied.

Carson made a noise of disgust in his throat.

Silently, Thomas got out of the car, taking his time to walk all the way around the car so that he would get in on the opposite side as Lady Mary. In this way, he opened his own door to the car and did not have to cross over Lady Mary’s legs to sit next to her. The interior of the cab smelt like stale cigars and polished leather. It was an oddly soothing scent, and the cushions were uncommonly soft against Thomas’ back.

Lady Mary was incredibly smug, tipping her head to Carson in lieu of farewell. Carson looked ready to be sick.

Off they went, traveling down the drive as prompt as you please.

They traveled to the train station, with Lady Mary purchasing both her and Thomas’ ticket in a moment of charity. For reasons that Thomas could not understand, she bought the pair of them tickets for second class, so that they might share a table in the luxury of the dining car. They would take a train from Downton to Liverpool, from which they would then board a smaller, local train to Stockport. It total, their journey would take them about three and a half hours, with their journey ending close to eight that night. As a result, the pair of them would dine on the way to Liverpool, and retire as soon as they reached their hotel.
They sat down in the dining cart, taking a table in the far corner. Lady Mary peered out their shared window, curious at the view she was offered.

“I’ve never sat in second class before,” Lady Mary said.

“That makes two of us, M’lady,” Thomas said. Lady Mary laughed.

But Thomas had trouble enjoying her humor. He could not let go of the way that Carson had spoken about him when he’d been only feet way. In one breath, Carson could claim to be sorry; then the wind would shift and Thomas would return to being a doormat.

When Thomas did not smile, Lady Mary paused.

“… Are you alright, Thomas?” Lady Mary asked. “You seem pensive.”

Thomas shrugged, looking out the window as the Downton Village countryside began to roll past. Soon, it was nothing more than a gaussian blur of gray and brown.

“Carson... Anna... all of them don’t trust me with you,” Thomas said. “I suppose sometimes it gets to me.”

“What?” Lady Mary was taken aback. “Why not?”

“I suppose I’m a bad person, in their eyes.” Thomas said it with a bitter smile. “I’ve been a bad person for a long time. That doesn’t change just because I try out the Dutch act.”

“Don’t say such things,” Lady Mary murmured. Instead of speaking with approach, she seemed terribly sad for him. It was a foreign experience, to see empathy in another’s eyes. The most he’d ever garnered before had been pity, and even that had only truly been in passing.

“You’re not a bad person,” Lady Mary said. “You’re a good person, whom bad things have happened to.”

“Is that so, M’lady?” Thomas asked with a smile.
Lady Mary nodded, firm in her belief.

“It’s my belief that there are some people in this world that are born to do the difficult jobs for the rest of us. People who are meant to bear the burdens of others, silently if also angrily. They don’t get the luxury of a happy life, but they don’t deserve our pity. They deserve our respect. Our undying respect,” Lady Mary added just for clarity.

Thomas could not look away from her eyes.
Her beautiful blue eyes.

“That’s you,” Lady Mary said with a smile. “So you’ll always have my undying respect… Thomas.”

He could not help it. Her words soothed an awful ache inside of him if only for a moment.

“You know, when you talk like that I almost believe you,” He said.

“Well you should,” Lady Mary said. “Because if there’s anyone in Downton Abbey whose wicked, it’s me. Not you.”

“You’re not wicked-“
“I ruined Lady Edith’s life—“

Now that was a funny thing to consider.

The dichotomy between Lady Mary and Lady Edith was a tale as old as time. Thomas could safely put his hand on his arse and say that he didn’t care a nit about their squabbles. But at the same time, he’d watched it balloon from a maiden rivalry to an all out dog fight between grown women. Why had it been allowed to go on for so long? Why hadn’t either one of them conceded and apologized?

And yet, did Thomas have any room to talk? He’d been just as vicious with Bates, the pair of them allowing a boyhood dispute to turn into an ugly grudge…. A battle that Thomas had ultimately lost.

But Lady Mary seemed to have construed his silence for an affirmation. She bowed her head, wearing an usually miserable expression. “It’s funny,” she mumbled. “Your agreement—”

“Did I say I agree, M’lady?” Thomas asked. Lady Mary perked up a bit, seemingly nervous to place hope in his words.

“Do you?” She asked.

“No,” Thomas shook his head. “I’m in a similar position with Bates. The only difference is, I was the one that lost. But I can’t say that Bates ruined my life. I ruined my life—“

“That isn’t true.”

“Well it isn’t Bates’ fault either way,” Thomas said. “An’ it’s not your fault that Lady Edith is having a hard time.”

“But I told Lord Hexam that—well—” Lady Mary blushed. “Some unsavory details.”

“About Marigold,” Thomas finished with a wave of the hand. Lady Mary blinked, taken aback. “The staff are familiar with the issue at hand, M’lady.”

At this, Lady Mary rolled her eyes. “Did everyone but me know?”

He shrugged. It was quite possible.

“How do I make it up to Lady Edith?” Lady Mary asked. “How do I tell her how sorry I am? Why is it that every time I’m given the chance, I can’t find the words? Do you have the same problem with Bates?”

Thomas smiled and gave a tiny nod. Lady Mary was oddly soothed by this.

“Then let’s make a pact, you and I,” Lady Mary offered. “I’ll help you smooth things over with Bates if you help me smooth things over with Lady Edith.”

“That’ll cost you ten pounds extra,” Thomas teased.
Lady Mary threw back her head and laughed; it was a gay, beautiful sound.
Mummy Issues

Chapter Summary

Lady Mary and Thomas Barrow head to Stockport in search of the Carneys. They get their wish, unfortunately.

Chapter Notes

Hello friends! There is a trigger warning, but it gives away a part of the chapter. Check the end notes to make sure it’s not something which triggers you (it’s more of a phobia/fear really).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

After nearly twenty years of living away from home, Thomas hadn’t imagined the road back to Stockport would be so familiar. He’d spent what felt like centuries putting up walls between his present and his past, constructing a life so solid it seemed implausible anything else had been there before. Yet as the signs rushed past for Leeds and then Manchester, Thomas could not help but remember traces of the life from before. He dined on corn beef sandwiches with Lady Mary from the trolley cart, and when the train finally pulled into its last stop in Liverpool the pair of them disembarked to take up room on a smaller line bound to trail the northern coast.

The sun dipped down, and finally set, leaving no choice but for Thomas to open the train window if only to catch a glimpse of the signs rushing past. Lady Mary read a book of poetry to entertain herself, but Thomas was far from bored. With each mile he passed, more and more memories were rushing back to him.

The town of Bootle went past, and Thomas could remember being just a tot hiding beneath his father’s work bench to nap upon the floor.

The village of Crosby went by, and Thomas recalled how his sister had begged for a blue ribbon only to plait it into her hair every day for years.

Hightown was next, and then Formby, with Thomas wondering what on earth he would do should he arrive only to be recognized. Would it be better to wear a scarf about his neck, even though it was hardly 79 degrees? God forbid, what if his father was stopping over for a pint at The Guest House on Union Street? It was one of the few bars in town and doubled as an inn where Thomas and Lady Mary would be residing. If Thomas bumped into his father, how would he ever explain himself?

The train pulled into Stockport before he came up with a solution to his predicament.

“STOCKPORT!” Boomed the conductor from down the hall. “STOCKPORT DISEMBARKING!”

“Right, that’s us,” Lady Mary placed a bookmark in her novel, stowing it away in her handbag lest she lose the lot in their travels. “Lead the way, Detective Barrow.”
“Well first off, let’s start by callin’ me something else, because the name Barrow is a hot one here,” Thomas urged, taking both Lady Mary’s valise and his own under the arm to head out onto the platform. He was greeted by the crisp aroma of piss and stale sea air. Ah… aroma of poverty; some things could always bring back the notion of home.

Lady Mary paused, as if physically struck by the smell emanating from the train station. Thomas gave her a moment to catch up, allowing her to take his arm. In an attempt to blend in more, she even took up her valise though she held it with an awkward hand.

“How… quaint,” Lady Mary remarked, glancing from abandoned storefronts to the neighborhood drunk who was asleep on the stoop– by god, Thomas knew the man! It was Frank, a vagrant who’d been around since Thomas’ infancy. By god, he was ancient now.

“It’s a dump, call it what it is,” Thomas teased. Lady Mary let out a tiny laugh, the tension easing from her as she realized that Thomas would not hold her raisings against her. “C’mon, let’s head to the The Guest House. It’s on union street, not far from here.”

The high street of Stockport was just as Thomas remembered. The fronts were quiet now, with most families sitting down to supper. Those that were still out were on business, with a few men heading for the local pub arm in arm. The smell of fish was strong in the air, mixed along with bread baking in the local bakery. Families would bring their unbaked loaves to Mr. Oar, a baker by trade who’d no doubt passed his business on to his son Robin. Sure enough, as they passed by the bakery front, Thomas glanced in through the fogged windows and saw Robin Oar hard at work pulling fresh loaves out of his great-grandfather’s oven. He’d aged and had gained quite a good deal of weight around the middle. But he wasn’t alone, a woman was at his side with graying hair, tallying up sums from customers. It must be his wife.

Robin turned about, bread rack in hand, and noticed Thomas at the window. He stared, brow furrowed as he no doubt tried to place why Thomas’ face was familiar.

“Let’s go,” Thomas muttered, pulling Lady Mary along. As they walked, Thomas whispered in her ear so that none could hear. “From here on in, call me James Courtenay.”

“Detective James Courtenay,” She reminded him. “But why? I should think you would have been glad to return home.”

“M’lady, the last time I saw Stockport I was being drug out by my arse and elbows,” Thomas said. Lady Mary was taken aback. “Everyone in this town knew of my shame. I was practically chased out with pitchforks.”

“My god,” Lady Mary clung tight to his arm. “I’m so sorry Thomas. I can’t imagine how awful that must have been.”

“Terrifying, actually,” Thomas muttered. Even now, as an adult of thirty-six, he could remember running for his life from a group of at least eight men. The village preacher, butcher, greengrocer, fishmonger, baker (Mr. Oar), tailor, milliner, and schoolteacher had all joined the throng, running Thomas out of town down the tracks throwing stones at him.

“Invert!” They’d snarled. A stone had cracked Thomas over the back of the head, causing him to fall to the tracks in a heap. He’d had to get up quick and keep running lest the men had caught him and torn him alive. “Filthy pervert!”

“Thomas?”
Thomas came back to the present, only to find Lady Mary watching him with great concern. He gave her a small smile, leading her through a side alley so that they cut across onto Union street. Just as Thomas remembered, it looked out over the bay of Stockport with fishing ships bobbing lazily in black freezing waters. A few men were out front, having an ale and playing a game of cards. Thomas was almost certain he recognized one of the men as the same greengrocer that had chased him out of town. He kept his head down, slipping silently past the men.

“Give us another turn, Harold!” The greengrocer said with a smile. “I’ve only got till eight before the misses drags me back!”

“Good ol’ Susan!” The other man laughed.

The Guest House was set up around a cloister bar and a group of polished tables. Despite being a bar in a one-horse town, The Guest House got good business from sailors passing through on their way to Liverpool. As a result, all the tabletops were clean and boasting mason jars crammed with fresh wildflowers. Thomas weeded his way through the crowd, keeping his head down as he approached the bar. He recognized the aged man as the same who’d held down the fort during Thomas’ childhood. He was named Arthur Kent, and though Thomas’ father had given Kent plenty of business over the years he’d never been unkind to Thomas or approved of his father’s cruel streak. He hadn’t been in the group of men to chase Thomas out of town, either.

That didn’t mean he’d approved of Thomas being a homosexual though.

Thomas flagged Kent down; the old bartender lumbered over, polishing a dirtied beer mug with a clean rag. “Can I help you, lad?”

“I’ve booked two rooms for the weekend,” Thomas said. “Underneath the name Courtenay!”

“Ah!” Kent muscled his way down to the far edge of the bar where an aged record book held a list of everyone staying at The Guest House. Lady Mary squeezed her way through the crowd, grateful to find a place out of the way. Kent leaned heavily upon his guestbook, flicking idly through the most recent pages only to pause with a crooked brow.

“Two?” Kent wondered. “I’ve got a James Courtenay booked for two beds, not two rooms.”

“Well I-” Thomas gaffed, waffling for words. He looked to Lady Mary, unsure what to say. “I did say two beds, but I thought surely-”

“Well lad I offer two beds in a single room, I’m afraid I’ve marked you down for one of those!” Kent explained.

Thomas groaned, palming his head. Oh, what an idiotic mistake!

“I remember you only had singles!” Thomas groaned.

“I’ve boasted doubles since 1912. When on earth did you visit me before then?” Kent asked. Thomas froze, nervous of giving himself away.

“My uh… my father passed through, that’s all,” Thomas said. “Is there nothing else available?”

“Fraid not, lad,” Kent said, scanning his pages just to make sure. “We’ve the annual-”

“Fish fest,” Thomas finished. Of course! How on earth could he have forgotten about the fish fest?

“… You know about our fish fest?” Kent asked, surprised to find a stranger so familiar with their
customs. “I didn’t realize it got around!”

Thomas almost caught Kent’s eye, but looked away in the nick of time. Kent, on the other hand, wasn’t too sure.

“Are you certain that you’ve never been here before?” Kent asked. “By god, you look horribly familiar. I can’t place it, but I could swear you look like someone I once knew.”

“I’m sure it’s just a mistake,” Lady Mary butted in, taking over negotiations for Thomas. “Well take the room.”

“Very good, Mrs. Courtenay,” Kent turned the guest book around. “If you’ll just sign next to your names?”

They did so, with Thomas slightly shaky as he penned “James Courtenay”. Kent took the book back, pausing as he looked at Thomas again.

“Cor, that’s weird,” Kent murmured. “He’d surely be dead by now, but you look like him.”

“Who?” Lady Mary wondered.

“Ah, it’s nothing to trouble over,” Kent sighed, closing his guest book. He suddenly looked oddly unhappy which made no sense whatsoever. “There was this boy who used to live here years ago. Poor thing… probably gone an’ passed now, but your husband looks just like him.”

Lady Mary gave him a tight-lipped smile. Kent reached under the bar to pull out a heavy iron key with a wooden placard hanging off of it. It bore the number five in chipped white paint.

The pair of them headed upstairs, with Thomas all the while mentally cursing himself for not specifically requesting two separate rooms. How ever would they manage through this night? It didn’t matter if they had two different beds; a lady of the gentry and her footman could not (should not) sleep in the same room. Thomas would probably have to find somewhere to kip outside; perhaps he could pitch a tent in a field and wait until morning?

Oh-! Curse the damn fish fest! As if anyone gave a shit about salted cod--

Well, actually, Thomas loved salted cod cakes. The Stockport Fish Fest was where he’d first tried them.

They reached room number five, and Thomas unlocked the door to open wide on a humble but clean abode. The Guest House had clearly updated its furnishings from the days of Thomas’ youth. Long god were the shiplap chests and ancient brass candlesticks. In their place were old chests of drawers with rose glass lanterns, which offered light onto a scene of two twin beds swathed in hand sewn quilts bearing the images of ship wheels and sailboats.

Lady Mary sat down her valise, took one good look around, and said, “I’m positively middle class.”

“An’ I’m positively idiotic,” Thomas replied, setting down his own valise to prostrate himself before his employer. “I’m so sorry, M’lady. I never realized that The Guest House had become so popular! When I lived here, it was just a simple inn and bar! Even the furniture is new, it must have gone through a boom of some sort.”

“Don’t fret,” Lady Mary waved a gentle hand before gently taking off her traveling gloves. “I’ve had more risky affairs in hotels than you realize. Besides, you’re hardly a danger to my delicacies.”

He was about as dangerous as a wet flannel when it came to women. That didn’t mean it was any
less scandalous for him to share a room with Lady Mary, though.

“I’ll find somewhere else to sleep,” Thomas assured her. “I’ll come back tomorrow morning.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Lady Mary took off her hat, unpinning it from her bob to let it fall upon her bed. “It’s much too late for you to find another inn now. So long as we keep our backs turned, I don’t see why it should be such a fuss. I won’t tell Lord Grantham if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Thomas scoffed. “Lord Grantham will be nothing compared to Carson, M’lady. He’ll kill me!”

“He can’t kill you if he doesn’t find out,” Lady Mary said. Thomas had trouble arguing with that logic.

“.... Are you certain?” Thomas asked, just for clarification.

“I know my own mind, Thomas,” She warned.

He raised his hands in slightest defense and took off his hat. Cor but he was exhausted! “I could fall over,” He muttered, raking a hand through his hair so that his coif came undone.

“Then do.”

Without further ado, Thomas slouched onto his bed and threw an arm over his eyes. He might very well have gone to sleep that way, had he not heard Lady Mary say, “I’m going to change. Shut your eyes.”

“I’m terrified.” Thomas mocked. He kept his arm resolutely over his face.

It was a disturbing experience, to know a woman was undressing only feet from him. And a woman who employed him no less! He’d have sooner watched Carson undress, or clip the Dowager’s toenails.

“The barman recognized you,” Lady Mary commented. Thomas heard the sound of valise buckles coming undone.

“I’m afraid many people in the town will recognize me if we’re not careful,” Thomas warned. “My father’s shop is just down the street. You can probably see the sign from our window.”

“Is it dreadful, to be back?” Lady Mary asked. Her voice was tender, a clear sign that she took his plight seriously. “I should imagine I’d be horrified if it were me.”

“I’m trying not to think about it too much,” Thomas admitted. “I was chased out of town by a group of men, all of whom will still be here unless they’ve gone an’ died. They may not recognize me, but I could never forget their faces.”

“Should we be alarmed?” Lady Mary asked.

“So long as we stay away from the high street, we should be fine,” Thomas said. “The fish fest is going on this week, so everyone will be down by the docks. We stand a good chance of going through town unnoticed if we stay away from the crowd.”

“And what is this ‘fish fest’?” she asked.

“A bunch of oiks and pikeys getting their jollies off about jellied eels and salted cod cakes,” Thomas grumbled. Lady Mary let out a laugh, shocked at his language.
“Thomas!” She said. “That’s hardly nice.”

“I’m hardly nice,” He grumbled.

“You can drop your arm now.”

He did so and looked over to find Lady Mary wearing a thin if fashionable housecoat over her silk nightgown. She crawled into bed, relaxing into her pillow with a sigh.

“Is this the part where you tell me a bedtime story?” Lady Mary teased.

“Don’t know many, if I’m honest.” Thomas stood up, cracking two lower vertebrae before fetching his valise and opening it on the bed. “Close your eyes, M’lady, unless you want to see what a bent Billy looks like.”

She laughed again, closing her eyes as Thomas shed his vest and shucked his suspenders. “You know, I have been married.”

“I don’t know if I’d like to be compared to Mr. Matthew,” Thomas mused. “He was handsome- er-” He stopped, feeling a right tit. “Sorry, M’lady.”

“Please,” Lady Mary shrugged, her eyes still closed. “I quite agree. But I suppose you’ve known many handsome men in your life.”

Thomas paused mid-way through shucking his trousers. Had he?

“...Yes, M’lady.” He folded his trousers, neatly stowing them in his valise to pull on his pajama pants.

“Who’s the most handsome man you’ve ever kissed?” Lady Mary asked.

Thomas sighed, closing his valise with a snap. “You can look,” He said. Lady Mary blinked, watching as Thomas crawled into bed and began to fiddle with their lone light source.

“... Are you embarrassed?” Lady Mary asked.

“... I’m sad,” Thomas replied. As he stretched out his arm, he noticed Lady Mary staring at his leather cuffs which now covered his suicide attempt. She frowned.

“Have you been sad long, Thomas?” She asked.

“Since I was born,” He said. “Or somethin’ like it. I can remember bein’ happy as an infant but after a while everything just went gray.”

“...Funny…” Lady Mary looked away as Thomas turned off the light. The pair of them were plunged into darkness, where they could each speculate without fear of being watched. “I feel the same way.”

Plunged into darkness, the pair of them fell into an uneasy sleep. For a long while, Thomas simply lay awake listening to Lady Mary breath. When her breathes became softer and evened out, Thomas reasoned that she must be asleep and checked his pocket watch to note that it was close to midnight. For whatever reason, he was desperate for a smoke, and rose from bed to open his window so that he might have a fag before trying to kip down.

Of course, opening the window gave Thomas a disturbing view to the high street of Stockport, and his eyes were inevitably drawn to a three-story building down the road. It loomed like a mountain in
the dark, illuminated only by muddied street lamps and a half-full moon.

Barrow and Sons Clockworks was one of the largest buildings in Stockport. This wasn’t by chance, either. Thomas’ great grandfather had bought the building long ago when it had been a rope factory. New machines had rendered the business useless, but the Barrows were clock people through and through. Rope had been of little consequence to them.

“Can’t sleep?”

Her voice was as soft as a whisper, but it carried well in a quiet room

“Go back to sleep,” He said. “Don’t worry about me.”

She did as he bade and did not stir again until morning.

The next morning, Thomas and Lady Mary ate breakfast in their room to avoid being seen in the pub by the wrong people. They each took their turn having a bath, with Lady Mary going first so as to get the better amount of hot water, and then left the hotel to head for the outskirts of Stockport. As Thomas waited for Lady Mary to join him out front of The Guest House, his eyes were locked upon his family home only a few blocks away. From his vantage point, he could see a few clotheslines hanging out on the roof. Soft white sheets were blowing in the wind… the tablecloth for the kitchen. It had been nearly thirty years, and still some things never changed.

“How do I look?”

Thomas gave a start, looking about to find Lady Mary dressed in a casual frock of soft sage green. Her hair, so normally well combed and coiffed, was merely done in a side part hiding beneath a cloche of a matching color.

“Do I know you, Miss?” Thomas teased. Lady Mary rolled her eyes, opening her umbrella to garner herself some shade as they began their walk down the high street. She took his arm just as before.

“Don’t tease,” Lady Mary warned. “I feel absolutely plebeian without Anna to assist me. I’m sure I look it too.”

“Don’t take on so,” Thomas said. Even with her hair less smooth, Lady Mary was by far the most attractive woman in the village. “Most families here are related to each other. The women are all hideous. Ladies of your caliber do not walk through the streets of Stockport every day.”

“Surely your mother was beautiful, though,” Lady Mary offered.

Had she been? Thomas merely remembered a pained, panicked woman with dusky brown hair pulled back tight from her forehead. She’d always been on the verge of a mental breakdown, always desperate for a kip down to the basement where Thomas was certain she smoked. If his father had known, he’d never let on. He’d just screamed for Thomas and his siblings to ‘get out of the bleedin’ house!’

“No,” Thomas said. Lady Mary snickered, only to draw to a standstill as she stared at the shop across the street.

It was Barrow and Sons Clockworks.

For a moment, the pair of them were absolutely still. Pedestrians wove in and out around them,
calling out for newspapers, salted cod cakes, or the names of errant children. Across the way, the
door to Barrow and Son’s Clockworks was open. The main window held an array of glittering
clocks, each hand carved and painted by Thomas’ father. Up above on the second floor, lace curtains
hid the family home from view. Smoke was coming out of the chimney, a clear sign that Thomas’
mother was cooking something… probably a meat pie for his father’s lunch.

“C’mon,” Thomas murmured, pulling Lady Mary away. They took an ally and vanished from site of
the odious stoop.

It was a pleasant enough walk to the outskirts of Stockport, with most people heading in the opposite
direction for the Fish Fest. As it stood, Thomas was eager to change the topic from the unnerving site
of his family home.

“So,” Thomas began, “You want my help with Lady Edith?”

They were walking along a country road, technically labeled Hollow Oak Road. It was this very lane
upon which the Carney’s supposedly lived. No one but farmers were this far out, and each of their
fields were so vast that houses were few and far between. They were bound for number 1408 but
were still at 1302. They had a while yet to walk.

Lady Mary sighed, closing her umbrella to swing it carefully upon her wrist. “I won’t pretend that
I’m blameless in all of it. In fact, I rather think I started it.”

“When did it begin?”

“The first time I can truly remember hating her, I was ten,” Lady Mary said. “We were playing a
game of hide and seek, and it was my turn to hide. For whatever reason, she got distracted and left
me in the attics for hours while she played with Sybil on the lawn. I was furious after that.”

“That’s not when it started,” Thomas grumbled. “Don’t sell me a dog, M’lady. Tell me the truth.”

She shrugged. “If you want to know the absolute truth, it began when the first heir died on the
Titanic. I was engaged to him, but I never knew him well. When he died, I felt nothing. Lady Edith
felt that this was a terrible sin on my part, like I should have mourned him the rest of my life.”

“She’s an emotional creature,” Thomas surmised. Lady Mary kicked irritably at a passing stone; it
was one of the first times that Thomas had seen her act out of character, and it mildly amused him.

“She’s an annoying creature,” Lady Mary snapped. “It only got worse after poor Mr. Pamuk died.”

“And then Anthony Strallen,” Thomas added.

“And then Matthew and her own beau vanishing in Germany.”

“And then Marigold,” Thomas summed up.

For a moment, they simply walked side by side, each of them wondering what to say to the other. It
was Lady Mary to break the silence in the end, though. Her guilt seemed to drive her to talk, begging
her to confess to Thomas like he were some sort of priest.

“I did something terrible, Thomas. On the same day that you… well…”

Well.

He nodded, “Go on.” They’d passed 1400, which was apparently some sort of sheep farm if the
noises and the smells were to be believed.
“I told Lord Hexam about Marigold… and he left her,” Lady Mary paused. “I ruined my only living sister’s last shot at happiness. How can I ever forgive myself?”

“You made a mistake,” Thomas said.

“I ruined her life—”

“No, you made a mistake.” He stopped walking and so did she, the pair of them turning to stare at one another. There was a burning desire in her eyes, a sort of primal hunger to be understood and not judged. Thomas was well acquainted with the look and took it in his stride as he spoke his mind.

“You made a mistake of letting your mouth take off,” Thomas said. “You’re not the first nor the last person to do something like that. It startled Lord Hexam, maybe, but if he truly loves Lady Edith then he will return to her and they’ll work it out. You’re not responsible for her wellbeing.”

“I’m her only living sister.” Lady Mary seemed to wear this like a badge of dishonor. “And I shamed her so horribly in front of the man she loved.”

“And has she never shamed you?” Thomas asked. Lady Mary bristled, eyes going back and forth as she seemed to tally up her entire life. “Has she never called you names, or revealed your dark marks?”

For a moment there was silence, which was only broken by the far-off noises of a farmer cursing at his sheep.

“Rosie, round ‘em up!” the farmer barked at his sheep dog. The hound went mental, dashing away from her master to start swarming around the sheep who bleated and ran for their lives.

“... Yes,” Lady Mary finally said. “Yes, she did. But it was long ago, and I was able to recover from it by the skin of my teeth.”

“Well, then,” Thomas said. “Tit for tat. Shall we?”

They re-laced arms again and took off once more.

“Lady Edith is a grown woman,” Thomas finally said. “She’ll find her way, and whether or not it’s with Lord Hexam is beside the point. There are many forms of happiness to be found in this life, and she’ll always have Miss Marigold.”

“Should I apologize?” Lady Mary asked.

“Be candid,” Thomas said. “You cannot trust a liar. If you don’t honestly want to do something, then don’t do it. It’s better to be contrite than to be polite. That’s my motto, at least.”

Now that he thought about it, maybe he wasn’t the best person to be giving advice to Lady Mary. He paused, noting a sign that had fallen in the road near what looked like the opening of a drive. The fences were down, and the grass was threadbare, but you could still make out the remnants of cobblestone beneath the muck.

The sign read 1408.

“This must be it,” Thomas said, looking up the drive. In the distance, the remains of a shack could be seen. Lady Mary was less than enthused.

“It looks like a hovel, even from here,” She said. “Are you sure this is it?”
“The Carney’s lived at 1408 Hollow Oak Road,” Thomas said. “This is 1408 Hollow Oak Road. Even if the family doesn’t live here now, the current family may know where they went.”

“And if they don’t want to speak to me?” Lady Mary asked.

“They’ll to speak to me.” Thomas growled. “I’m hard to ignore.”

They started up the drive, slightly closer together on the winding path. These fields might have once held anything from pigs to sheep. Now, they were bare and left to the breath of the wild. Heather had grown to knee height, and strange paths had been made through the weeds as if wild animals roamed the fields at night looking for clover. The closer they got to the house, the more obvious it became that no one had remained at 1408 Hollow Oak Road. The windows were broken and grimy, the roof had holes the size of pans in it. Wood slates had fallen from their rotting cores, and the floor was starting to give out in areas. All in all, it was an absolute mess.

Lady Mary and Thomas stopped before the front step, with Thomas holding up a hand in caution.

“Wait here,” He advised. “Let me go first and make sure it’s safe.”

He didn’t trust the place not to be crawling with vermin or vagabonds.

Every step he took had to be counted, particularly when the floorboard was two minutes away from giving in. Thomas had to wonder when the last time had been since someone had called 1408 home.

It was difficult to say what had happened in the final hours of the Carney family, but Thomas had a feeling it had been unpleasant. Walls were peeling away, and the chimney had caved in, but there were still pieces of furniture and personal effects scattered inside as if someone had all but fled their living room out of fear. Strange logs were upon the floor, oddly shaped and wrapped in charred cloth. Thomas picked one up to use as an impromptu club, clutching it tight as he went from room to room. The smell of mold was overpowering, but above it all an eerie stench hung in the air. It was like a presence, and one that clearly did not appreciate company.

“Hallo?” Thomas called out, pausing upon the threshold of what might have once been a bedroom. Rotting ropes still hung from the ceiling where someone might have hung a curtain as a divider. “Is anyone here?”

No one answered him.

He poked his head into each room, at one point holding a hand over his nose to keep from gagging; just as he’d suspected, no one was home, save for a robin that had made its nest in the chimney. He returned to the front stoop, glad for a breath of fresh air.

“It’s safe,” He said to Lady Mary. “But cor it smells like hell in here. You might want to stay outside.”

“I haven’t come all this way to be put off by an odor,” Lady Mary declared. Thomas helped her up the front step, taking her by the hand just in case her heel went through the floor. She looked about, lip curling at the wreckage.

“Does this count as breaking and entering?” She wondered.

Thomas feigned a look of panic, allowing his voice to drop meekly as he mocked a cry for help. “Police. Help. Stop them.”

Lady Mary snickered. “Guess no one’s coming to stop us,” Thomas teased.
“Let’s split up,” Lady Mary decided. “We can search the rooms more thoroughly. There may be clues hiding in this hovel.”

The real problem was finding anything that hadn’t been ruined by mold. The more that Thomas searched, the more that he realized a fire must have taken place at some point. The walls were scorched in areas while others were oddly bare. Whatever had kept the house from burning had likewise allowed the mold to flourish. Thomas found a door which had fallen in on itself, resulting in vines creeping up through the floorboard to cover the mock entrance. He pulled at the weeds, poking his head through to find a basement. Lady Mary, on the other hand, focused on the bedrooms and the kitchen.

“Do you see anything?” She called out from the hall.

“A basement,” Thomas answered. “Looks untouched from the fire. Ought to check it out.”

The problem was, the stairs were long since gone. It would require Thomas taking a leap of faith, one that Lady Mary could not possibly make in heels and a frock. He steeled himself, crouching down to lessen the distance as he dropped into the musty gloom of the cellar. It was grimy, cold, and quiet; the only noise came from Lady Mary’s footsteps above. Despite being alone, the hairs on the back of Thomas’ neck were beginning to prick up.

He felt like he was being watched by unfriendly eyes.

“Thomas?”

He jumped, looking up to see Lady Mary crouched down at the mouth of the hole to watch him. She was nervous, “Are you alright? You look more pale than usual.”

“Fine,” Thomas mumbled. In truth he’d never been father from. He rubbed at the hairs on the back of his neck, determined to get to the bottom of this rotten mystery.

“I’m coming to join you,” Lady Mary said. Thomas doubled back, waving her off.

“M’lady there’s no way down save to jump,” Thomas urged. “Stay where you are. You’ll only get hurt.”

“Oh honestly, Thomas. I’m half-American,” Lady Mary scoffed. “Now catch me.”

“Catch-?” she left him with little time to decipher her cryptic message. Scooting to the very edge of the cellar hole, she dropped without warning so that it was either be caught by Thomas or crash to the floor. He dove for her, catching her just in the nick of time to hold her tightly to his pounding breast. Cor-!

“Woman-!” Thomas yelped. “You could have broken your leg!”

“I knew you wouldn’t let me get hurt,” Lady Mary said. “Now set me down.”
It seemed he was doomed to follow orders no matter where he roamed. Thomas sat her carefully upon the floor so that Lady Mary could look around. She was smirking, seemingly impressed that Thomas had essentially broken his neck to save her.

“Goodness this is even more gloomy than the rest of the house,” Lady Mary said. “Are we in the cellar proper?”

“Seems so,” Thomas said.
“Well hold my hand if you’re frightened,” Lady Mary teased. She scooted around a fallen pillar which had once supported the floor of the kitchen and began to make her way down a labyrinth of tight tunnels.

“M’lady, wait!” Thomas had to hassle after her. He’d never met a woman with such zeal for spooky sites!

“Oh, Thomas don’t be such a ninny,” Lady Mary warned.

“M’lady, a hobo is going to jump out and kill you, and then Carson is going to kill me-”

“You wouldn’t let me get hurt.”

“You make it sound like I’d have a choice!”

“You’re my footman, Thomas. It’s bred into your…” Lady Mary’s voice trailed off into silence, her back to Thomas as she observed a room beyond the cellar.

She was trembling.

“M’lady?” Thomas murmured, cautiously coming around her so that they stood side by side. Lady Mary was staring at something in the gloom, her eyes wide and her skin clammy from fright.

“… Thomas…” She had to swallow around his name, her mouth dry. “… What’s that.”
She pointed to something oddly shaped in the gloom.
The smell of rotting meat hung like a foul mist in the air.

Even in pitch black, Thomas could make out a peculiar shape in the dark. It looked like a person.

“Get back,” He hissed, putting himself directly between Lady Mary and whatever lay beyond. His heart was pounding in his breast, but he refused to be frightened. If someone was in the basement, he would face them head on like a man.

“I can see you there!” Thomas snapped, his voice full of loathing. “Come out and face me if you’re a man proper!”

The figure did not move.

Lady Mary pressed herself to Thomas’ back, her hands tight upon his waist as if he were a shield and not a man. Thomas reached into his trouser pocket, pulling out the silver lighter that had saved him during the war. Flicking it open, he struck the match to shine light upon the-
“JESUS WEPT!” Thomas yelped, taking a sharp step back. Lady Mary shrieked in his ear, hiding her face in his neck so as not to see the horror before them.

The reason why Thomas’ question had gone without response was evident in the state of their subject. The form had indeed been human… but whoever it is was long since dead. Left in the cold arid air of the basement, their corpse had been mummified, allowed to sink in upon itself until all that remained was the hair, teeth, and waxen skin wrapped tight about the bones. Even the individual toes and fingers had remained intact although a few were slightly chipped at the edges. The corpse was curled up upon an altar of stone, knees to its chest and arms up about its face as if to fend off some long dead enemy. Worst of all, the eyes were sewn shut with heavy black thread, forever cursing the mummy into an unnatural blindness.

“What on earth-?” Lady Mary’s voice was close to a wail in fear. “What on God’s green earth is it?”

“A mummy,” Thomas murmured. “Stay here, I’m going to take a closer look.”

“Oh, Thomas, no-!” Lady Mary begged, holding him tight by the waist. “I beg of you don’t get closer.”

“Steady on,” He murmured, carefully detaching her fingers from his vest. “I won’t do anything queer.”

He took one step forward, then another, eyes drifting over the stone and altar upon which the
mummy rested. The more he looked, the more he realized this was no normal tomb. It seemed to be a ritual site, with deep grooves upon the walls reflecting ancient Druid images. Upon the altar, hidden behind the mummy, were several items long since lost to time. A few bowls that might have held incense and water, candles blackened with mold, an enormous conch shell (for whatever reason), and worst of all, a sickle with a heavy leather handle.

Thomas picked it up, noting that though it was clearly ancient there was still no sign of rust upon the blade. Could it be that this blade had killed the woman upon the altar? Who had she been, and why was she here? Was she a sacrifice made ages ago to some heathen tribe or was she a murder victim set to stage by some Stockport sicko. Had the Carney’s truly been witches? The more that Thomas read and saw, the more he realized that something was very wrong with Laura Carney. Had her sister Alice been just as wicked? Where was she now, if she was even alive?

This couldn’t be Alice, could it? No… the mummy was much too old. It had to be at least a century old, at the very least. The skin was much too waxen, the hair much too brittle.

It was holding something.

At first, Thomas had thought that the mummy had its arms up about its face to protect itself from harm. Instead, it seemed that it had been holding what looked like a book.

“It’s holding a book,” Thomas said, setting the sickle down to draw closer. He carefully began to worm at the bottom, wiggling it back and forth so as not to disturb the mummy’s limbs.

“Be careful,” Lady Mary begged from the door. She’d remained there, hiding despite her earlier courage. “Don’t break it Thomas.”

“You can come closer if you like,” Thomas said. “I think she was some kind of sacrifice. Look at the way she’s laid out on this altar—”

“Honestly, Thomas, if you think I’m getting anywhere near that thing, you imagine me to be much braver than I really am.” Lady Mary muttered.

Thomas looked over his shoulder at her and found her shuddering with nausea.

“You hate looking at it, don’t you,” Thomas said.

“It reminds me of Matthew.”

“Then wait for me by the hole in the ceiling. I’ll be there in a moment.”

“Please be quick about it,” Lady Mary turned away; Thomas noted that she stumbled as she walked, as if pausing to swallow down rising nausea.

He returned to the mummy and resumed pulling the book free of her arms. It finally came away to reveal an antique book which seemed to have been wrapped in a fine rabbit pelt. He carefully undid the tie, allowing it to fall away so that he might see the pages inside. They were hand woven, truly a work of art, and filled with ancient text that Thomas could not decipher.
“... Odd ...” Thomas pulled away, taking the book with him. He could not help but feel like he was stealing, though there was no one left alive to steal from. He wrestled with his emotions as he walked back up the hall, taking the book with him tucked into the inner pocket of his jacket. Lady Mary was waiting for him just as expected by the opening to the main floor. She looked ashen and exhausted.

“Can we go home now?” She mumbled.

“Yes, we can,” Thomas said. “We’re no closer to finding Laura Carney, but we know now that her family did in fact practice witchcraft. Let’s focus on Alice, the sister, and try to track her down.”

Lady Mary was silent as Thomas helped her out of the basement, and all the way back to town she looked horribly disturbed. When they finally reached The Guest House again, Lady Mary ordered a gin and tonic from the bar. Thomas joined her with three fingers worth of whiskey, the pair of them making for a mute corner so that they could nurse their newfound wounds.

Both of them were beginning to realize they’d bitten off more than they could chew.
Trigger warning for mummies (dead bodies left to the elements)
Chapter Summary

Thomas and Mary learn more about Alice Carney than they bargained for.

Chapter Notes

slight trigger warning for homophobic violence at the end of this chapter. No one gets hurt. Sort of.
No one bleeds, is what I'm trying to say.

There was no adequate way to explain to the Stockport police that there was a corpse in the basement of the Carney home without likewise admitting that they’d broken into the flat. Their hands were tied, and Lady Mary was miserable as they returned home to Downton on a quiet train Sunday afternoon. She kept tugging at her fingers, toying with the tips of her leather riding gloves as Thomas closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

“I shall never forget that site as long as I live,” Lady Mary declared. “That horrible horrible site.”

Thomas said nothing, though internally he could not help but concur.

The sky was an odd pale yellow when they returned to Downton, a nod to the head of rain recently fallen. It was unusual for Thomas to be greeted by the Grantham family car, but Lady Mary was relieved to see it and urged him to hurry as they picked up their luggage and headed home. The sites of comforting normalcy seemed to spur her back to life. She was growing intense, hands clenched into fists upon her lap as she gazed at Thomas with a look of thunder.

“We must interrogate Mrs. Hughes,” Lady Mary said. “The Carney’s were devil worshipers. We cannot deny that now. I want to know why she would think to hire such horrific women-“

“She wouldn’t have known about any of it,” Thomas said. Mrs. Hughes panicked when unmarried maids winked at visiting grocers. Hiring devil worshipers was so far outside of her realm that it was almost laughable. “And we don’t know if one sister was like the other. Why did Alice get to stay after Laura’s violence? We need to find out more about both women. Mrs. Hughes will at least know why Alice left, and will be able to point us in the direction of her last known house. We’ll work from there.”

Lady Mary relaxed a bit, suddenly growing somber. Her eyes were full of a misery Thomas had known many a year. An isolation from the realm of sane men. A fear that she would not be taken seriously or even believed.

“What happened to my poor brother?” Lady Mary whispered. “Do you think… do you think they killed him?”

She looked to him, eyes full of terror. Thomas was shamed by the site of her unshed tears. “Do you
think they killed my twin, Thomas.”

He could only tell her the bitter truth in that moment. “I hope to God not.”

~*~

It amazed Mary, as she returned to her cradle and tomb, how strong and calm Thomas was. She’d been loath to admit it in hindsight, but the decrepit mummy of Carney house had frightened her senseless. In its sunken eyes and sallow face, she could not help but see Matthew and Sybil, her sweetest love and sweetest sister. Were their bodies just as heinously destroyed by time? If Mary went out to Downton Cemetery and opened their crypts, would she be greeted by the site of gray waxen skin and rotting bones?

She tried not to think of it too much, but it was hard.

The sight of Carson approaching the car made her feel warm, like all the tension inside of her was dripping away to pool at her feet. Thomas got out of the car first, opening the door for her so that she could follow. Though it was hardly proper, Mary longed to hug Carson in the moment. To lean upon him just as she’d done when she was a little girl.

“My lady,” Carson greeted her with a warm smile. “I trust your trip went well?”

“A little too well,” Lady Mary shuddered at the memory of the mummy. “As a matter of fact, Thomas and I have decided in lieu of new information that we need to speak to Mrs. Hughes promptly. We need more information about the Carney’s sisters employment here.”

Carson was crestfallen. “If that is what your Ladyship desires that I shall ensure that it happens.”

“Don’t worry, Carson,” Mary said. “I promise you I won’t bother Mrs. Hughes too much.”

“You are never a bother, M’lady… unlike son,” Carson added.

Mary noted that Thomas bristled, his back to Carson as he unloaded their valises from the motorcar.

“Thomas, follow me,” Mary commanded. Thomas paused, hands full of luggage, but took it in his stride as Mary lead him into the house through the front door. She noted that Carson stiffened as Thomas walked past as if he wanted to reprimand him.

*How can I make them both happy?* Mary wondered. *I don’t want to upset Carson or Thomas. Surely I can find common ground between them pair of them.*

As she entered, she paused at the site of her mother walking out of the sitting room. She looked exhausted in a pearl gray gown, an oddly faint smile in place that did not quite meet her eyes. They embraced, kissing one another fondly upon the cheek.

“Mary, you look tuckered out,” Cora said. “Did you have a good trip?”

“I wish I could tell you about it,” Mary said. “But I can’t just yet. How are you feeling?”

“…Tired,” Cora said. Mary could tell it wasn’t what she wanted to say. “I expect you’ll want to wash and change before dinner?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I do, but I have something I want to speak to Anna about first,” Mary said. This of course was a lie, she was really after Mrs. Hughes; but she couldn’t adequately tell her
mother this without causing a stir. She turned to find Thomas waiting awkwardly in the doorway. “Thomas, take my luggage upstairs. I’ll see you below.”

“Very good, M’lady,” He replied. He headed off without another word, taking their valises with him.

~*~

It felt good to take off his hat and coat again, to know that he was safe in Downton and far away from that disturbing mummy. He splashed some water on his face in the men’s lavatory, then headed downstairs sans valises to ferret out Mrs. Hughes. There were either two places she was likely to be: in the linen cupboard or in her office. As Thomas hit the bottom floor, he checked in the linen cupboard and found it bare save for Gertie who was ironing a tablecloth for dinner.

“Where’s Mrs. Hughes?” Thomas asked.

“In her office, Mr. Barrow,” Gertie said. Thomas nodded and shut the door on her. As he passed by the boot room, he noted that Anna was sitting with Mr. Bates and Ms. Baxter, the three of them squirreling away cleaning their charge’s boots. Anna paused, watching Thomas as he walked past. Thomas did not make to look at her, did not want to reason with a woman who would always think ill of him.

As Thomas reached Mrs. Hughes’ door, he heard the tell-tale sound of heels upon stone and looked over his shoulder to find Lady Mary bringing up the rear. She gave him a gentle smile, gesturing for him to knock upon Mrs. Hughes’ door.

“Shall we?” she asked.

“Why not,” Thomas smiled. He knocked, heard the call to enter, and opened the door wide to reveal Mrs. Hughes sitting behind her ancient desk working through a pile of bills to be paid. Mrs. Hughes looked up, her smile faltering as she saw it was Thomas and Lady Mary in the door. Thomas tried not to take it to heart, but it was difficult.

“M’lady!” Mrs. Hughes rose up from her seat, coming out from behind her desk. “How may I help you?”

“I’m afraid I come to you on an urgent matter Mrs. Hughes,” Lady Mary explained. Mrs. Hughes crossed her arms over her chest, steeling herself for the worst.

“Mrs. Hughes, Thomas has discovered something rather shocking regarding the Carney sisters,” Lady Mary explained. Mrs. Hughes crossed her arms over her chest, steeling herself for the worst.

“Thomas, shall I let you explain?” Lady Mary asked.

Mrs. Hughes gave a delicate sniff, sizing Thomas up as the charge was passed over to him.

“Carney broke out of prison two weeks after being transferred,” Thomas explained. Mrs. Hughes stiffened, her eyes going wide. “An’ I know as well as you do that no one could break into this abbey without help from the inside. Am I wrong?”

“Well-“ Mrs. Hughes waffled about, weighing the consequences. “No, not exactly but-“
“And Carney had a sister still inside the abbey. Alice?” Thomas said.

“Yes, but Alice was nothing like Laura,” Mrs. Hughes urged. “She was a loving, sweet girl and she absolutely adored Master James. She wouldn’t dare do such a horrid thing as take him.”

“Would she indeed,” Thomas grumbled. He pulled out a notepad from his trouser pocket, flipping it open to begin scribbling Mrs. Hughes’ words. “Would you mind telling me about the Carney sisters? What do you remember about them?”

Instead of answering straight away, Mrs. Hughes narrowed her eyes at the sight of Thomas’ notepad. “Am I being interrogated, Mr. Barrow?” She asked in clipped tones.

“It’s just to help me remember, Mrs. Hughes.”

“May I read what you write?” She asked. Now it was Thomas’ turn to be taken aback. What was she trying to say? Did she think he would use her words against her?

“… I wouldn’t use your words against you, Mrs. Hughes,” Thomas was reproachful. Seeming to sense she’d crossed a line, Mrs. Hughes relented.

“Of course, forgive me I didn’t mean to be cross,” She said. “I just don’t like speaking about the Carney sisters. It sets me on edge. I was, after all, the one who hired the pair of them.”

“Tell me about them,” Thomas urged. “What were they like?”

Mrs. Hughes let out an exhausted sigh, rubbing her brow where a knot from stress was beginning to form.

“We’d best sit down,” She gestured to her visitor chairs. “I’ll have Mrs. Patmore put together a tray for tea.”

“Is it going to be a long story?” Lady Mary asked.

“Unfortunately yes, M’lady,” Mrs. Hughes left them to their own devices, so that they were momentarily alone in her office. Lady Mary glanced around, noticing Mrs. Hughes’ filing cabinet and nodded to it.

“Quick.” She whispered. “I’ll watch the door, you search for the files.”

Thomas moved with haste, yanking open Mrs. Hughes’ filing cabinet to rifle through it. Bills, bills, bills, and more bills... Ah-

The women’s employment folder was thick, with ninety percent of it dedicated to maids alone. Mercifully it was alphabetized; Thomas saw both the Carney files and yanked them out to stow them in his inner breast pocket. He bumped the file drawer closed with his hip, then returned to Lady Mary’s side.

“When you’re alone, go over them,” Lady Mary whispered. “And we’ll see how much we can discern for ourselves.”

“She wouldn’t lie,” Thomas warned.

“Maybe not, but she might be reluctant to give you more information that you need.”

The door opened and Mrs. Hughes returned with a loaded tea tray. Feeling guilty for having stolen from her (borrowed, really), Thomas took her tray to put it upon the guest table. There, he dolled out
three steaming cups of earl gray while Mrs. Hughes sat down across from Lady Mary and offered her a fresh blueberry scone with butter.

Thomas sat down between the two women, re-opening his notepad. “Start from when you hired them,” Thomas said. “Where did they come from? Can you remember what they were like?”

“They were a queer pair, but they were diligent in their work,” Mrs. Hughes said. “Excellent references too from a house in Ireland. They were native to the country. They wanted to be nearer their grandmother who lived in Stockport but couldn’t find work close by. It wasn’t hard to imagine in those days, it hasn’t always been easy to find a service position when you were Irish. Being Scottish, I suppose I felt a sense of compassion for them.”

“So what was Laura like?” Lady Mary asked. “Did she give you any weird feelings?”

“If she had, I wouldn’t have hired her, M’lady,” Mrs. Hughes reminded her. Lady Mary bit her tongue, suddenly reminded that Mrs. Hughes was not nearly as warm on her as Mr. Carson. “I suppose Laura was quiet, if anything. Alice did most of the talking. She was a bright, bubbly gay thing. Laura was dark. She read far too much for my liking, always books in Gaelic that I couldn’t understand. She never frolicked with men in the village or made a scene below stairs but there was something odd about her. Something… unnerving. Like she was thinking awful thoughts but you couldn’t prove it.”

“A dark horse,” Lady Mary summed up.

“Yes, M’lady, but I couldn’t refute her work ethic. She was one of the best maids we had on staff.” Mrs. Hughes paused. “Then something rather odd happened. Oh- where did I put that file-?”

Thomas’ heart leapt to his throat as Mrs. Hughes got up to rummage through her filing cabinet. Next to him, Lady Mary stiffened in her seat, close to breaking into a sweat as Mrs. Hughes paused mid-file.

“Strange, I thought it was here,” She closed the cabinet with a shrug, untroubled as she retook her seat. “I must have put it in storage. I tend to weed out files from those that have been out of our service for more than two decades.” Mrs. Hughes gave Thomas a small smile. “Don’t look so nervous Thomas. I don’t think you stole it.”

*I’m an asshole,* Thomas thought. All he could do was give Mrs. Hughes a bitter smile, taking a tiny sip of tea. “Would you hate me if I did?”

“Did you?” Mrs. Hughes asked.

“Of course not,” Lady Mary cut in. “Thomas would never do such a thing.”

Thomas blinked, catching her eye. Hadn’t she been the one to tell him to do it? But Lady Mary just gave him another tight-lipped smile. In her own way, Thomas could sense that she was taking responsibility for telling Thomas to steal. That she knew implicitly he was struggling under guilt. She couldn’t say it aloud, but Thomas was certain that she was apologizing in her own way. He understood completely.

“So what can you remember?” Lady Mary asked.

“Well…” Mrs. Hughes relaxed in her chair, staring up at the ceiling as she tried to recall the ancient memory. “It was about three years into their service, and Alice went home to visit their grandmother who was unwell. She returned, and seemed delighted. She kept babbling about having met the most
wonderful man. Laura disapproved, but she seemed to loving towards Alice she must have kept her thoughts to herself. But then, Alice grew ill. Terribly ill. For months, she was off color… Laura had to nurse her back to health herself. When Alice got better, she wasn’t the same. It was like all the light had left her eyes. She never smiled. She never laughed. She was just as dark and somber as her sister.”

Mrs. Hughes paused, taking another sip of tea. “I never understood it. I tried talking to her… we all did. But she was as silent as the grave. I thought at first she’d fallen out with her beau, but she told me that she was going to be married so that couldn’t be it.”

“Family troubles?” Thomas offered.

“I couldn’t say,” Mrs. Hughes wore a tender smile, her memories growing golden. “Lady Grantham was close to giving birth at the time. There was such a sense of joy in the house. Everyone was talking about babies. Everyone was wondering if it would be a little boy or girl. We had bets going around for names. Of course—” Mrs. Hughes broke into a gay laugh, fondly stroking the rim of her teacup in penchant thought. “Of course, when both a boy and girl were born, the bets broke even. A great deal of staff lost money that day.”

“And Carson?” Lady Mary asked.

“Oh, he had been the one taking up the money,” Mrs. Hughes scoffed. “He used it to buy a blanket which was in your crib. From the time you were born, you and your brother adored that blanket. It was stolen the night your brother was taken. You were inconsolable…” Mrs. Hughes was crestfallen, her golden memories and fond thoughts long gone.

“We all were,” she whispered.

“What did you think when you found out Laura attacked Master James?” Thomas asked.

Mrs. Hughes scoffed, rolling her eyes. “I slapped her, the stupid cow. I kept her locked in my office until the police arrived. Alice wanted to talk to her, but I wouldn’t let her. I didn’t trust her not to attack her own sister. She was stark raving mad, claiming that she was a witch and had the power to destroy us all. Can you imagine? She must have been drunk.” Mrs. Hughes shook her head.

“Idiot woman,” She cursed into her cup.

Thomas and Lady Mary shared a wary glance. Though Mrs. Hughes did not know it, both of them were now solidly convinced the Carney family had practiced witchcraft.

“And after that? With Alice?” Thomas asked.

“Well…” Mrs. Hughes sighed. “She became obsessed with caring for Master James. I suppose she felt guilty for her sister’s crimes, though of course no one below stairs held it against her. It had been obvious from the start that Laura was the dark one between them. No one in their right mind would have thought Alice capable of such things. She was excited to be married. She kept talking about the future, about how bright it was. For a moment, it seemed it would be… then that night happened.”

“Tell me about the day before,” Thomas offered. “Anything strike your mind about Alice or Lady Mary and Master James?”

“Well they were hardly fit to be troubled, they were just wee things,” Mrs. Hughes shrugged. “Master James was going to visit the doctor very soon, so we were all monitoring his burn for infection. Besides that he mostly just slept and ate, always in the company of Lady Mary. As for Alice, she was suffering from a head cold so I sent her to bed. She was restless, the poor thing.”

“I remember that distinctly, because when we formed the search party we couldn’t include Alice,” Mrs. Hughes explained.

Thomas paused, his pen perched upon his pad.

“…Do you remember the last time you saw Alice?” He asked. “The last time that day, I mean.”

“Well… I suppose a bit before noon,” Mrs. Hughes was confused, “I mean to say, she didn’t help lay the table for lunch. She was in bed.”

“And then when was the next time you saw her?”

Mrs. Hughes pondered on it for a moment before saying. “It must have been around five in the morning. The police were finished searching the estate… Alice came down from her rooms, claiming to have been woken by the ruckus. We filled her in of course. She was heartbroken… she cried all day.”

“but the police interrogated her?” Lady Mary asked. “Why?”

“Well, because of Laura, I suppose M’lady.” Mrs. Hughes paused. “Alice was furious at being linked in with her sister. I had to sit with her while the police interrogated her. She just kept saying ‘I don’t know anything’. Over and over again… they were hardly impressed.”

“And you?” Thomas asked.

“I just felt sorry for the poor thing,” Mrs. Hughes said. “After a few weeks, she just couldn’t handle the pain anymore. Downton had become a tomb for her. She handed in her notice and returned to Stockport to be married.”

Thomas set down his notepad with a long pause. “You’re certain it was Stockport?”

“Oh yes,” Mrs. Hughes said. “I sent her Christmas cards that year from the staff wishing her well. I can’t remember the address, somewhere on the high street.”

Thomas looked to Lady Mary, capping his pen and tucking his notebook back into his jacket. His knuckles burned as they brushed over the stolen files.

“Thank you Mrs. Hughes. That’s more than enough,” Thomas rose up, gesturing for Lady Mary to follow him. “Lady Mary, may I speak to you in private?”

“Of course. Thank you Mrs. Hughes for your kindness.” Lady Mary set her teacup aside and stepped to the door so that Mrs. Hughes could show them out. She did so, looking tentative.

“If there’s anything else I can, please let me know,” she said.

“Thomas is a proper detective, Mrs. Hughes, he leaves no stone unturned,” Lady Mary praised. Thomas just rolled his eyes, but even he could not keep the grin off his face.

As they exited Mrs. Hughes’ office, they were suddenly seized upon by Anna who had clearly been just outside the door eavesdropping. Lady Mary was taken aback.

“Anna!”

“M’lady, is everything alright?” Anna asked. “I’ve been terribly worried.”
“Oh, nonsense,” Lady Mary put her at ease with a warm smile. “Thomas has been taking very good care of me. We just wanted to speak to Mrs. Hughes about the maid who attacked my brother. Will you run me a bath, Anna? I want to bathe before dinner.”

“I… of course M’lady.” Anna caught Thomas’ eyes and held it. She wanted to say more, and Thomas knew it.

But she couldn’t in front of Lady Mary, and that meant she was angry with him. Anna left, marching up the hall with slight force in her steps. Lady Mary watched her go, perplexed.

“I wonder what’s gotten under her skin,” Lady Mary said.

“Me,” Thomas replied.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Lady Mary wouldn’t hear a word of it. “Now what did you want to tell me?”

“If Alice Carney returned to Stockport to get married, then I’ll be able to find her name in the church registrar,” Thomas spoke low and soft, not wanting anyone else to hear. Lady Mary had to lean in to be privy. “I say I leave tonight and head back up to Stockport to track down where she went.”

“But you’ve only just gotten back,” Lady Mary said. “Won’t you be exhausted?”

“Not really,” Thomas shrugged.

“Well I want to go with you. Let’s wait a day or two and then travel together,” Lady Mary decided. “Is that alright?”

“If you like, but I doubt it’ll be interesting.”

Lady Mary just gave him an enchanting smile. “With you, everything is interesting.”

~*~

Taking a bath felt like she was washing years off, and Mary was glad to don a fine dress again. She’d never admit it to Thomas, but she hadn’t enjoyed pretending to be middle class. She was spoilt, and she knew it. But she was also a Crawley and it was her birth right to be dressed well. That night, she put on a dress of deep purple, new from the highlights of last Spring’s fashion show, and allowed Anna to tie a diamond encrusted headband about her forehead. Anna was clearly engrossed in one thought or another, saying nothing but looking pensive.

“Anything wrong, Anna?”

“Nothing, M’lady.”

Down Mary went to dinner, taking her train in hand so that she wouldn’t trip upon the carpeted stairs. As she walked, Mary could not help but feel haunted by ghosts. The memory of her brother seemed to follow after her. She thought of mummies, she thought of witches, but most of all she thought of Thomas Barrow who had done nothing but shown her kindness and been treated with contempt in return.

Why?

Why was he such a black shadow in this house? What had he ever done but attempted to defend himself from the world? On the other hand, was Mary defending Thomas in order to defend herself?
So similar were they that she felt an attack on one was an attack on the other. She could not help but wonder if Thomas felt the same.

Dinner that night was a quiet affair. Though Granny came by, talk was low to the ground. Cora was still disturbingly silent, wearing a gown of dark blue that almost appeared black in the light. Across the table from her mother, Mary carefully cut through her white fish and lemon sauce, every so often glancing at her to see if she was smiling or listening to Granny.

She wasn’t.

As the vegetable dish was passed around (watercress with sliced onions), Mary glanced up again and caught Cora’s eye. Cora held her gaze, the tiniest bitter smile upon her lips. Mary tried to return it.

“How was your trip?” Cora asked.

“Fine,” Mary carefully arranged a small pile of watercress and onion upon her dish, handing the silver serving spoons back to Andrew so that he could continue on around the table. Carson followed up, offering a vinaigrette to anyone who would care for it of sherry and sparkling elderberry. “Quite fine.”

“Where did you go?” Robert asked.

Wary of giving away too much information, Mary kept her answers short. “Stockport.”

“Where on earth is that?” Tom asked.

“It’s past Liverpool,” Mary said.

“Stockport,” Granny let the name fall over her tongue, rubbing her fingers together as she tried to spark back an ancient memory. “Do we know anyone in Stockport? Do people even live there? I thought it was just a commune for fish.” She tittered at her own joke.

“Why on earth did you go to Stockport?” Robert asked.

Mary carefully sliced through her watercress, eyes averted so as not to feel the heat from her father’s gaze. “I had some business to attend to with Barrow,” Mary said.

“Enough of the secrets, Mary. Tell me flat out what is going on. I refuse to be put off any longer.” Robert snapped. The heat was beginning to show in his voice, and it caused everyone to pause mid-bite. Across the table from Mary, Cora was staring at her eldest daughter. Something in her gaze made Mary sense her mother was already catching on.

When Mary did not answer right away, Robert snapped, jerking around in his chair to look at Carson. “Carson, fetch Barrow. If Mary won’t talk then I’ll ask him-“

“Oh leave Thomas alone!” Mary snapped. Carson was stuck, one foot ready to move and one foot firmly planted. Dare he refute his master for the Crawley he loved most? Who should he listen to? Who should he ignore?

“Tell me or I’ll have him brought up here this very minute,” Robert said.

Mary huffed, letting her linen napkin fall upon her plate as she crossed her arms over her chest. Oh, she detested being man-handled!
Across the table from her, Cora was still staring at her, waiting. Somehow, Mary felt like if she must answer, she would have to address her mother. After all, it had been Cora to suffer so much as of late, and Cora who would no doubt be thrown again.

“…Mama,” Mary spoke as calmly as she could, “I’ve decided to find out what happened to my brother. Barrow’s been helping me. I thought it only fair, after how he accidentally got dragged into it. I didn’t want to say anything lest it upset you more.”

Cora blinked, looked down at her lap, and nodded. “…I thought so.”

Silence overtook the table as each member of the Crawley family turned to see what Cora would do next. To Mary’s utter surprise, her mother did not burst into tears or leave the table. Instead, she took a deep breath, steadying herself as she sipped her wine and returned to her watercress.

“What have you found out?” she asked.

“Cora,” Robert cut Mary off before she could even begin. “Enough of this bloody awful business. I don’t want to be drug through it again.”

Cora chewed on her watercress, swallowing and addressing the tablecloth to avoid looking up. “What have you found out, Mary.”

Robert deflated in his chair, gray face as he palmed his head. “Clearly no one cares about what I want anymore.”

“Barrow has been combing through all the files the police compiled,” Mary explained. Cora listened intently, continuing to eat as if untroubled. “He’s deduced a rather stunning discovery.”

“Do tell,” Cora said. She looked to Carson, gesturing silently for more wine. Carson filled her glass at once, stepping back carefully so as to allow the family their moment.

“As a servant, Thomas knows full well how the abbey operates at night,” Mary explained. She picked back up her napkin, folding it delicately upon her lap. “He knows how hard it would be for anyone to break in. That’s why he feels that whoever did it had an accomplice on the inside.”

Cora nodded, swallowing another mouthful of wine. “I can see how that must of made sense. But who?”

“Well, he started looking at the suspects, and of course the obvious one was that dreadful Carney woman who attacked my brother, but she was imprisoned so how could she have done it. Thomas called her prison to arrange an interview, just to see if he could shed any more light, and then he discovered something else.”

“Yes?”

How to put it? Mary thought over her words carefully, using a bite of watercress to buy herself more time. “Mama, I hate to frighten you, but Carney broke out of prison two weeks after she was transferred. Only days before my brother was taken.”

Granny dropped her knife in shock.

Across the table from Mary, Cora looked ready to be sick. Her normally lovely olive skin had taken an ashen tone.

“What?” Cora whispered, eyes wide with horror. “But, surely, the police-!”
“I don’t know how they slipped up on that detail,” Mary admitted. “But they did. And so Thomas believes that Carney is the number one suspect. We’ve been trying to track her down. She’s from Stockport. That’s why Thomas and I went. But when we got there, we found… well…” Mary shuddered. “Frankly, we found signs of witchcraft in the old Carney house—“

“Mary.” Robert snapped. His voice was unnaturally loud for the dining hall.

Mary bristled, meeting her father’s eyes. He was scolding her much like he would have done if she was five. But Mary was thirty-five, a mother herself, and did not enjoy being treated like an infant simply because she went against her father’s wishes.

“Stop this now,” Robert growled.

“…No,” Mary said. Robert was taken aback. “I will not stop until I know the truth.”

When Robert said nothing else, Mary carefully took another bite of watercress and continued on.

“So what now?” Cora asked. “Does Thomas have any ideas?”

“Well, Thomas is looking at the other Carney sister, Alice, to see if she was the accomplice on the inside,” Mary explained. “The pair of us spoke with Mrs. Hughes earlier this evening, and she relayed to us all she could remember about the Carney sisters.”

“What did she say?” Cora asked.

“Cora!” Robert slammed a fist upon the dinner table, causing every dish to rattle. Granny jumped in her chair, shocked at the outburst. Even Tom was taken aback. “Enough of this! Why are we talking about this?! Why are we dragging it out?! Our son is dead! No more can be done or said! Regardless of what Thomas Barrow thinks, the matter is finished! Let his soul rest in peace!”

Cora said nothing, and for a moment utter silence reigned. Then, Cora took a small breath, looked up at Mary, and calmly asked. “Mary, tell me what Mrs. Hughes said.”

Robert could take no more. He jerked out of his chair and stormed out of the dining room before Cora or Mary could say another word. The slam of the door was like the crack of the gong, and it gave the table a stir as Granny carefully picked back up her knife and fretfully cut through several rounds of watercress.

“Well go on,” she muttered. “We might as well hear it now.”

“Mrs. Hughes said that Carney was angry at being interviewed,” Mary explained. “And that she left shortly afterward to be wed in Stockport. Thomas and I are going to see if we can find out who she married, and track her down to question her.”

“Sounds like your haranguing the poor woman,” Granny grumbled.

“Harangue away,” Cora snapped. Granny was taken aback.

“Heavens you sounds positively incensed,” Granny said.

“I am,” Cora said, though her anger certainly did not show in her voice. “If Thomas Barrow can find out what happened to my child… I will never be able to express my joy and gratitude deeply enough.”

Mary smiled. “I’ll pass your thoughts on.”
Thomas would be a fool to deny the change in Downton Abbey after Lady Mary confessed their plot to Lord Grantham. The jolly, calm atmosphere so often infused with every brick and stone was replaced by banging doors and stiff silences. Lord Grantham didn’t want to hear a word of it. Didn’t want to speak to Cora, or Lady Mary, or anyone who had an opinion on the matter. Instead, he wanted to be left alone, and so he often took long walks with only Tiaa for company.

Thomas, on the other hand, spent his days organizing notes on the Carney sisters. He even made a private test for himself, asking Lady Mary to time him while he walked from the front door all the way up to the nursery and then back again. He then repeated the test, running, and found he could make the trip in little under two minutes. It would be an incredibly tight window, but it did not account for how Carney had managed to slip past the nanny. And had Alice been involved? He just couldn’t say.

On August 2nd, Thomas and Mary headed out for Stockport. They were once again planning to book a room at The Guest House, this time with Thomas demanding they be given separate rooms so that Lady Mary could have her privacy. They found Stockport much as they had left it, save that a rain had recently fallen so everything was terribly damp. The pair of them dropped off their valises at the Guest House, and then set out to visit Christ Church of Stockport. Creepily enough, it was just off of Lord Street, set behind the High Street in front of a small but well groomed park. The sight of ancient brickwork and molding stone set Thomas on edge. He felt a strange sensation begin to crawl around in his gut as they approached, and though it was improper he held tight to Lady Mary’s arm.

This had been the church to cast him out.
The church to ruin his life.

And if the pastor was still the same… it would be the very same man who had condemned Thomas to hell in front of the entire community of Stockport.
He’d been fourteen years old.

Lady Mary paused in her gait, sensing Thomas’ tightening grip. “Thomas?”

“It’s nothing,” He mumbled. “Just… this was the church that ruined my life. Remember to call me James Courtenay. If they know who I am… they’ll destroy me. They’ll remember my name.”

“Yes of course,” Lady Mary even patted his arm, offering him a genial smile. “Don’t worry, I’ll do the talking. We’ll pretend you have a cold.”

“Thank you, M’lady,” It was a great relief to his mind.

As they reached the front doors, Thomas drew back leaving Lady Mary to knock. She did so with a gloved hand, practicing her expression into one of a calm smile.

“Breath, Thomas,” she whispered. Thomas forced himself to relax, putting on a rather sharp grin that did not bode well. The door opened to reveal-

_Fuck_, Thomas thought.
It was, without a doubt, the very same pastor that had ruined his life. Father Seabank.

The shriveled old bat hadn’t died, it seemed, which was a fine stroke of luck considering the man must surely be in his nineties by now. He gave Lady Mary a tight lipped smile, his bony fingers holding the door ajar. Every knuckle on his hand was swollen. His eyes seemed sunken into his face. He was more of a walking corpse than a man.
“Yes? How may I help you?” Father Seabank asked. Yet even as Lady Mary opened her mouth, he took notice of Thomas and did a double take.

“…Do I know you, sir?” Father Seabank asked.

“I shouldn’t imagine so, no,” Thomas ground out. Father Seabank said no more, but it was clear he didn’t fully believe Thomas.

“I’m Lady Mary Crawley of Grantham,” Lady Mary held out her hand so that she might shake Father Seabank’s. “This is my private detective Mr. James Courtenay. We need to look at your records of marriage from the summer of 1891. Do you have them available for viewing?”

“Certainly, M’lady,” Father Seabank still hadn’t let them into the church, “But whatever for?”

“I’m afraid that’s a delicate matter. My solicitor has requested me to remain silent,” Lady Mary said. “May we come in?”

“Please,” Father Seabank stepped aside. Thomas entered after Lady Mary, wary to stay as far back from Father Seabank as possible. He seemed benign enough, hunchbacked and knobbly kneed, but Thomas could remember that very same man holding him tight by the back of the head, dragging him up before the alter to scream out at the congregation “BEHOLD! A SINNER!”

They walked towards the alter, stopping only to turn right and head around the pulpit where an unassuming oak door lead to the back of the church. Thomas, however, did not follow. He was too transfixed by the image of Christ, splayed upon the cross with his head bent in agony. Thomas slowly turned about, staring out at the empty benches which once held the entire community of Stockport.

“This boy! This cretin! Has been found for a homosexual! A sodomite who flouts God’s law!”

The screaming. The jeers.
His mother’s ashen face, tight lipped and bloodless as she watched her eldest be destroyed.

“Thomas-?”

He jumped, looking about to find Lady Mary watching him unsure. Just over her shoulder, Father Seabank was at the door to the parish hall, wary of Thomas’ unusual behavior.

“…Nothing’s changed,” Thomas whispered.

“Try not to think on it,” Mary whispered. She took his arm, lacing it about her own so that they walked in tandem behind Father Seabank. The inside of Christ Church were cold and bleak, broken by nothing save for slim windows that looked out onto a quiet courtyard.

“Is this your first time in Stockport, Detective Courtenay?” Father Seabanks asked.

“It is,” Thomas lied.

“Well, it’s pleasant enough,” Father Seabanks lead them into an alcove off the main hall, unlocking a heavy door with a master key which swung from a chatelain upon his hip. “We’ve had our fair share of delinquents, but I’m pleased to say that our town is quite free from sin.”

Lady Mary held tighter to Thomas’ arm. Her grip was making his pulse pound in his wrist.
“Here are the records,” The room was stocked to the eaves with old cardboard boxes. The farther back they went, the more the boxes turned to wood. It seemed that some of these records hadn’t seen the light of day since 1800.

“Now, what are we looking for?” Father Seabanks asked, rubbing his knobbly hands together with a pleasant if tight lipped smile.

“We want to see marriage licenses from June to July of 1892. We’re looking for a particular woman who would have been wed during that time,” Lady Mary explained. “We want to question her regarding a private matter.”

“Very good,” Father Seabanks began to ferret through boxes, eventually selecting one seemingly at random to pull it out and flip through the files. When he finally pulled out the one he sought, he had to blow off a sheaf of dust and brush off a tiny spider that scuttled past.

“Here we are!” Father Seabanks declared. He opened the file in his arms, and began to flick through one soft document after another. Each page was so gentle, so delicate, that a rough touch might tear it in two. Every word was written in fine blank ink, cursive cutting hard bows into powdery paper.

“Pray tell who are we looking for?” Father Seabanks asked.

“Her surname would have been Carney,” Lady Mary explained. “An Alice Carney.”

“Oh-“ Father Seabanks looked up, taken aback. He broke into a tittering laugh, and for whatever reason closed the folder to put it back into the box. Lady Mary looked at Thomas, taken aback.

“Oh, why I’ve no need for a record to tell you that!” Father Seabanks beamed. “I know the Barrow’s well!”

“…W…” The word couldn’t even come out of Thomas’ mouth. What had he said? Had he said Barrow?

“What?” Lady Mary asked, utterly bewildered. Thomas’ heart was beginning to pound in his throat.

“Forgive me, let me explain,” Father Seabanks smiled. “I presided over that wedding myself. Alice Carney married Nathaniel Barrow in June of 1891. I likewise know exactly where she resides now if you’d like to speak to her. She’s at-“

“No…”

Thomas slipped free from Lady Mary’s arm, his face flush and hot. His pulse was jumping in his neck.

No, it could not be.

Barrow… Alice Carney…
Alice Carney was Alice Barrow.
Alice Barrow was his mother.

But the more that Thomas thought about it, the more that he stood there horrified, the more he realized it had to be true! He’d looked at Alice Carney’s picture, and he’d been so certain that he knew who she was! That he’d seen her face before! And it was because he had, he’d seen it a million times… because…

Because she was his mother.
“Oh my god-“ Lady Mary turned to Thomas, a hand over his mouth. Father Seabank stared from her to Thomas, utterly bewildered as to why they were panicking. “Thomas, she’s your mother! Alice Carney is your mother!”

“Oh my god-“ Thomas thought he might be sick. It couldn’t be true-! But how could he deny it!!

His own mother, the very same woman who might have assisted in the abduction of James Crawley.

He had to get out of here. He had to get outside. He needed to breathe-!

But Father Seabank’s friendly demeanor had vanished with the utterance of ‘Thomas’. He was now glaring at Thomas and Lady Mary so fiercely that Thomas actually shrank away from the man.

“Did she just say your name was Thomas?” Father Seabank’s spat the name like it was a curse.

“I-“ Lady Mary tried to take it back but it was too late.

“And that Alice Carney is your mother?” He added, his tone growing fiercer by the second.

“I just-“ Lady Mary tried to speak again, but once more Father Seabanks would not have it.

“Meaning that you-!” Father Seabank’s pointed a knobbled finger in Thomas’ face. He shrank back even more, hitting the cold stone wall of the church. “Are you Thomas Barrow?!”

Thomas did not deny it.

Father Seabanks flew into a rage.

“PERVERT!” He shrieked. He grabbed the wooden box that held the marriage files and flung it at Thomas’ face with a strength that surely befitted a man thirty years his junior. Thomas ducked, and the box hit the wall to shatter just over his head. Lady Mary screamed, terrified at the violence.

“GET OUT OF THIS HOUSE OF WORSHIP!” Father Seabanks threw yet another box at him. This one clipped Thomas on the side of the face, so that an exploding pain burst into his eye.

“Run!” Lady Mary cried out, grabbing his hand to pull him away from Father Seabanks.

The pair of them were tearing up the church, running like madmen back through the aisles. Behind them, Father Seabank was chasing them, roaring out horrid things like a banshee.

“DEVL SPAWN!” A bible sailed past Thomas’ head.

“Run, Thomas-!” Lady Mary burst through the front door, and Thomas followed after her to flee through the park. Father Seabank did not go further than the stoop of his church, seemingly too old and frail to keep up the chase. What he lacked in distance, he made up for in volume, however.

“BASTARD! SEXUAL DEVIANT! SODOMITE! LAVENDER WHORE!”

Thomas tripped upon a rock, nearly falling to the ground till Lady Mary grabbed him and pulled him back up. They fled into an ally by the church, hiding in the shadows so that Thomas could break down amongst the rubbish bins of a random shop.

Lady Mary did not judge him, clearly just as shaken as he. She held onto him from behind, shuddering as Father Seabank’s voice echoed throughout the park.

“IF A MAN LIE WITH MANKIND AS HE LIETH WITH A WOMAN, BOTH OF THEM HAVE
COMMITTED AN ABOMINATION! THEY WILL BE PUT TO DEATH AND THEIR BLOOD SHALL BE UPON THEM!!”
A Walk in the Woods

Chapter Summary

Thomas and Mary discover yet another shocking secret from the Carney sisters. Thomas talks a walk in the woods.

Chapter Notes

Hello there! No triggers today, save for a bit of parental emotional abuse in the beginning and references to gun violence at the end. No guns are actually fired, but it gets talked about so if that upsets you just be aware it's there.

Like many a poor man before him, when Thomas Barrow felt fright overtake him he did the only thing that felt sensible.

He got drunk.

Sitting at the bar of The Guest House, Thomas wholly expected to have a gang of thirty men burst through the door seeking to skin him. But it seemed that Father Seabank, while being vitriolic in his hate, was simply too old and too weak to fetch his pitchfork. Lady Mary sat penchant beside Thomas, nursing a scotch while Thomas threw back yet another shot of whiskey. He was on his fourth and looking forward to his fifth.

He could not believe it. He simply could not fucking believe it.

How sick was it, that his mother was the same Alice that had been in league with Laura Carney—Christ, this meant she was Thomas’ aunt! Thomas’ aunt was a psychotic killer, who dabbled in witchcraft! Oh, the minute Carson found out he’d skin Thomas alive.

Thomas tried to recall his youth, tried to ferret out any detail he could that might help him to discover what had happened to James Crawley. For the life of him, he could not remember his mother doing anything suspicious besides hiding in the basement for a smoke. She’d been devout, going to church every Sunday and Wednesday. They’d said their prayers at every meal, and at bed time too. She’d read Thomas and his siblings stories from the bible… she’d been chaste; she’d never so much as even cursed.

And now… could she possibly be capable of helping a lunatic harm a child? An infant? Thomas didn’t know what to believe anymore.

“She’s my mother…” He shook his head, nursing his half-empty whiskey glass. “God help me, she’s my mother.”

“Thomas, we have to talk to her,” Lady Mary said.

“I don’t know how we’re gonna get past my father,” They were already playing on thin ice with
Father Seabank aware that Thomas was in town. If he alerted Thomas’ parents, Thomas wouldn’t get a mile near Barrow and Son’s Clockworks. How in the hell were they going to be able to interrogate his mother?

“Simple,” Lady Mary soothed him with a hand upon his arm. “We go to the police and demand our way in!”

“You don’t understand!” He jerked his arm, a little too drunk to be polite. Mary watched him, unsure.

Thomas turned sharply in his chair so that they could bend their heads together. They were a queer pair at a mostly calm and orderly bar.

“This is a small town,” Thomas hissed. “M’father knows the police. They drink together! They fuckin’ threw me out of Stockport! He’s violent and mean as hell! I cannot and will not put you in harms way.”

“I’m asking you to!” Lady Mary hissed. Her eyes were burning with an inner determination that Thomas could not help but admire. “We don’t have to talk to your father, just your mother. When could we get her alone?”

Thomas opened his mouth to tell Lady Mary that this was impossible, but then paused to consider it further.

There was only two times when his mother was away from his father. The first, was Wednesday evening when she went to church for a sitting group. There, she would knit scarves and gloves for the less fortunate. The problem was, Thomas and Mary wouldn’t be able to get lose to Christ Church now.

The second time was Sunday Market, where his mother would go and buy food, supplies, and whatever the hell else for the week. She’d take massive burlap sacks, and fill them with everything from coal, to pork, to apples. Thomas’ father, meanwhile, would sleep in. It was their best, and only shot at getting his mother alone.

“Sunday Market,” Thomas said. “She goes alone; Da sleeps in.”

“Sunday is tomorrow,” Lady Mary said. “Let’s lay in wait, track her down, and interrogate her.”

“We’re gonna have to get out of town fast.” Thomas rotated his glass carefully about, allowing the amber liquid to stain each side in a gentle roll. “The minute she gets loose, she’ll run for m’da. He’ll rip me apart.”

“Then we’ll leave on the first train out,” Lady Mary said.

Thomas threw back the rest of his whiskey. It burned all the way down, stinging his nose and tongue and helping him to momentarily forget that he was utterly miserable. The barman Mr. Kent passed by, watching Thomas warily as Thomas set his whiskey glass back down with a sharp ‘snap’.

“Whiskey,” Thomas requested to the man. “Three shots.” He fished into his vest pocket for the money and put down a thropping. Kent was taken aback but took his money all the same.

“Don’t get drunk,” Lady Mary urged him.

Kent filled up three whiskey shots, one after another. Thomas tapped the bottom of his glass twice against the wood before throwing it back hard.

“To your health,” Thomas threw back another. “To my health.” He paused, coughing a bit from the burn in the back of his throat. Lady Mary took the moment to reach out, and in a move of shocking character took up Thomas’ final shot.

She arched a fine eyebrow, licked her plush lips, and then threw back the shot.

She burst into a round of coughing a hand over her mouth to keep her dignity. Thomas reached out and patted her upon the back.

“Heavens,” Her eyes were watering. “What was that?”


“Oh, I can’t wait to tell Tom,” She said. “He’ll have a field day.”

Yet instead of moving on to other patrons, Kent regarded Thomas cautiously as if expecting him to explode. He poured yet another glass of whiskey, but instead of offering it to Thomas or Lady Mary he drank from it himself. Clearly, he wasn’t against indulging while on the clock.

“… There’s a rumor goin’ about town,” Kent said.

Thomas cut him off. “Do I look like I give a fuck?”

His inebriated tongue was not a kind creature.

But instead of growing angry at Thomas’ lack of respect, Kent just kept watching him. Watching and waiting, eyes peering deep into Thomas’ own. He was searching for something, though God knows what. To distract himself, Thomas began arranging his finished whiskey glasses into a tiny pyramid.

“…Thomas,” Kent whispered.

Thomas’ eyes snapped up. The barman grew distressed, mouth curved into an expression of something close to pity.

“My god,” Kent leaned in close so that they would not be disturbed by the other patrons listening in. “It is you, isn’t it? Thomas Barrow. You poor creature-“

“Fuck you!” Thomas hissed. Though he refrained from shouting, his loathing was obvious in his voice. “Don’t you dare show me pity. You didn’t do shit for me that day, so don’t you dare try to do shit for me now-“

“I didn’t join in with that mob, did I?” Kent hissed, “And I’ll garner you, they asked me to. An’ I haven’t told your father you’re here now, have I?”

Fair point.

Thomas grimaced, slumping upon his bar stool to grumble into the bar top. Lady Mary patted him cautiously upon the arm, offering him a sympathetic ear.

“I suppose you wish to be paid for your silence?” Lady Mary asked. Kent looked as if she’d slapped him.

“I don’t require money to do the right thing,” Kent said. “Not then, an’ not now.”

Lady Mary shrugged. Kent continued on. “I heard you whisperin’. You want to interrogate your
mum? Why?"

Thomas sat up, giving a heavy sigh. His breath stank of whiskey. “D’you remember her sister?”

“Laura?” Kent scoffed, pouring himself another shot of whiskey though it was hardly more than a
thimble at best. “Christ, there’s a name I never wanted to hear again.”

“D’you know there’s a fuckin’ mummy in their old house?” Thomas pointed randomly to the east. If
one were to follow his direction it would lead them in the direction of the Carney house.

“You went down there?” Kent asked.

“Aye, I did,” Thomas snapped. “An’ she went with me so she saw it too.”

“It was ghastly,” Lady Mary said.

“Shit,” Kent scoffed, toasting his tiny whiskey to Thomas. “I didn’t think lavenders were brave.”

“If you weren’t pourin’ me whiskey and lettin’ me kip in your room, I’d sock you in the mouth for
that,” Thomas slurred. “Now give me another whiskey.”

“Go slow or you’ll get sick.”

“Fuck you, just fill up my glass.”

Kent had had just about enough of Thomas’ mouth. “Your mother taught you better manners than
that.”

Thomas put on his lightest voice, sounding more like a boy than a man as he drawled: “Excuse me
kind sir. Please give me a whiskey. My mummy’s related to a murderess and I found one of her
victims in a rotting basement.”

The barman rolled his eyes but filled up Thomas’ glass all the same. “You know…” he paused to re-
cap the whiskey bottle. “It’s not a murder victim.”

“So you know it’s there?” Lady Mary asked, curious.

“Ay,” Kent shrugged. “We all know it’s there. No one goes round there, though, because the land is
cursed. It’s not a victim, lad. It’s your gran.”

Thomas coughed on his whiskey so that some of it spilt onto his shirtsleeves. “What?” He
demanded.

“Niamh Carney,” Kent explained. “Your grandmother. Ages ago back when your mother an’ her
sister were just tots, the Carney’s came over from Ireland and started practicing witchcraft in the
barrens outside of town. Everyone knew it, but no one dared cross them; they were too frightened.
But the church got wind sure enough and sent men out there to apprehend the Carney’s. They tried
to set the house of fire, but the damn thing wouldn’t burn. Then they broke into the house and found
the Carney’s hiding in the basement. Alice couldn’t have been more than three or four at the time.
Niamh was down there, with a blade to her throat, and she said if the men came even a step closer,
she’d kill herself an’ curse them all.”

“Did they?” Lady Mary was listening with rapt attention.

“Ay,” Kent said, drumming his fingers upon the ancient wood of his bar. “An’ sure enough she cut
her throat. Right in front of her own tots, god help ‘em. The children were put in the charge of the
church, but sure enough by the end of the week every man who had apprehended the Carney family was dead. Freak accidents too, stuff you wouldn’t see every day. By the seventh day they were ravin’ mad too, shrieking that a ghost was chasing them to their doom.”

“I can’t believe it,” Lady Mary whispered.

“My father was one of the men,” The barman said. “I watched him run and jump off the pier outside, swept out to sea. He was screaming the whole time that a ghost was coming after him until he drowned.”

Lady Mary shuddered, horrified at such an ugly death.

“I’m gonna be sick,” Thomas mumbled. Christ, his family was black as coal. He’d never stood a tenth of a change at being normal.

“Thomas what do we do?” Lady Mary asked. “How do we apprehend your mother if she really is a witch?”

Thomas thought it over, eyes narrowed. He knew what he had to do. He just prayed he got it right the first time around.

“Alright…” Thomas pushed his glass pyramid away to lean in heavily towards Lady Mary. Kent listened too, curious to know just how they’d pull this off. “Here’s what we’re gonna do…”

They bowed their heads and began to plot.

~*~

Sunday Market in Stockport was nothing more than a large set of vending stalls placed along a country lane that ran parallel to the high street. The grass was browned, repeatedly flattened by scores of irritated mothers and exasperated housewives fetching everything from coal to catsup for their whiny husbands and clambering children. Among the fishmongers and venders sat a little rickety shack off the main road used for storing extra tent flaps and rope for banners. It was there, tucked away in the gloom, that Lady Mary and Thomas Barrow waited for Alice Barrow to appear. They were haggard and poorly groomed, after a night spent waiting with baited breath for Father Seabank to appear.

“Remember,” Lady Mary whispered in his ear, “You have the right to ask her these questions. Keep it practical, not personal.”

“Right.” Thomas lips felt numb. He’d not spoken to his mother in nearly thirty years. Would he recognize her? Would she be the same as he remembered?

“She has nothing on you,” Lady Mary added. “You’re not a sinner.”

“Right.”

For several minutes, they merely stood in the gloom, crouching by a slit in the side of the wall to see out into the market. Thomas watched women past, some lurchingly familiar and others not so much.

A graying head of hair, bound up in a tight spiraling bun-
No… no that wasn’t her.

A beaded pink shawl-?
No, she hated the color pink.
A shoulder bag of burlap, and a soft gray coat!

“There!” Thomas hissed, pointing to a quiet tiny woman who was currently examining the prices of apples.

His mother might have been thirty years older, but she was still about the same. Perhaps plumper, perhaps more squat, but still shrewd with a pinched glare and a wary eye. She picked up five apples, putting them in her bag and paying the vender.

“Alright, do you want to go grab her or should I?” Lady Mary whispered.

“Wait-” Thomas urged, a hand out to stop Lady Mary from moving towards the door.

Alice Barrow shifted the sack higher on her shoulder, and then began to head away from the market. Clearly, she’d gotten everything she needed. It just so happened that the road she walked lead her right past the door of their hiding spot-!

Thomas pressed a finger to his mouth, bidding Lady Mary to be silent. She did so, even going to far as to hold a hand over her lips in case she breathed too loud.

Thomas carefully opened the door to the shack so that it swung inward and nearly hit him in the face. There, in the gloom, he waited in absolute silence as the crunch of gravel got closer…. Closer…. Closer…

A shadow past by the door. Thomas reached out with a sharp hand and grabbed his mother tight by the back of the neck to yank her hard into the shed. She fell to the floor, nearly letting out a bloody shriek until Thomas fell upon her and pressed his hands to her mouth!

“Shut up!” He hissed as Lady Mary closed the shed door. Now all three of them were in the dark.

“Shut your damn mouth, woman!”

Alice Barrow thrashed, her blue eyes wide with terror, only to pause as she realized who was atop her.

Thomas pulled back his hands, wary not to stray too far in case she started screaming again. Alice sat up, with Thomas almost in her lap, holding her gray coat close to the nape of her neck as if she feared Thomas might assault her.

But her eyes were searching his face, not even bothering to stare at Lady Mary. Recognition dawned upon her, as she looked into the face of her eldest son.

She gasped, her faced drained of blood.

“Oh my god-!” She hissed, kicking Thomas off of her. Thomas jerked away, staggering back to his feet with a helping hand from Lady Mary. Alice Barrow was left to her own devices, still holding tight to her coat. Between them, her burlap sack lay slumped on the floor full of food and preserves.

“Mrs. Barrow, I presume?” Lady Mary greeted her. “Neé Carney?”

“You…” Alice couldn’t manage to say the words. “Why are you here? What could you possibly think to want from me now-!?”

“Oh this isn’t about me,” Thomas assured her. The venom in his voice was surprising; did he really hate his mother so much? Even Lady Mary was taken aback. “this is about James Crawley.”

Alice froze as if Thomas had slapped her. She looked from Lady Mary to Thomas, petrified of what might come next. Her expression, however, was a dead giveaway to her guilt.
“Ah, I thought that name might get a reaction out of you,” Thomas drawled, “Your old masters, the Crawley’s… Remember that little baby girl, Miss Mary quite contrary?” Thomas gestured to Lady Mary at his side. “Take a look at her now, all grown up, and quite eager to find out what happened to her twin brother James. I’ve been hired as a private detective to try and clean up loose ends, and you’re as loose as they come.”

“What- I-“ Alice fumbled over her sentences, seemingly terrified that Lady Mary might enact some kind of horrid revenge on her. “I already—I told the police years ago that I know nothing, M’lady!” She ignored Thomas completely, instead prostrating herself in front of Lady Mary like she might somehow take pity on her.

The curl in Lady Mary’s lip was more than telling of her apathy.

“I swear to you, I have nothing but the utmost sympathy for your family’s loss,” Alice begged, hands clasped as if in prayer. “But I want nothing to do with this. I’m no longer a servant!”

“But see, I think you’re lying about what you know-“ Thomas cut her off.

“I don’t care what you think!” Alice shrieked, stamping her foot in outrage at being held hostage in a shed. “You’re sexually perverted. I bet your mind is-“

“Laura Carney broke out of prison!” Thomas overrode her anger with his own. Suddenly she was back to cowering, hiding from him in the corner of the shed like distance alone might save her. “Did you know that?!“

“No,” Alice stuttered.

“Liar,” Thomas hissed. Alice shuddered, sickened by her situation. “She been in contact with you?”

Alice shook her head. She couldn’t even speak anymore.

“I smell another lie!” Thomas sing-songed, looking to Lady Mary for back up. She nodded, her expression murderous.

“I could have my wicked way with you right now,” Thomas threatened, “An’ who would blame me after all the hell you put me through. Your own child, your oldest son… I bet there’s a special ring in hell for cruel mothers... And there’s enough rope in this shed to hang you with-“

“I don’t know where she is!” Alice blurted out. Now, she was begging to Thomas. “But yes, yes, I do know she’s not in jail okay?! I haven’t heard from her in years, she ran into the woods and never came back!! She’s probably dead for god’s sake-“

“Did she take the boy?” Thomas demanded, cutting across his mother’s excuse.

Alice fell eerily silent, seemingly juggling the many answers she could give. “I… I don’t…”

Thomas took one step forward, then another. Up close, he could see that his mother was trembling from fright. Deep down, he was sickened that he’d inspired such terror in his own mother, but on the other hand he could not help but remember all the horrible things she’d put him through. The abuse, the lies, the apathy…. Was it really fair to ask him to be kind to his mother when she’d not been kind to him?

What kind of sick double standard was that?

“Did she take the boy?” Thomas growled, nose to nose with his mother.
“…Maybe…” Alice whispered, “It’s possible.”

Thomas tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. Alice dropped her gaze, unable to stand the heat.

“…Yes.” She finally admitted. “Yes, she took the boy.”

“I knew it!” Lady Mary shrieked. Thomas stepped back, joining Lady Mary at her side to put a comforting hand upon her back. She was close to tears now, her blue eyes sparkling in outrage. “I knew it!! You lied to the police the whole time! You were the one that helped her in-!”

“No!” Alice screamed. She fell to her knees, grabbing at the hem of Lady Mary’s skirts like she was praying to an idol. Lady Mary took a step back so that Alice fell upon her hands.

“No, M’lady I beg you listen to me!” Alice began to cry, hysterical in her grief. “I never knew!! I never knew until years later when she told me!! By that time, it was much too late-!”

“Then what did she do to my brother?!” Lady Mary snarled.

“She never said!” Alice cried. “I was too frightened to ask! She’s terrifying, M’lady! She hardly remembers me as a sister! She’s crazy!”

“What woods did she vanish into?” Thomas demanded. It was clear his mother was too spineless to own up to her own guilt, and frankly he was exhausted of her presence. “Where did she go after she broke out of prison?”

“G-Grantham woods-“

“Christ!” Thomas swore, turning away to run a haggard hand over his mouth.

Grantham woods were the same forests that surrounded Downton Abbey. Thomas had walked through them countless times! He’d made up stories about witches to amuse himself and had stored Isis in an old shed once when he’d been young and stupid. If Laura Carney was hiding in Grantham Woods, no one in the abbey was safe!

“She’s near the abbey,” Thomas spoke to Lady Mary in a rapid tone. “We’ve gotta go to the police-“

“Surely she’s not still alive,” Lady Mary wondered.

“She’s practiced witchcraft, broke out of a prison cell, and was cunning enough to steal your brother and get away with it for years!” Thomas snapped. “I think that there’s a very real possibility that she’s still in those woods-“

“You can’t!”

Thomas looked down at his mother, still crying on her knees. She was hysterical, frightened of their plans and her sister. “She’ll—she’s a monster! She’ll kill you!”

“Oh, what do you care?!” Thomas sneered. “You’ll probably piss on my grave given half the chance!”

“How could you say such awful things to me?!” Alice sobbed, hiding her face behind her hands. “How could you treat me in such a way?!”

“I dunno mum, how could you say awful things to me and treat me in such a way?!” Thomas fired back. “If you can’t handle the heat, stay out of the kitchen!”
“Thomas, let it go,” Lady Mary was cooling from her fight of rage, seemingly inspired by the new knowledge that Laura Carney had taken her brother and was close. “She’s not worth it.”

“We’ve got to get back to Downton,” Thomas said. He took a deep, steadying breath, trying to calm himself in his rage. It took several efforts before he finally regained control of his voice. “If Carney’s in the woods, then that’s where I’m going next. As soon as possible.”

“And if you’re lying to us, Mrs. Barrow, we’ll send the police on you,” Lady Mary added. “I ought to have you arrested right now for your lack of courage to admit the truth when you found out-“

“Is it against the law to be frightened, M’lady?” Alice whispered. She’d stopped crying, but her face was now a ruddy mess. Tears showed clean tracks amid the dirt on her cheeks.

Lady Mary did not deign her question worthy of a reply.

“Let’s go,” Thomas took Lady Mary by the elbow and pulled her from the shed. “We’ve got a train to catch.”

~*~

The entire train ride home, Thomas did not speak.

Mary watched him, wondering at the clear tension in his face and palms. He kept clenching and unclenching his fingers and jaw, blue eyes distant as if reliving some awful memory. Maybe he was.

Mary had thought at first that her investigations would lead to a corpse, quick and simple. She had envisioned a shallow grave in some far-flung place, with none to recall a face or name. But in a series of weeks, Thomas Barrow had uncovered a plot much deeper… a hole much darker. And why? Why had he gone to such great lengths to solve her pain? Was it because she was paying him forty pounds or was it because they were so unnervingly similar. Maybe by being falsely identified as James in the beginning, Thomas now felt responsible for finding the real one.

It was difficult to say.

“…Why are you doing this?” Mary whispered.

At first, Thomas did not move nor blink, and she assumed he had not heard her until he shifted slightly in his seat to look her dead in the face and reply. “Why?”

“Why.” Mary repeated. “Why go to all this trouble. Why push yourself so hard? You’ve face so many demons in the name of helping my family, but what have we ever done for you but enslave you?”

“…Maybe I wanted a bit of fun,” Thomas teased. Mary smirked, but she wasn’t buying it.

“I can think of other ways to have a jolly holiday.”

“Maybe,” Thomas relaxed a bit more in his seat, crossing his leg with an ankle upon the opposite knee.

For a moment, it seemed like Thomas would not answer her question honestly. Mary didn’t know whether or not she could blame him. But then, Thomas regarded her honestly, and gave her a small if gentle smile that was wholly foreign upon his usually cold face.
“We’re the same, you and I,” Thomas said. “And I know what it feels like to live with a burning desire… to not have it fulfilled. If there’s a chance I can spare you from that, then I will.”

She smiled.

“You’re a brave and wonderful man, Thomas Barrow,” She praised. She meant every word of it. “But I still don’t know how you intend to track Carney down.”

“I’m going to search the woods,” Thomas said.

“In a one-man battalion?”

“Exactly.”

“Thomas, I fear that’ll be nearly impossible. She could be anywhere.”

“I’ve got all night,” Thomas declared. The growling timbre in his voice sent pleasant shivers up her spine. “I’ll wait till it’s dark, then go in alone. If she’s in those woods, I’ll find her.”

“Are you certain you can do it by yourself?” Mary asked. “You wouldn’t want to take anyone with you? Not even one of the dogs?”

“Put a little faith in me.”

Mary knew it was improper to touch a man outside of her immediate family, particularly when she was neither engaged nor married to them. But Mary felt compelled in this moment to reach out and support Thomas. To let him know that she had faith in him always, no matter the circumstances.

She reached out across the seats and took his hand in her own. Yet even as she held his hand in her own, she could not help but feel some deep longing within her sated. It was an old aching wound she could not quite name… but hand in hand with Thomas Barrow it fell quiet till she was left feeling pleasantly warm.

It was right to hold his hand. It was good. It was natural. ‘

They arrived back at Downton around noon and were greeted at the station by the Crawley chauffeur. Mary watched Thomas scrutinize the Grantham Woods as they drove past. Each flickering shadow, each duck and dive of the trees seemed to him to be a viable form of Laura Carney. Upon catching sight of Downton Abbey, Mary felt a flutter of anticipation in her chest. How would her mother and father react when they learned what she knew—what Thomas had been able to find out?

When the motorcar pulled up in the front drive, Thomas opened the door and helped Mary out. Mary made a bee line for the front door, with Thomas hot on her heels as she rang the bell.

It was opened at one by Carson, who spluttered indignantly as Thomas pushed past.

“I-what are you doing using this door?!” Carson demanded to Thomas’ broad back.

“No time!” Thomas wouldn’t even turn about to speak to Carson properly, striding into the entrance hall with purpose. “Where’s his Lordship?”

“In the library- but- what are you- M’lady!” Carson begged for an explanation that Mary could not give him.

“Come with us, Carson,” She urged. “You’ll want to hear this. Thomas has discovered something
incredible.”

Carson followed at once, his pacing rapt.

As they approached the library, Mary held Thomas back by the elbow so that Carson could take the lead. He opened the door, stepping aside so that Thomas and Mary could-

Mary froze, eyes wide at the sight of her sister Edith sitting upon the couch next to Granny and Cora.

For a moment, time seemed to slow to a crawl. Though a stranger would not know it, Edith looked a wreck. Her skin was sallow and gaunt, her auburn curls limp about her small ears. Her eyes were the most telling, hollow and dead as if she did not care to see anymore. Even the frock she wore of deepest navy seemed to be a color of mourning. She looked up from the floor, and upon seeing Mary standing on the hearth she bristled.

Robert had been relaxing in his leather chair, while Tom took his tea standing by the hearth. When the door had opened, everyone had looked around so that suddenly a whole host of unfriendly eyes were upon Mary’s skin.

She suddenly felt hot, even frightened of her own family. Edith was like the damning evidence of her trial… her crime against humanity.

“Mary,” Robert stood from his chair, setting his teacup aside. “Why are you back so early? Cora and I thought you’d be gone for at least a few days.”

Mary looked to Thomas, unsure of what to say.

Edith did not know about James.

“Thomas has discovered something incredible,” Mary explained. Her voice felt weary and flat upon her own tongue. Standing before Edith robbed her of all her energy, or perhaps it was simply that the train had tuckered her out.

When no one made to speak, Edith sit up a bit straighter on the couch.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “Why is no one speaking?”

Robert and Cora were staring at her, eyes burning into one another. It seemed that they might never be able to speak, and even Granny was at a loss for words.

“…Edith, there’s something you need to know,” Mary said. Edith wouldn’t even meet her eyes, seemingly too lost to find the courage to do so. She’d always been the weaker one of the two of them.

Sybil had been the strongest.

When Edith did not make to ask her what she needed to know, Mary realized that Edith was waiting for an apology. But what more could she say?

“… You know I’m sorry,” Mary said.

Edith let out a tiny scoff, rolling her eyes and taking another sip of tea. “Yes, I’d assumed you would be unless you were completely insane.”

“Well, I’m not,” Mary grumbled. “But… I am sorry.”

“Well speak on it later, when we have some privacy” Edith said. Clearly this was not a conversation
she wanted to have in front of their parents, and frankly Mary couldn’t blame her. “For now, why
don’t you fill me in on what’s occurred since no one else seems capable of it.”

“Mary-” Robert began.
Mary cut him off.

“Edith, there’s something you’ve never been told, for the sake of mama and papa,” Mary explained.
“Something that as of late has come to light again.”

“And what is this mystery,” Edith asked. She carefully stroked the rim of her teacup, completely
unaware that her world was about to be rocked.
“I-“Robert tried to cut off Mary again. But in a shocking move of solidarity it was Cora who spoke
up. She reached out and took Edith’s hand in her own, caressing the smooth fingers she found.

“Darling you must try to understand,” Cora said. “I never told you because I couldn’t speak of it
aloud. The pain hurt too much. But something happened and….“ Cora shook her head, steadying
herself with a tiny breath.

Now Edith was enraptured.
“Go on?”

“…Edith, Mary was born a twin,” Cora whispered. There was the tiniest twinge of sorrow in her
voice, laden from the misery that had encompassed her years. Edith froze, eyes wide.

“What?” She set her teacup aside, so that Granny might place it upon the side table for her.

“Mary was born a twin,” Cora repeated. “She had a twin brother… named…” Cora pursed her lips
and looked down to shake her head. It seemed she could not go on.

“James,” Mary cut in. Her mother would not be able to endure the sorrow of it. Mary would simply
have to be stronger. “His name was James. When we were only a few months old, a mad maid
burned him with a hot iron--“

“What?!“ Edith gasped. “But- but where is he-“

“He was kidnapped,” Mary explained. Edith relaxed a bit upon the couch, as if blown by the horror
of her sister’s tale. “He was taken and never seen again… so mama and papa had every right to
assume… they didn’t know what else to do.”

“My god,” Edith put a hand over her mouth. Mary was surprised to see tears misting her eyes; how
could she feel such sorrow for someone she’d never met. “It can’t be true. Tell me this isn’t true-“

“It is true,” Mary said. “But it’s not all bad, not now at least. Because something happened the same
day that you… that you left for London, and as a result…” Mary looked to Thomas, unsure of how
much to say.

Thomas took the cue from her, coughing to garner Edith’s attention. “M’lady, I have a burn on my
arm in the exact shape and position that your brother did… and Her Ladyship and Lady Mary at first
thought-“

“Did Sybil know?” Edith choked out, cutting Thomas off. Once again, she was addressing Mary.

“No,” Mary said. “Listen to what Thomas is saying, please. He’s done a great deal to help our family
as of late.”
Edith touched the corners of her eyes with her fingertips, drying them of the wetness she found there.
“Go on, Barrow,” she finally said when it seemed she was ready.

“As I said, M’lady, Her Ladyship and Lady Mary at first thought that… well…” Thomas shook his head, as if darkly amused. “They thought that I might actually be James, but this was of course not the case. But it inspired Lady Mary to look to me as someone who might be able to help. Lady Mary and I have been investigating your brother’s disappearance for the past weeks—”

“Don’t drag me into it,” Mary scoffed. “You’ve been doing all the heavy lifting.”

“Well as I say,” Thomas carried on. “I was able to discover a great deal about what happened to your brother, and as of today I know a great deal more. Which I now am going to reveal to your family.”

“They say it at once,” Edith urged. She’d never been as friendly with the staff as Mary, and Mary could hear the imperious edge in Edith’s voice.

Judging by the look on Thomas’ face, he could too.

“M’lady,” Thomas looked to Cora in that moment, “I know who took Master James.”

Cora jerked out of her chair, her face suddenly bloodless. “Who?!“ There was an animalistic edge in her voice.

“I have a witness confirming that Laura Carney did sneak back into Downton Abbey—” Thomas said, having to suddenly talk over both Cora and Robert who were groaning aloud in grief. “And stole Master James from his crib!”

Cora fell back upon the couch, crying plaintively. At once, Edith put her arms around her mother while Robert took her by the shoulders. Even Granny, normally so composed, grasped Cora tightly by the knee.

“My baby!” Cora sobbed through her fingers. “God, why my baby?”

And then, something quite remarkable happened.

Though he was a servant by trade, and certainly not a member of the family, Thomas Barrow walked forward and dropped to one knee before Cora Crawley to take one of her hands in his own. There, he held it in a plaintive but firm grasp, and he spoke to her with such gentle tone that even Edith was moved.

“M’lady, allow me to finish,” Thomas said. Cora sniveled, but did not pull her hand away from Thomas’.

“I tracked down Laura Carney’s only know living relative, her sister Alice—“ Thomas paused, seemingly struggling with the truth of that memory. “She told me that Laura Carney has been hiding in Grantham woods all this time. That she’s still out there to her knowledge. Tonight, I’m going to raid the woods. I will find her and bring her to justice.”

Cora slowly stopped growing, her cheeks moist. Edith offered her a handkerchief and she took it to tentatively to wipe her face. In doing so, she was forced to let go of Thomas’ hand. She dabbed at her eyes and cheeks, then shakily re-folded Edith’s handkerchief to lay it against her thigh.

Thomas was still on one knee.

“Thomas, you cannot be serious,” Robert spoke up. He was still at Cora’s side, supporting her unendingly in the face of woe.
“He is, Papa!” Mary said. “But it goes much deeper than that. Thomas, tell them the whole truth about Alice.”

They needed to know. They needed to understand.
Thomas bristled, unsure.

“It’ll create more problems than it solves,” He warned.

“Maybe,” Mary wouldn’t deny it. “But the truth is what is required.”

“Alice…” He paused, “Alice Carney… I found out when I…”

He couldn’t seem to continue on.

“…Alice Carney is now Alice Barrow,” Mary finished. Robert looked about, shocked. Even Carson at the door did a double take.


“She’s his mother, papa,” Mary whispered.

Robert looked like he might be sick.

“I didn’t know it,” Thomas finally said when it became clear that no one would dare speak. “I had to find it out the hard way. But this means that Laura Carney is my aunt, and it’s my responsibility to track her down after all the pain she’s caused this family.”

“Your mother?” Cora wondered. Her voice was thick as if she suffered a severe head cold.

“Yes,” Thomas whispered.

For a moment, Robert digested Thomas’ words. He paced back and forth, taking a moment to gather his thoughts before speaking again. When he did, he did so to Thomas.

“Thomas, you cannot go alone,” Robert said. “The Grantham Woods are deep, and in the dark of night you could run into countless troubles.”

“M’lord-” Thomas groaned a bit, jerking back to his feet and dusting his left knee. “This is no longer a Crawley family problem. This is a Barrow problem and forgive me if I don’t want to get another man involved in it.”

“And if you find her?” Robert asked.

“I’ll drag her back here by the hair,” Thomas growled, “And ring the police myself.”

Robert was impressed, but he wasn’t the only one. Edith and Granny were both looking at Thomas with renewed amazement.

“…Take what you need from Mr. Lynch,” Robert said. Lynch was the groundskeeper, who had everything from shovels to rope in his shed. “Carson, see that Barrow is prepared for tonight.”

“Very good My lord,” Carson’s voice was hoarse. He gestured to Thomas from the door. “Mr. Barrow, if you’ll follow me.”

Thomas bowed his head to Robert in a form of demure loyalty. He then stepped away, passing right
by Mary. But Mary just couldn’t let it go.

She reached out and snagged Thomas’ hand as he passed, holding on tight. Thomas paused, the pair of them so close that their shoulder’s brushed.

“Thomas, be careful for god’s sake,” Mary begged him. “She’s mad… you heard what your mother said. She’ll kill you given half the chance.”

“Well thank god she won’t get that.” Thomas smirked. Mary grinned.

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It was strange to change out of his day clothes to instead put on something more rustic and durable. Like most men of a trade, Thomas owned a pair of trousers that he would hardly consider well-kept. Sensing the woods would be difficult to track through at night, he likewise donned a heavy jacket and the toughest pair of boots he owned. As a result, by the time he was finished and heading out to Mr. Lynch’s office shed Thomas looked ready for a hunt.

Mrs. Patmore had offered him a sandwich, which he was grateful for given that he would not be able to eat normal meals. Lynch was busy, working with gardeners to prune the surrounding edges of Downton Abbey in late summer weather. As a result, Thomas was left to his own devices, eating a sliced corn beef sandwich and hand baked crisps while pouring over a map of Grantham Woods kept in Lynch’s shed.

It had been an exhausting day, with Thomas taking a brief nap after putting up his valise. He would need to be fully rested to search the entirety of Grantham Woods by himself. Even now, he was considering if it were truly possible.

A soft knock came at the door to the shed, followed by Mr. Carson opening it wide to regard him on the stoop.

“Ah,” Carson shut the door sealing them both in. “I thought I’d find you here. His lordship has given permission for you to use both a gun and knife if you so choose.”

“That would be best,” Thomas said. Mr. Carson stepped around Mr. Lynch’s enormous project table, having to squeeze by lest he dirty his livery. In the corner of Mr. Lynch’s shed sat a well-oiled steel safe, which operated by both code and key. Thomas made a scene of looking in the opposite direction as Mr. Carson fiddled with the locks, and only looked back around when he heard the tell-tale groan of its opening.

“Use this,” Mr. Carson offered a revolver, which Thomas took to observe with a wary gaze. It was a Webley Mk VI, firing large .455 Webley cartridges out of a moon clip. Thomas had carried the same kind of pistol during the great war and examined it closely in the afternoon light.

“I should imagine you know well enough how to use one,” Mr. Carson said.

“Had one of my own during the war,” Thomas said. Mr. Carson passed him over an oiled leather holster, and he wrapped it around his waist at once. The buckle overlapped his suspenders, feeling oddly heavy about his waist. He could likewise stow away a heavy bowie knife and did so when Mr. Carson offered him one.

“You’ll want a torch as well,” Carson said.

“No,” Thomas would not need one.
“No?”

“I’m going hunting, Mr. Carson,” Thomas said. “What’s the use of hunting if your prey can see you a mile off?”

Mr. Carson stiffened, put off by Thomas’ use of the term ‘hunting’. “Do you really mean to tell me you had no idea that Alice Carney was your mother?”

“Not a clue,” Thomas grumbled. He made a show of pouring over the maps of Grantham Woods, hoping Mr. Carson would take a hint and leave him alone.

He didn’t.

“You look nothing like her.”

Thomas said nothing, instead tracing a well-known hunting path with his finger. It would lead him deep into the woods. If he kept veering left, it would likewise put him near a lake which he’d dubbed the ‘Witches Brew’.

“You act nothing like her too.”

“For which we are to be thoroughly grateful,” Thomas muttered.

“I’ll leave you then,” Mr. Carson decided. “What hour would you like me to come fetch you?”

“… Midnight,” Thomas said. He wanted the woods to be absolutely asleep, with no rustle of life. He wanted to hear every noise like it were as sharp as the crack of the bell. He wanted to sniff Laura Carney out like a bloodhound. To terrify her just as she’d terrified James Crawley.

“Very well,” Mr. Carson said. “Mr. Lynch has given you permission to sleep on his day cot. I suggest you catch up on some rest. I’ll fetch you when it’s time.”

Well, you couldn’t ask for much more than that. Mr. Carson left Thomas alone with an oddly troubled look upon his face. Honestly, Thomas didn’t know why he was so upset. He wasn’t the one who was going to be spending the night running around in the woods.

…

…..

…

“Thomas.”

He grunted, shifting in Mr. Lynch’s day cot to move away from the hand that disturbed his rest.

“Thomas it’s time.”

A firm shake upon the shoulder roused him completely. Thomas stiffened, opening his eyes into almost solid darkness save for the light of a brass lantern in the hands of Mr. Carson.

He sat up, looking around.

There, upon Mr. Lynch’s project table, was the revolver he’d taken off before falling asleep, along with his bowie knife. Mr. Carson was still in his livery, looking quite tired though he dared not show it. Thomas yawned, rubbing his eyes and pushing his hair out of his face before tugging on his boots.

“Family asleep?” Thomas’ voice was gravely, having only just woken up.
“The staff as well,” Mr. Carson confirmed. “the house is dark. I’m giving you a key to the front door to get in when you return. Kindly put it on my desk, and we’ll say more on the matter.”

“Mmm,” Thomas accepted the key from Mr. Carson. It was an enormous thing the length of his palm and made entirely of brass with an intricately carved handle. He got up from bed and fetched his holster to buckle it on once more. Checking his pocket watch found that it was only two minutes after midnight… the perfect time for mischief.

“Are you ready?” Mr. Carson asked.

“I am,” Thomas said.

He headed for the door to Mr. Lynch’s shed, with Mr. Carson right behind him. The pair of them exited, with Mr. Carson locking the door behind Thomas’ retreating back. Now on the cool lawn, Thomas looked out across the massive stretch of green to regard the starry sky. It was a full moon, with soft beams of pale light illuminating the barest edges of the trees and grass. There was no sound to be heard, save for the sigh of wind as it swept by. Mr. Carson’s lamplight flickered ominously in its glass prison, warning him of straying too far into the gale.

“Good luck, Mr. Barrow,” Mr. Carson said. Thomas didn’t believe him.

He headed off down the grass, completely unaware of Carson watching him. If Carson spoke out a soft prayer, asking for God to show Thomas compassion and strength, Thomas did not hear it.

If Lady Mary stood at her bedroom window, watching Thomas’ flitting shadow cross the lawn, Thomas was not aware of it.

Thomas entered the Grantham Woods, walking slowly and steadily over broken twigs and fallen leaves. By using the hunting paths, he was able to avoid making too much noise, and instinctively followed the trail that he knew best. It was a matter of bearing to the left at all times. This would take him into the heart of Grantham Woods the quickest.

“She’s mad…” Thomas heard Lady Mary’s voice in his head. “She’ll kill you given half the chance.”

He took out his revolver and held it tight.

For a while, Thomas simply walked, ears pricked for even the tiniest sounds of movement. What little rustling he did hear could be easily accredited to the wind passing through the tree tops. Besides that, absolutely nothing stirred. The deeper he walked, the cooler the temperature dropped, until the slightest fog was beginning to roll across the ground. Without the light of a torch, Thomas’ eyes were forced to adjust to pitch black so that he could see where he was going.

He reached the first fork in the trail and took a left.

The more he walked, the more Thomas realized that the Grantham Woods were truly massive. The best way to search them was to simply walk through them. To allow them to wash over you. A stranger stood out like a sore thumb in these parts. It was like the trees and the grass knew that he was not wanted. They whispered as he walked by, tiny woodland creatures asleep in their arms. At the edge of his vision, Thomas spotted the very same shack he’d once hidden Isis in.

He reached the second fork in the trail and took another left.
He was starting to get to a section of the Grantham Woods that was so dark and so deep, he could not move swiftly lest he trip over a fallen limb. Here, the canopy interlocked overhead and blocked out the light of the moon. The only way that Thomas could see was by the shadows of fog drifting heavily over the ground.

He paused, noting some fog seemed to be dripping down, as if over a steep ledge. Curious, Thomas left the trail and tip toed through the underbrush to come upon the rim of what seemed to be a strange basin. Ancient trees the size of motorcars stood tall and proud around the edge of the gully, their massive roots spreading out below to soak up moisture and nutrients from black soil. In their crags, they formed little caves with a clearing in the middle bare of any grass.

Even in the dark, Thomas could make out the site of a cold campfire.

A witch lives here, Thomas thought. He could not say why it came to him, only that the thought was as natural as if it had been planted from a seed.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Thomas crept over the side of the basin, using the limbs and roots of an old oak to slowly make his way down. He had to momentarily put up his gun to use both hands, and the moment that he dropped to the bottom he immediately took it out again.

The hairs were standing up on the back of his neck.

Crouched low, like an animal, Thomas crept around the edges of the basin, cautious for any suspicious movement in the fog. He could now see that several cave mouths were littered around the edges, some made of crumbling rock eaten away by rain and time, others looking weirdly carved by hand.

Something caught his eye; a strange swell in the ground and something lumpy atop it. Thomas pointed his revolver, talking slow deep breathes as he approached step by step.

Five paces in, he paused, recognizing the site of a cross.

It was a tiny grave.

“…Fuck…” Thomas whispered.

He sank to his knees before the grave, all hope fleeing him as he thought of Cora Crawley. Of Mary who had wanted so badly to know the truth. Was this the truth? Was this the end of the story of James Crawley? To die not even two miles from his mother’s arms?

It was enough to make him retch.

Determined to know the truth, Thomas set his gun aside and took out his bowie knife to hack into the dirt. He dug as quietly as he could, forcing up heavily laden rock stiff from years of being still. The more he dug, the looser the earth became, until he was about elbows deep and able to touch something that was distinctly not dirt or stone.

He felt, frightened of touching a bone.

Instead, he caught fabric.

Thomas pulled hard, tugging earth away, and out popped a little wrapped bundle. Queerly enough, the fabric seemed oddly… colored.

Thomas brushed more and more dirt away, till he was able to draw back and see the Grantham coat of arms. What in the hell-?
“What?” He whispered, wondering if he’d slipped into some bizarre dream. He untied the knot in the bundle, revealing it to actually be a blanket that might have fit into a crib or small bed. Inside the blanket lay a black leather journal, looking ripped and torn in the middle as if someone had meddled with the pages. Thomas opened it to the first page, squinting through the dark to see ink scrawled on the inner flap:

_Alice Carney, 1891_

It was a diary.

“…Mum’s diary?” He could not even fathom why such a thing would be hiding in an unmarked grave in the middle of Grantham Woods. And what the hell was up with the blanket? Could it be that at some point in time, James Crawley’s corpse had actually lain her only to be moved? Or had a corpse never lain here at all? Why bury a blanket and a journal unless you never wanted…anyone…to…

_Breathing._

Thomas froze, hands still wrapped tight around the blanket and journal. He could distinctly hear the shallow sounds of someone breathing behind him.

It would be impossible for him to pick up the gun. Thomas slid his gaze to the right and found with icy dread that there was a shadow hulking over him. It was almost impossible to see in the dark…but it was there.

Thomas let the book and the bundle drop, so that it hit the dirt with a soft thud. The shadow jumped.

Suddenly, there were bony hands about his throat, clawing and ripping at his skin till he felt blood running down his neck—! Thomas roared in agony and fury, reaching behind him to grab at fistful of hair and ragged clothe. It a fit of strength he had not known before, Thomas yanked the figure behind him up and over his head, forcing them down on the other side to land clumsily atop the upturned grave and the discovered bundle.

It was a toothless, brainless hag, yowling and screeching as she tried to rip Thomas’ eyes out.

_“An áit thíos atá ceapaithe duit, a dhiabhal!”_ The hag screamed, babbling in a language Thomas could not understand.

He pinned her down to the ground with one hand, struggling blindly in the dirt and the dark for the gun he knew was laying somewhere by his thigh. When he found it, Thomas pointed the revolver right in the hag’s face so that she froze with a maniacal grin in place.

She was mad, utterly raving mad. Dried drool and foam clung to her lips. Yet even as dreadful as she was, as dirty and depraved as she sunk to, Thomas could still recognize the face of Laura Carney from her younger photograph.

“…Hello, aunty,” Thomas growled.
Chapter Summary

The case of James Crawley takes a violent turn, leaving Thomas in extreme danger.

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings for this chapter include minor character death and gun violence.

Dragging Laura Carney back to Downton Abbey was single handedly the most difficult thing Thomas Barrow had ever done.

Full stop.

“Let me go!” Laura Carney screamed as Thomas drug her up the gravel drive. “Let me go, you little bastard! I curse you! I curse your entire wretched family!”

“Rather counterproductive don’t you think?” Thomas grunted. He had Laura about the waist, his arms wrapped around her like a vice to keep her from getting away. She’d already tried to elbow him twice in the nose, resulting in him throttling her until she stopped. Now they were at a stalemate, with her filthy hair catching in his mouth. She absolutely stank, smelling of a mixture between rain water and animal shit. Cor, it was an awful thing to smell up close!

Thomas reached the front door of Downton Abbey and let himself in, having to juggle between holding onto Laura and unlocking the door. He kicked it open, dragging her over the threshold with her hands catching at the sill and frame. She kicked over a side table, sending a crystal lamp crashing to the floor.

“Bastards!” She screamed. Thomas lifted her bodily off the floor, all but throwing her over his shoulder as he stormed to the library. “BASTARDS!!”

He kicked the door to the library open and made a bee line for the tassel bell to ring it several times. He prayed that Carson would still be up, no doubt the man had been waiting for Thomas to return. Laura whipped around and tried to bite Thomas upon the air. In a moment of blind rage and retaliation, Thomas threw his aunt to the floor to straddle her about the hips. He took out his gun and pointed it straight at her face. There, upon the ground with her matted hair spread out like a moldy pillow, Laura cackled with a deep throaty laugh.

“You don’t have the guts,” Laura sneered.

“Are you sure you want to make that bet?” Thomas replied. Laura just shook her head, wriggling beneath his bony hips.

The door to the library burst open to reveal Carson, who was still in his livery but looking decidedly untucked with his tie off and his hair askew. Perhaps he’d fallen asleep in front of the fire.
“What on earth?!” Carson cried out, agog at the scene before him.

“Good morning!” Thomas leered, still keeping his gun pressed to Laura’s forehead lest she try to make a break for it. “Look who I found in the woods! Wake up the family and ring the police—also could you help me tie her up?”

But at the sight of Carson, Laura Carney went into a rage again. She thrashed beneath Thomas, nearly throwing him off so that he had to hold on like a bucking bull.

“You!” Laura shouted at Carson. “Vile snake! Protector of Satan! I’ll kill you with my own hands!” She even tried to seize at Carson, though she was on the ground and could not get both hands free. Carson looked deeply disturbed.

“Oh shuftpup, you stupid woman!” It was a game of tug of war, with Thomas able to fasten his arms about Laura’s neck so that the pair of them could not be parted. Gravity gave way, and Thomas fell on his back with Laura on top. She kicked at the air, fighting to get at Mr. Carson tooth and nail.

But Carson was more resourceful than Thomas realized. He undid a curtain clasp, using the heavily braided rope to loop about Laura’s thrashing arms so that he could bind her hands. This enabled Thomas to roll free without Laura getting away, and he scrambled to grab another curtain tie as Mr. Carson used his full body weight to squash Laura into a visitor’s chair. She had very little choice but to do as he bade.

“Where did you find her?” Mr. Carson demanded in a rush. Thomas threw the second curtain tie around Laura from behind, binding her tight to the back of the chair while she cackled and thrashed. Carson forced Laura to stay still, towering over her like a bear.

“There’s a cave near the heart of the woods,” Thomas said. “She was hiding in it. Tried to get the jump on me, but I got there first, didn’t I aunty?”

To this, Laura just laughed and laughed, her head thrown back to reveal a mouth full of rotting black teeth. “Woods are lovely dark and deep- “she sing songed.

“Christ, you’re a loony,” Thomas grumbled. Laura was succinctly tied up, and both he and Mr. Carson relaxed to pant against the back of the sofa.

“Police- “Carson spoke to himself. He jerked up from the back of the sofa and staggered over to Lord Grantham’s writing desk where his telephone lay waiting. He jiggled the receiver, and began to bark into the telephone:

“Police, as quickly as you can!” Carson snapped. “Downton Abbey!”

While Carson waited to be connected, Laura just jeered: “You’ve porked right up, haven’t you?! I love to watch you walk home every night with Misses Hughes! I knew you wanted to bugger her back in 1890! Did it feel good when you buried your prick in her- “

Thomas pressed the barrel of his handgun directly to Laura’s temple, warning her to continue at her own risk. Laura paused, chewing on her gray tongue as Carson flustered over the phone.

“Send officers at once!” Carson said to whoever was on the other end. “My man has managed to recapture a known escaped convict, Laura Carney! She’s mad! There are women and children in the house! Hurry as fast as you can- yes, thank you!”
He hung up, turning about with a triumphant look upon his aged face.

“They’re on their way!” Mr. Carson declared. “They said to keep her under control no matter the cost. They’re bringing as many of their numbers as they can. She apparently killed two men when she broke out!”

“Hurry and wake the family!” Thomas said. “We don’t have much time! Lady Mary will want to talk to her!”

“Right!” Carson was off like a shot, moving at a speed Thomas would not have aligned with a man his age. This left Thomas and Laura alone, the pair of them staring at one another with the gun still pointed at Laura’s forehead.

She was grinning at him; it unnerved Thomas deeply.

“What?” Thomas snapped. “See something you like?”

“Family first, eh?” Laura tilted her head to the side, so that the tip of Thomas’ gun slid from her forehead to her temple. “How’s your mother treatin’ you?”

“She’s a massive bitch,” Thomas scoffed. “Just like you, my dear little aunty. What would you like me to call you, eh, Aunty Laura?”

A tiny incredulous look slid across Laura’s dirty face. “You actually think I’m your aunt?” she asked.

“You’re my mother’s sister,” Thomas said. “Or have you forgotten that after so many years eating wild mushrooms?”

But at this, Laura just began to laugh and laugh, throwing her head back as if Thomas had told her the gayest little tripe. “You- you sad little fool!”

If there was one thing that Thomas did not like, it was being taken for a mug. Thomas grabbed Laura by the throat, fisting her molded collar tight, and pressed their faces together so that they were nose to nose. Up close, her breath stank like rotting meat.

Laura paused, sensing she’d riled Thomas up again.

“Do I look like a sad little fool now?” He hissed. Laura said nothing in reply, far too wise to bait an angry bear.

“Woods are lovely dark and deep…” Laura sing songed. She was staring deep into Thomas’ eyes, as if trying to uncover something from within him. “I wonder, do you remember me?”

Yet as Thomas opened his mouth to reply, the door to the library burst open to reveal Lady Grantham in a pale pink housecoat. Behind her came Lord Grantham, Lady Mary, Lady Edith, and Mr. Branson. At the rear was Carson, his cheeks flushed hot pink from exertion and speed.

Lady Grantham was the first of the family over the threshold, the one that had suffered the most in lieu of James Crawley’s abduction. As such, she was the one to show the most fervor, the one to look the most deranged as she found Laura Carney tied to her library chair.

“YOU!” Lady Grantham howled, a curled finger pointed at Laura Carney’s face. She rushed over, seeming for a moment to be on the verge of throttling the woman.
“Stay back-!” Thomas held both hands out, one still clutching a gun, stopping Lady Grantham in her tracks. “She’s dangerous even with a gun on her.”

Lady Grantham tried to step around Thomas, tears in her eyes as she shrieked: “WHAT DID YOU DO TO MY BABY!!?”

Laura began to laugh again, her head thrown back. Lady Grantham made to swipe at her, though Thomas kept her at bay. “You BITCH!”

“Cora!” Lord Grantham was reproachful in the face of hearing Lady Grantham curse. It was, admitted, incredibly shocking.

“Tell me!” Lady Grantham shrieked. “Tell me or I’ll kill you myself!”
At this, Lady Grantham made a move as if to take away Thomas’ gun. He held it back, wary of her taking it away to open up a brawl. It was incredibly easy to see her American roots when she was under stress.

Laura just laughed and laughed, delighted by the chaos. “You fools! You absolute fools! My sister had her wicked way with all of you, an’ you think I’m the badden of the lot!”

But they were running out of time. Any minute now, the police would be pulling into the driveway and Thomas might never get a chance to interrogate Laura Carney again.

“What did you do with James Crawley!!” Thomas demanded.

“What do you think?” Laura parried with a grin.

“I think I’m about to fucking shoot you and say that you attacked me when the police showed up!!”
At this Thomas looked to Lady Grantham for an ally,” Will you back me, M’lady?”

“Absolutely,” Lady Grantham hissed, her teeth barred with vengeance. Thomas had never seen her so incensed.

Thomas made a show of pulling back the safety latch on his handgun, pointing it once more at Laura Carney’s dirty face. She just kept grinning.

“I’m giving you to the count of three,” Thomas growled. “One- “

“You don’t scare me,” Laura said.

“Two- “

“You still don’t scare me- “

Thomas looked at Lady Grantham, who nodded exuberantly. Behind her shoulder, Lady Mary watched with a hand over her mouth. Lord Grantham seemed on the verge of vomiting blood again, paranoid as to what Thomas might do.

Thomas aimed at Laura Carney’s feet and fired.

The noise was explosive, so loud and so frightening that both Lady Grantham and Lady Mary screamed. Laura Carney jumped, unable to get away from Thomas but clearly itching to do so. The carpet was now smoking, with a bullet embedded clearly in the floor.

Thomas pointed the pistol at Laura’s forehead. It was still smoking at the mouth.
“Three,” Thomas growled.

“I’m not your aunt,” Laura blurted out.

“Yes, you are,” He snapped. “You’re my mother’s sister, don’t act like we’re strangers.”

“She’s not your mother,” Laura Carney said.

“Oh, for god’s sake,” It was clear that Laura was mental by this point. “Tell me what you did with James Crawley and stop wasting my time!”

“Y’want to know what happened to James Crawley? It’s all the same, little boy. The answer lays in my sister’s basement. My wicked wicked sister…” At this, Laura let out another low cackle of malicious glee.

Thomas blanched.

How on earth had Laura Carney known about the fact that the basement was important to his mother? Had she truly gone down there to smoke, all this time? Or had there been something much worse hiding beneath the Barrow floorboards?

“What are you saying?” Thomas asked.

“I know what she hid down there,” Laura grinned. “Who she hid down there.”

Who.

Thomas was taken aback. “Who?” He repeated. But Laura just started laughing again.

“Were two sisters of country Claire one dark and the other fair- “Laura sing songed. “Both had a love for the devil’s son, but he was meant for the fair one…. Meant for the fair one.”

“Stop singing- “Thomas snapped. “You’re a numpty you know that-?”

“oh, sister oh sister give me your hand, and you may have my house an’ land, oh sister oh sister won’t take your glove I’ll kill the babe you love oh…. Kill the babe you love,” Laura looked down at her lap, muttering to herself.

“Enough!” Thomas snarled. “Lady Mary, do you have any questions for her?”

Yet even as Lady Mary stepped forward with a dark expression, Laura Carney’s head snapped up. She went from raving mad to plain raving, her movements jerky and inhuman as she looked to Lady Mary.

“Mary…” Laura hissed the name. It was like she’d been given a gift of some kind.

Thomas looked to Lady Mary, confused. Yet in the millisecond that Thomas was not wholly focused on his prisoner, all hell broke loose.

The smell of smoke filled his nostrils, with sudden dark plums covering Thomas’ vision. He coughed, waving a hand erratically in front of his face; Lady Mary was screaming-!

Thomas looked around at Laura Carney and saw to his horror that the cords which had bound her to the chair were now smoldering at her feet. Somehow, though logic evaded the act, Laura had managed to free herself with fire. But how-?! Her hands had been bound!
Laura leapt to her feet, a gnarled and twisted finger pointed at Lady Mary as if to curse her. “Diabhal leanabh!”

Before Thomas could seize her, before he could so much as speak, Laura whipped about and grabbed the bowie knife right from his belt. She charged Lady Mary, the knife up and out, as if to carve her from ear to ear!

“MARY!!”
“NO!!”
“Mary watch out-!!”

A cacophony of Crawley voices screamed out, each more terrified than the last, but all of it was overrode by the sound of one final gunshot echoing across the great library halls.

Laura Carney crashed to her knees, only inches away from her target.
The back of her head was blown wide open, rendered into a large fleshy wound by Thomas’ second shot.

Thomas stood, his breathes shaky but his hands oddly steady upon his smoky pistol. He had fired instinctively and had hit his mark on target.

Laura gurgled on a word, but it never came out.
She crashed onto her back, bleeding profusely from the back of the head all over the antique Persian rug underneath.

She was dead.

For a moment, there was absolute silence. Everyone looked on in horrified amazement as Thomas slowly lowered his gun, shaking in the revelation of what he’d just done.

“…Devil’s child,” Tom spoke up in a whisper. In the pervading silence, his voice was unnaturally loud. Thomas looked up and found Tom staring in horror from the fireplace.

“That’s what she said before you shot her,” Tom repeated, for no one had understood him clearly without context. “She was speakin’ Gaelic, my native tongue… Devil’s child is what she said.”

Thomas thought he might be sick.
Across from him, Lady Mary’s night gown was now tinged with blood. Lady Grantham held her eldest closely, shaking in the revelation that she had nearly lost yet another child. Lord Grantham carefully stepped around his wife and daughter, bending down on one ancient knee to feel at Laura’s blood-soaked neck.

Her eyes were staring vacantly up at the ceiling. The smell of smoke was still filtering through the room.

“…Dead,” Lord Grantham confirmed, pulling away so that he would not stain his house shoes with blood. “And God have mercy on her twisted soul.”

The last time that Thomas had killed someone, it had been during the war. For king and country, he’d shot a German sniper in the neck. It had felt right at the time, patriotic too, but now?

Now, Thomas just felt like a murderer. A stone-cold fuck of a murderer who’d had the gall to kill his own aunt.
A member of his family.

*My god,* Thomas thought, sinking to his knees by Laura’s body. *How could I do this to her?*

She’d been completely insane to the point of trying to kill Lady Mary, a daughter of the family he served… a friend. And in that moment, when Laura Carney had dared to attack a woman who had shown him kindness and trust, Thomas had lost his senses. He’d seen himself losing yet another person who’d thought him human. Who’d acknowledged he had a heart and could feel pain.

And it was that he couldn’t bear.

So, I’m a murderer, Thomas mused, but at least I’m not alone.

The yowling sound of police sirens coming up the drive broke through Thomas’ consciousness slowly. When he realized what the sirens meant, he looked over his shoulder at the door which lead to the entrance hall; his heart began to pound wildly in his chest.

There would be no denying his crimes now, no way for him to back out. No way to avoid jail now that he’d killed a man. Christ, even Bates hadn’t gone so far as to actually kill a—

“Thomas- “

Someone was calling his name, but Thomas couldn’t comprehend what it meant until he felt a small but strong hand upon his arm. Lady Grantham was pulling him up, away from Laura Carney’s bloodied corpse. In the same way that he’d come to her in a time of aid, it seemed she now wanted to protect him as well. He doubted it would do much good.

“I have to bring them in, M’lady,” Carson was stumbling over his words. Was it Thomas’ imagination or did he sound afraid?

“Do so, Carson,” Lady Grantham steady in the face of uncertainty. “Let’s put all this unpleasantness to bed.”

Carson left at once, catching Thomas’ eye as he stood in the doorway.

It was clear he didn’t want to bring the police in. That in his own way, he too wanted to protect Thomas. It was enough to bring Thomas to tears.

In the moment between Carson’s return, Lady Mary looked to Thomas with newfound admiration and praise.

“You saved me,” She whispered. There were tiny flecks of drying blood upon her neck and cheek.

“You sound surprised,” Thomas croaked.

“You’re shaking,” Lady Mary ran a hand upon his shoulder and arm, feeling the tremor that ran through his body.

“Well,” Thomas swallowed around a knot in his throat. “I did just commit murder. I’ll swing for it.”

“No, you won’t,” Lady Grantham cut him off. There was a fierce determination in her voice that Thomas could not help but appreciate in that moment.

Yet before Thomas could ask her exactly what she intended to do to help him escape the charge of manslaughter, the door to the library burst open revealing no less than eight police officers.

*Christ,* Thomas thought, all the blood draining from his face. *We’ve really gone and buggered it up*
now, haven’t we boys?

The policeman crowded around the murdered woman like children might a particularly interesting toy, each of them garnering to get a good look over the other’s shoulder. A few looked right put out, while a few more were delighted, each looking for the murder weapon or the murderer in a crowd full of petrified toffs.

“My god!” The first policeman was larger than the others, with a handlebar mustache and a gleaming brass badge upon his chest. Clearly, he was a captain. “Who did this??”

Lady Grantham stepped forward, wrapping her housecoat close to her body to protect her modesty.

“My servant,” Lady Grantham answered honestly, though her voice shook at the edges. “He was protecting my daughter. Carney attempted to kill her with a knife. Look at her hand! She’s still holding it!”

Sure enough, in the bowie knife still lay clutched in Laura’s grip. Beneath her filthy hand a pool of blood was soaking into the carpet to create a grisly background. The captain pursed his lips, examining the knife as close as he dared without touching the body.

“It’s true!” Lady Mary added when no one else would speak. “She was going to kill me; Thomas was protecting me-!” But as Lady Mary gestured to Thomas, the captain straightened up with a gleam in his eyes.

He found Thomas still holding the pistol, and at once drew out his own weapon to point it straight at Thomas’ face.

Christ! Thomas hitched a breath, wishing he could hide behind Lady Grantham again.

“Drop your weapon!” The captain commanded him. Thomas would have dropped his pants in that moment if it kept the police officer from killing him. He dropped the gun at once so that it clattered to the floor in a sickly wet splat.

“Put your hands behind your back,” The captain commanded, reaching with one hand for cuffs while he kept the other out to train a pistol between Thomas’ eyes.

“No!” Lady Grantham begged, prostrating herself before the police. “Can’t you understand, what he did to protect my daughter! He’s not a murderer! He saved my daughter’s life!”

“You cannot do this!” Lord Grantham commanded, even as the captain jerked Thomas over to latch his hands behind his back. The cuffs were tight, burning cold steel that pinched at the sensitive flesh of his suicide scars.

Is this how it ends? Thomas wondered. His eyes were full of shame, averted to the floor lest the family see the tears that clung to his eyelashes. Am I going to jail for this family?

“He saved me from a horrific death!” Lady Mary begged. “I would have been stabbed and left to bleed out on the floor of my family home- how can you think to arrest him??”

“We’re not arresting him!” The captain had grown irate at being badgered. “But I will be taking him in for questioning. Until I know exactly what’s happened, I want him in handcuffs. A woman is dead- “

“A murderer is dead!” Lady Grantham corrected, furious as Thomas was pulled away from the
But the other policemen were still gawking at the dead body of Laura Carney, confused as to why the ropes that had held her were burned upon the floor.

“Cor, look at this!” A second police officer, clearly younger and more inexperienced than the first, bent over to pick up the charred rope. “The ropes branded ‘er skin! It’s like they were set on fire!”

“It wasn’t Thomas!” Lady Mary beseeched. “She set the ropes on fire to get free. We all saw her!”

“How?” A third policeman demanded.

Mercifully, Lady Mary didn’t have to answer this particular conundrum.

“Spark of tinder,” The captain shrugged. “She probably had a match up your sleeve. You’d be amazed what these types can pull.”

“But I though’ Johnson said she was a witch!” The second policeman looked to another, a portly policeman who looked heavily embarrassed at being called out in front of his seniors.

“Well- I mean- “Constable Johnson waffled. “That is- it’s in her file, Captain!”

“Enough!” Snarled the captain. He held Thomas so close that Thomas could feel the body heat emanating off the man. “Peaks, Current, take this body and get a sheet over it! I want it bagged an’ tagged an’ waiting in the morgue by the time I’m finished with this miscreant- “He jostled Thomas by the arm painfully. “An’ take the gun an’ knife to! I’ll want them both dusted for fingerprints.”

At this, he pulled Thomas towards the door. But even as Thomas rounded the sofa, his heart pounding wildly in his ears at the swirling thoughts of jail cells and nooses made out of moldy rope, he was suddenly besieged upon by Lady Mary who flung herself at the head police officer to stop him in his tracks.

For the first time in living memory, there were tears upon Lady Mary’s high cheeks.

“Please!” She grunted out the word through clenched teeth, desperately trying to reel in all her emotion in front of a man she did not know. “Please I beg of you officer, don’t do this- don’t condemn a brave man to die- “

“Get a hold of yourself ma’am!-” The captain was taken aback as Lady Grantham carefully tucked Lady Mary into her arms. Even Lady Edith in that moment seemed terribly sorry for her older sister who now wept upon the neck of her mother. “I’m not gonna’ kill him. I just want to take him in for questioning!”

“Carson, do something!” Lady Mary wailed.

Frankly if tears from an Earl’s daughter counted for nothing, Thomas doubted Charles Carson could sway the law very much. And yet, instead of begging or bartering as Thomas thought he might do, Carson instead carefully walked up to the captain with diligence and poise to say: “If you must take him, I request I may be taken too. I am his superior as the butler of this abbey, and I wish to be present for questioning.”

The captain thought it over for a moment before conceding with a short sharp jerk of the head.
“Fine, follow me to the station,” The captain grumbled. As the pair of them frog marched for the door, Carson turned about to catch Lady Mary’s eye. Though he spoke to her, Thomas sensed that the whole family would be comforted by his words.

“I shall handle this, My lady,” Carson said.
He closed the library door, the last to follow out.

~*~
Case No: 221455
Date of Interview: September 8th, 1926
Name of Interviewee: Thomas Nathaniel Barrow
Interviewing Officer: Constable John A. Bennett
Prepared By: Officer Benjamin Coats
Incident: Murder of Convicted Felon Laura Carney (see case 02

Transcript of Interview

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C. B: Why didn’t you call for aid?
T.B.: I thought I ould do it myself.
C. B.: Laura Carney was an incredibly dangerous woman, and your story only serves to prove it more. By rights, you should have turned your investigation over to us. Now you might be facing charges of your own.
T. B.: I was protecting a lady of the family I serve.
C.B.: You shot a woman in the back of the head.
T.B.: A convicted killer.
C.B.: And now you are the same. Why? Why did you kill her?
T.B.: (note the subject is growing pensive) The woman she was...sweet on her?
T.B.: She believes in me. She believes in me, in my heart. She believes I have one. She believes I can feel pain. That I deserve happiness. I was losing that, losing her, that I couldn’t stand. So maybe I did it...but I did it to save a the only woman who’d ever treated me with an ounce of kindness.
C.B.: You mention that you went to question Laura Carney about the disappearance of James Crawley. Did anything come of that? (note: T.B.: I’m unsure. She mentioned some things, but I’ll need to look at the evidence I’ve managed to pull together to see if anything adds up.
C.B.: I want copies of all your information. Technically the case has been completed by the late Lieutenant of York, but he’s passed on from this life now. His soul. As a private detective you’d be within full rights to take on the case, but that’s not what you are, is it? You’re a servant, investigating...
Downton Village Police Department
Interview Transcript

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C.B.: (cont.) a matter for the family he serves. And as much as I charge you with murder, I know what it is to be loved by a kind woman. What you did, you did to protect a lady of the county from a pain of death. That’s commendable in the eyes of our Earl.

T.B.: So are you saying I’m free to go?

C.B.: Yes. But I don’t want you leaving the country until I clear up all this work. Am I clear?

T.B. gives a non-verbal confirmation of yes.

C.B.: Go on and get out of here. Get back to your precious Lady M...

It’s pretty obvious to me that “Lady” Mary has been having her green with a servant. If Lord Grantham knew he’d do his nut. Chalk it up to like seeks like, I guess. I wonder if that boy of hers is actually Barrows? Also Barrow seems like an emotional fellow. Wouldn’t be surprised if they ran off together and eloped.

- Const. J. A. Bennett
The grass was crisp and wet underfoot; Thomas slogged through step after step, utterly exhausted. About his ankles, a cool fog rolled from valley to dale, coating Grantham county in a gentle down of opalescent dew. It was dawn, hardly six o’clock, and Thomas and Carson were finally back at Downton Abbey after leaving the police station. Both of them were exhausted, not speaking a word as they walked.

Frankly, Thomas was in shock.

He’d shot a woman in the back of the head and had gotten away with it. He’d shot his own aunt; his mother’s sister. He’d committed murder, and yet he was walking free, all because in doing so he’d been protecting a lady of the county. A lady of the peerage whose father had money and influence in Grantham. Thomas had a feeling that if Lady Mary hadn’t been an Earl’s daughter, he’d be swinging from a noose by now.

Thomas paused as Carson turned their path towards the servant’s area. He didn’t want to face the staff just yet, not when there was still blood on the soles of his shoes.

“Mr. Carson,” Thomas paused, his voice as gravely as the pebbles beneath his feet. Carson paused, looking back over his shoulder with saggy eyes. “I don’t want to face the staff just yet. Can I go through the front door?”

“…Just this once,” Mr. Carson murmured. It seemed he understood why Thomas was skittish.

The pair of them changed their course, heading for the front door which was collecting a thin sheen of dew as of yet evaporated by the morning sun. Mr. Carson pulled out the heavy iron key from his striped trouser pocket and unlocked the door to let it swing wide in a groan. Thomas entered into the gloom, but Carson remained out front to fiddle with the lock.

“To bed,” He ordered Thomas.

He doubted he’d be able to stay awake for much longer anyways.

It honestly felt like a dream, or some detached waking reality, as Thomas stumbled up the servant’s stairs to the attics. Had he really shot his own aunt in the back of the head last night? Had he really been up since midnight being interrogated and photographed by Downton police? Had he really managed to escape all charges simply because he’d saved a lady of the county, the daughter of an Earl? What if the police changed their minds and came back in a few hours to cart him to jail? What if when Thomas died, he was sent to hell for the crime of murder? What if for the rest of his life, Laura Carney’s vengeful ghost followed his every footstep to try and drag him to hell herself?

Thomas could not contemplate the answers to these questions. Instead, he sat on his bed and numbly stared at the opposite wall.

In his head, Laura Carney’s voice slicked from wall to floor, like some poisonous ooze saturating into his nervous system.

“You actually think I’m your aunt. You said little fool!”

“I’m not your aunt.”

“She’s not your mother.”

“You want to know what happened to James Crawley? It’s all the same, little boy. The answer lays in
my sister’s basement. My wicked wicked sister…”

What had it meant? Was it the truth, or yet another lie meant to distract Thomas from the real answer as to James Crawley’s fate?

He supposed now he’d never know.

A soft knocking interrupted his gloomy reverie. He did not turn, nor did he even call out to tell his visitor they could enter. The door opened anyways, revealing Lady Grantham and Lady Mary, both of whom were in fresh housecoats with combed hair. It seemed he was not the only one who hadn’t gotten sleep the night before.

“…Are you alright?” Lady Grantham asked. She reached out, and delicately laid her hand upon Thomas’ shoulder.

“M’fine, M’lady,” Thomas said. It was a response made out of habit, not fact.

“You’ve never looked worse,” Lady Mary said. “Are they going to charge you?”

“Don’t think so,” Thomas mused. “Somethin’ about protectin’ a lady of the county. God only knows if you’d been a commoner, I’d probably be swingin’ from a noose by now.”

Neither Lady Grantham nor Lady Mary knew what to say to that.

“… I’m going back to Stockport,” Thomas spoke the words before he even understood what they meant. They seemed to issue from the very depths of his soul. “I’m going to sneak into m’father’s house, and I’m going to get into the basement. I’m going to find out what happened to James Crawley if it soddin’ kills me.”

“You can’t be serious,” Lady Grantham wondered.

“…Laura Carney…” Laying her name was akin to speaking of the boogeyman now. “The woman I murdered… she insisted before I shot her that my mother wasn’t my mother. An’ that the answer to James Crawley’s disappearance was in the basement of my childhood home. I’m extremely serious, my lady.”

Lady Grantham’s hand slipped from his shoulder.

“…Sleep first,” She finally said. “You need to regain your strength.”

This seemed as good an idea as any. Though it was highly improper, Thomas fell back upon his bed, laying his head upon his lone pillow though his feet were still upon the floor.

“I’ll have Carson wake you for the five o’clock train,” Lady Grantham said, ushering Lady Mary to the door. “You can take it to Stockport and wait as long as you need to. I’ll give you some money for the fare.”

“You’re very kind M’lady, but I earn a salary,” Thomas mumbled into his pillow. To be fair, it was the hardest forty pounds he’d ever earned in his life.

“Maybe I want to pay you for saving my daughter’s life.”

“I’ve a feeling being paid for a murder will not put me in high standing with God,” Thomas mused. “Though I’m not exactly the front runner for saint dome given that I am a sodomite.”
It was a shocking word to use in front of a lady, and one that Thomas was certain would give him a thorough lashing from Carson should he ever find out. And yet, Lady Grantham didn’t seem to mind. Her American nature gave her the ability to roll with the punches far better than her English daughters. She smiled at him from the door, offering him sympathetic words in sweet tones.

“Don’t say that,” She urged. “You did an incredibly brave thing.”

“It’s not brave to shoot someone in the back of the head,” Thomas whispered. But he was speaking out of turn now and bordering on impertinence.

“Forgive me, I’m speaking impertinently,” Thomas mumbled. “I’m tired, M’lady. I spent the better half of the night thinking I was going to be hung come morning.”

“Sleep,” Lady Grantham commanded. She turned off the light to his bedroom so that he was plunged into semi-darkness. “We’ll come wake you when it’s time.”

“…Thank you,” Thomas whispered, closing his eyes.

There was a cave in the woods, dark and deep. Like a gaping maw in the heart of the earth. Thomas walked through a muddy cavern that slowly grew tighter and drier. Mud turned to wood. Cave turned to basement. Suddenly, he was coming down the stairs of his childhood home, rounding the corner of the basement to find his mother crouched on all fours before an antique open chifforobe.

He could hear crunching sounds, like she was eating something particularly crispy.

Thomas approached her from behind, reaching out a hand to tap his mother on the shoulder and ask her what she was eating.

Upon being touched on the shoulder, his mother looked around at him with a sharp glare of reproach.

Her eyes were milked.

Her mouth was full of blood, dribbling down her chin.

In her hands lay the corpse of a half-eaten infant—

Thomas jerked instinctively, gasping out as he shot up in bed. Sweat dappled his chest and his brow, his heart pounding at the image of his mother… his mother eating… god it had been horrible.

But he was not alone.

Thomas looked about to find Mrs. Hughes and Anna watching him, unsure. It seems they’d been the ones to wake him up; Thomas wondered if he’d been screaming in his sleep.

“… I came to wake you,” Mrs. Hughes murmured. “It’s time for you to catch your train to Stockport.”
Thomas shuddered and bowed his head. He needed a moment to compose himself after that awful dream.

“I’m amazed you’ll still speak to me, given that I’m a murderer,” Thomas mumbled. Mrs. Hughes gave him a tender smile that Thomas did not deserve.

“You did a very brave thing,” Anna said. “No one downstairs holds it against you.”

“Although I will admit, you did shoot a hole in a four-hundred-year-old piece of oak paneling, so I’m not too pleased about that,” Mrs. Hughes said. Thomas did not appreciate the act of humor.

He stood up, walked over to his chest of drawers, and poured water from his pitcher into a bowl so that he might wash his face of sleep. As he did so, both Anna and Mrs. Hughes watched him.

“You’ve been vacant from downstairs for weeks now,” Anna said. “Everyone’s been wondering about what you’re doing.”

“You’ve become quite the vaudeville performance,” Mrs. Hughes said.


“Gone to visit Mr. Moseley at the school house,” Mrs. Hughes said. Thomas wondered if she was angry at him for killing his aunt. For murdering his aunt.

“How will you sneak into your family home?” Anna asked.

“There’s a window on the ground level,” Thomas said, “It’s small but it leads directly into the basement. If I can break it open and squeeze through, it’ll be my best way in.”

“Can you make it through?” Mrs. Hughes wondered. Thomas was still in his more rugged clothes from running about the woods. Tucked away in a tea tin inside his top drawer lay all the money Thomas had been able to scrimp and save (hardly a lot). He pulled out a thropping for the fair to Stockport and back. He headed for the door to his room, with Mrs. Hughes and Anna following him out.

“If I can’t, then I’ll break in through the back door,” Thomas said.

“But won’t your father hear you?” Anna asked.

“Probably.”

He headed downstairs, with Mrs. Hughes and Anna following him. The pair of them followed him like ravenous vultures, pecking him with questions all the way to the servant’s area door.

“Thomas-!” Mrs. Hughes reached out, pulling him to a halt before he could leave Downton Abbey properly. He paused at the door, re-fixing his jacket a little better upon his shoulders.

“Her ladyship gave me this for your fair,” Mrs. Hughes offered him yet another thropping. Thomas shook his head.

“Already got it,” He pulled it out of his pocket. “From my savings.”

“Well put that back and use this,” Mrs. Hughes pressed the thropping adamantly into his hands so that he would have no choice but to accept it.
“Lady Mary wanted me to tell you that she sends you all her luck and love,” Anna added. That was a gift Thomas wouldn’t hesitate to accept. He smiled, buttoning up the front of his jacket.

“…Tell her I said thank you,” Thomas murmured.

Mrs. Hughes let him out the backdoor. He left swiftly and quietly.

It was a long and quiet ride to Stockport. With two throppings instead of one, Thomas was able to buy himself dinner on the train in trolley in the form of a ham and cheese toastie with a cup of black tea. He was even offered some crisps, which filled him right up.

As he changed trains and began to head around the Liverpool coastline, the sky grew dark and the only light came from his carriage. Thomas tried to rest but ended up instead counting the number of nail heads he could find in the floor and walls. He got to the number 947 before the train began to slow down announcing its final stock in Stockport.

Thomas got up from his worn leather seat, a feeling of unease in the pit of his stomach.

It was nine o’clock at night, and most residents of Stockport were either in bed, at the Guest House having an ale, or heading home. It was easy for Thomas to slip into the shadows; he went generally unnoticed by the exhausted throng. In his drab attire and five o’clock shadow, he blended right in with the sailors who hung about the docks.

Thomas wasted no time. He headed straight for Barrow & Son’s Clockworks.

After what felt like a hundred years away from home, Thomas still knew the route to his doorstep well. It was a matter of taking a left off the high street, winding his way down the alley that separate his residence from the Baxter’s, and then letting himself in the back gate so that he could crouch amongst the weeds and his father’s shop shed. Thomas still knew where the key hung to the shed (it was hidden underneath an unsuspecting rock by the stoop) and let himself in to hide amongst his father’s half-made clocks. There, from the comfort of his father’s swivel chair, he could watch each window in the Barrow household grow dark as time slipped by from ten to midnight.

He would wait until he was absolutely certain everyone was asleep.

Then, he would act.

As the time past, Thomas contented himself with watching the family chickens roost. They were a group of six, homely and attractive hens all tucked away with heads beneath their wings. Once, around 11:30, Thomas stepped outside to take a piss on his mother’s rose bushes. It felt insanely vindictive to urinate on something that his mother adored. After all the hell she’d put him through over the years, it felt good to finally get a bit of his own back.

The chickens slept on, unaware that the prodigal Barrow son had returned.

When it was close to midnight, the final window went dark. Thomas waited for another good half-hour, listening intently to the sounds of his suburban cradle sleeping contentedly.

The church tolled for midnight.

Thomas made his move.

Crouching down on all fours, Thomas rummaged through the bushes that lined the house
foundations to find a slim window which let in light to the basement. It would be a tight fit, perhaps almost too tight, but it was the best shot that Thomas had at getting into the basement unseen.

He fiddled with the window latch from the outside, having to wipe away years’ worth of grime, and began to pull as hard as he could backwards. The window groaned and squeaked, its ancient hinges not wanting to obey. Thomas planted his feet on either side of the window and gave an almighty tug!

The window broke off, causing Thomas to slam flat on his back. With stinging fingers, Thomas tossed the window aside, now proceeding to shimmy through the hole feet first.

He just barely scraped by, causing welts to appear upon his hips and shoulders. As Thomas’ lower back slipped through, he began to flounder on the inside of the basement for a place to stand. He found it upon a stacked sack of flour and rice and used it as leverage to get the rest of his body inside without falling on his face twice.

Once he was inside the basement, Thomas took several deep breathes and listened to the house around him for signs that someone was coming.

All was silent.

Thomas moved again.

The Barrow family basement was crapped, much like the cellar of any middle-class home would be. It was here that his mother did the family washing, as well as storing up enormous quantities of jarred goods for winter. Thomas had been forced into this basement several times for punishment as a child (punishment for what, he was never sure), and knew the layout well. In the middle of the northern wall lay an antique chifforobe, much like the one that Thomas had seen in his dreams. On the outside of the door lay a grimy mirror which offered a foggy view of its spectator.

Thomas took out a candlestick from a dusty cardboard box atop a high shelf and lit it with his pocket lighter. Able to shine light on the basement at long last, Thomas began to ferret about for clues. Yet it became increasingly apparent that there was absolutely nowhere for a clue to hide save in the chifforobe.

And to be fair, he had dreamed about the damn thing.

His breathes caught in his throat as he approached the chifforobe with a sense of dread. He honestly did not know what he would do if he opened the door to find the half-eaten corpse of an infant dead for thirty years.

He reached the door of the chifforobe and attempted to open it, only to have it be locked.

Well, that would never do.

In an attempt to make the door give way, Thomas took the doorknob in one hand and pressed down hard with the other. Suddenly he was in a violent tug of war with an antique wooden door. He could hear it splintering and cracking-!

A bead of sweat dripped down his forehead as he grunted from the exertion. Why were Lady Mary’s eyes coming to him in that moment? How she’d wept in her mother’s arms when Thomas had been taken away. How she’d begged Carson to stop them-

Thomas threw all his weight behind the door, yanking for dear life-!

The door broke busting free so that the deadbolt fell with a sharp clatter to the cobblestone floor.
Thomas gasped for breath, his heart pounding in his chest as he took a moment to recompose himself.

Christ… that had been about as difficult as passing a kidney stone.

Thomas wiped sweat off his brow and picked up his candlestick again to examine the contents of the chifforobe, only to draw back in abject horror as he saw a moth-eaten lacy blanket covering what was unmistakably…

“…Oh no…” Thomas whispered. He covered his mouth with a hand, his fingers trembling against sweating skin at the sight of a mummified corpse.

An infant’s corpse.

It was held upon an altar, surrounded by flowers, letters wrapped in bundles of red velvet ribbon, and even wore a bonnet though it was yellowed with age.

No, it could not be.

After all his hard work, after all Lady Mary’s struggles, was this how James Crawley had met his end? In some filthy, horrid chifforobe left in the dark on his own? Had he cried and screamed until he’d died of starvation or lack of oxygen? Thomas couldn’t even stand the thought.

He fell to his knees and buried his head into his hands. Though it was not wise in a sleeping house, he sniveled into his hands, weeping as quietly as he could in misery at his newest discovery.

How would he ever tell Lady Mary?
How would he tell Lady Grantham?

And what about Lord Grantham or Mr. Carson? How would they react to this news?
How would Thomas ever recover from it.

“What have they done?” Thomas whimpered into his hands, tears stinging his filthy unshaven cheeks. “What has my family done?”

In that moment, the weight of a thousand sins lay upon his back, threatening to crush him like Atlas beneath the monstrous weight of the Earth. He suddenly felt a wave of nausea overtake him, and almost vomited until he managed to take several deep breathes.

It was more than he could stand.

A soft thwap of noise caught Thomas’ attention as a bundle of papers fell from the chifforobe. They’d been resting atop a pile of dried and decaying flowers; with the door now open they’d lost their footing and had fallen out.

They looked like diary entries, or letters of some type. One side of each of the documents seemed to have been hastily torn as if from a book. Thomas wondered if the whole packet had come from a single section.

Unsure of why he even wanted to look, Thomas picked up the packet to untie the red velvet with clumsy hands. He sat his candlestick upon the ground next to his knees, using its dim light to read through ancient handwriting.
May 2 - I buried him today. I buried my heart. My darling, my Thomas. My strength to endure this pain I miscarried in the attic and buried him in the supper. I had to turn down beds with blood between my legs. No one gave a fuck. I wasn’t born a fucking Countess.

May 5 - It doesn’t get easier, only colder. Mother blessed Laura with fire, and me with a mistress’s touch over her two bairns. How come she’s blessed with two sodding heads atop everything else? The girl screams like a banshee, but the boy is a sweet thing. I talk to him as often as I can, but the nursemaid keeps stopping me. She’s such a pedant.

May 10 - I dreamed a shocking dream the other night. I was so tired, but now I feel lighter. Everything is clear to me. He’s mine. He’s always been. She never scream like the girl. That’s why he likes me. That’s why the nurse is mad at me. She’s not mad about me, but about that baby. God gave her two because he wanted me to have one. The boy is mine. I love Thomas. My sweet, wonderful Thomas.

May 12 - Laura is back. She’s hiding in the woods, though I can’t believe it. I don’t believe she managed to escape. Our mother’s blood is deep within her veins. I don’t understand why she’s the one to keep me back. God would never be so cruel as to give that bitch two and take my child. God gave her two because he wanted me to have one. The boy is mine. I love Thomas. My sweet, wonderful Thomas.

May 16 - The plan is almost ready. I’ve knitted Thomas a couple of blankets, to keep him warm while I wait. We’ve picked May 18th. When the moon is new and the dark is still. In lieu of our great plan, I joined her tonight in the woods and sacrificed a lamb name of our guest. I feel stronger now that I’ve drunk its blood. Laura says that to feast on the earth like her, but my heart’s not in it. I don’t want power. I just want to be home.

May 17 - One more night. I cannot sit still. I cannot stop shaking. One more night. A will be home.

May 18 - Eleven at night... I am waiting. Eleven thirty... this night will never end. Eleven forty-six... I just heard Hughes go to sleep. Twelve... I’m going to knit Thomas a pair of booties to take up the time. One... Almost time. One fifty-two... I’m heading down now.
Thomas took one breath.
Then another.

Now, now, he knew at long last what had occurred to James Crawley. His initial assumption had been right on the money, only just a little twisted. It hadn’t been Laura acting with Alice helping… it had been Alice acting with Laura helping.

“My sister had her wicked way with all of you, an’ you think I’m the badden of the lot” Laura Carney had cackled.

She had been right. Laura hadn’t been as nearly as bad as Alice. Alice had been the one to construct the kidnapping; Laura had just been the lacky.

But if this was true, then where was James Crawley now?!

Thomas scrambled to his feet, immediately digging through the other letters that had centered around the infant’s corpse. He grabbed one at random and read by the candlelight;
Alice

you are being ridiculous. you knew from the start that he wasn’t yours. why are you acting so surprised now? if you’re tired of him, get rid of him. I hardly have any paper to write with, and you want me to waste it on this dribble? I’m your sister, your priest. We are of an ancient race, born of our own blood and the devil’s seed. If she could see you whispering over this stupid brat, she would be appalled of you. Pull your head out of your arse and finish that damn job!

Also send me more medicine. My toes are rotting.
Dread filled the pit of Thomas’ stomach. Why had Alice Barrow grown tired of James Crawley? Had she taken her sister’s advice and killed the baby?

There was a scrolled, wrapping and laid upon the infant’s mummified chest. Steeling his nerves, Thomas plucked it up and untied it to read:
May 18th, 1894

It's been three years since I took the brat, and now I've seen the error of my ways. I suppose Laura was right. I really am a fool. I couldn't take the grief anymore. I went back out to Downton Abbey and found the girl and the woods. Laura was there, of course. I gave her rations and medicine. She gave me the corpse of my son. I don't know why I needed it, or I can't bury it, but I have to have it near. I brought him home with me wrapped in my skirts. Now I've put him in the basement in our mother's wardrobe. Nathan fashioned him a coffin out of some pine from the woods. I've set up some flowers and candles. The brat keeps whining for attention. I gave him a smack and sent him to bed early. He isn't the same, he's mine. I cannot hide from the pain any longer. I want my baby back. I want to have to deal with him tonight. All my time, all my love, is for my son. My sweet little Thomas. My true bairn. I've put all my pages and letters here. They are a testament to my love, and to my heart. Maybe one day, when I'm older, I'll look back at these pages again.

Until then, my little angel, know that mummy will always love you.

Alice Barrow
Where only seconds before he’d felt nothing but misery, now wild delirious hope was beginning to spread through him. The corpse wasn’t James Crawley at all! It was the corpse of Thomas’ older brother, whom he must have been named after! It was a Barrow baby, forever entombed by its delirious mother-

“Oh, thank God- “Thomas was grinning like a madman, holding the page tight to his chest. “This isn’t James!”

He looked down at the mummy touching its withered gray hand, “This is my older brother… oh my god- “

But if this was true… if all these letters were true, and this baby wasn’t James Crawley, then that meant that Alice Barrow knew what had happened to James.

The time had come for Thomas’ final interview with the Barrow family, and he would be damned if he left the house tonight without knowing exactly what had happened to James Crawley. Come dawn, this damnable mystery would finally be solved!

Thomas grabbed every letter he could, storing them all in the pockets of his jacket. They would be damning evidence, and he would give them to the police at once. It would result in the arrest of his parents, but Thomas didn’t give a damn anymore. They’d doomed themselves by harming an infant. It was time for them to face the music.

It was like pissing on a thousand of his mother’s rose bushes at once.
He would bring his parents to justice, and finally get revenge on them after all the years of cruelty he’d withstood.

Thomas spared one last glance to his older brother, still enshrined in the decaying crypt his mother had made out of letters and flowers. His moth-eaten blankets had fallen to the side at some point, revealing his shriveled blackened feet.

Thomas didn’t know why he did it, but he gently plucked the blanket up to lay it over the infant as if it were still alive and might catch cold in the night.

“… M’sorry,” He whispered to the infant. “Truly. You didn’t deserve this. You deserved a proper burial.”

There was no point in closing the door to the chifforobe; Thomas had broken it.
He took his candlestick, blew it out, and laid it aside to head up the basement stairs. As he reached the top step, Thomas unlocked the door and swung it open wide-

Only to be confronted with a gun in his face.

Cold, sick dread filled Thomas to the brim as he looked up into the face of his haggard father. It seemed that his rummaging through the basement had not gone unnoticed, and now he was at the mercy of the one man who hated him more than any other.

“’Ello, Tommy,” His father murmured, a dirty leer on his unshaven face.
He pressed the gun to Thomas’ forehead. “Come home for a visit?”
Orphan's Luck

Chapter Summary

An unwitting ally offers Thomas a striking clue to his past, but Lord Grantham is unwilling to hear it.

Chapter Notes

We're finally at the crux of the matter. The next two chapters will get us past 'the hump' as it were. Hold on for lucky Chapter 13.

There were two things that Thomas Barrow knew for certain.

The first was that Alice Barrow, his mother, had stolen James Crawley with the help of her sister Laura Carney, and that she would be the one to know where James was now.

The second was that if he died at the hands of his own father, Lady Mary and the rest of the Crawley clan would never know the truth about their missing loved one... and that, Thomas could not abide.

“No sudden movements,” Nathaniel Barrow was a thin but dominating main, with a grizzled jaw and glowering amber eyes. Thomas was forced to keep his hands at eye level lest his father shoot him; the torn pages of his mother’s diary were sweaty and sticky beneath his vest pocket.

“Where is she?” Thomas demanded.

“Who?”

“Your wife,” Thomas could not even bear to claim her as a family member now.

“Sleepin’,” His father said, which made sense since it was technically in the middle of the night. “Why are you in the basement?”

“Oh I duuno, Da, I fancied a bit of peach jam in the middle of the night-“

It had been years since Thomas had seen his father, and in that time, he had not managed to forget just how volatile and sharp his father’s temper was (particularly when confronted by sass). Yet it seemed that Thomas was a glutton for punishment, willing to step on his father’s toes just to get a reaction.

He got one alright.

Nathaniel Barrow snapped, grabbing Thomas tight by the collar and yanking him clear off the basement step to slam him against the wall of the family kitchen. The resounding impact knocked all the breath from Thomas’ lungs as his father pinned him against the wall with an elbow to his throat. There was a murderous, bitter look in his eyes, the kind that Thomas knew boded nothing but ill.
“I always hated it when you called me that,” His father hissed.

“Then you shouldn’t have buggered m’mother,” Thomas croaked out, his father’s arm pressing hard against his windpipe so that his voice was like a wheeze.

He hocked a loogy and spat right in his father’s face.

“Gye-!” Nathaniel dropped his son to the ground, scrubbing furiously at his cheek and eye. Thomas staggered up, searching left and right in vain for something to protect himself with. He saw a cast iron skillet sitting in the butler’s pantry and yanked it out of cold soapy water to brandish it at his father. Between them, an unlit hurricane lamp on the counter was their sudden victim. Nathaniel raised the gun, wary, but did not fire. They were at a standoff, with Thomas able to duck beneath the kitchen island if needs be.

Thomas saw his opportunity and seized it, sucking in a deep breath to bellow at the top of his voice: “ALICE! ALICE BARROW! GET DOWN HERE YOU THEIVIN’ BITCH!”

Nathaniel was taken aback. “What did you call m-“

“Child robbers!” Thomas seethed, pointing the frying pan like a judge might his gavel, “That’s what you two are. Child robbers!”

Nathaniel went white. For whatever reason, he was shaking his head; was it Thomas’ imagination or was his father turning green as if ill? “Don’t drag me into it, boy-“

“An’ don’t you act dumb!” Thomas parried. There was absolutely no way that his father was innocent in this. “ALICE GET DOWN HERE!!”

The stairs which lead to the upper loft where the family slept were suddenly illuminated. A long slender shadow was cast on the wall: “Nathan? What’s going on?”

It was his mother; she was awake.

“I found the boy in the basement!” Nathaniel shouted for his wife, his gun still trained on Thomas. “I’ve got a gun on him! Ring the police!”

“What?!”

Alice thundered down the stairs in her housecoat and slippers, whipping around the corner and hurriedly tying the sash of her coat. She was frazzled, gray hair falling in her face as she staggered to a stop upon the scene. She looked from her husband to her son, horrified at the standoff. “What on earth is going on?!”

“You!” The mere site of her filled him with such loathing that Thomas could not stand it. Oh, how he wanted to strike her down! To make her miserable! After all the wicked, awful things that she had done to James Crawley, Thomas would see her pay. “You vile harpy! You witch! You took James Crawley from his mother!”

Alice sucked in the tiniest breath, a sudden true terror filling her dark eyes. She clutched at her neck, as if trying to keep her breath from forcibly leaving her body.

But Thomas would not stop. Not now, and not in a million years. Oh, if he could he’d die raving at her! “You ripped him right out of her arms, just to fill your own! And then you had the gaul to want to give him up! You tried to hide the evidence of your crimes, but I know everything now.”
“I-“ Alice tried to speak, but Thomas overrode her at once.

“it’s too late!” He wouldn’t hear a word of it. “Far too late! Call the police on me now if you like, but I’ll tell em’ everything!”

Alice stuttered, choking on words she could not finish. She looked to her husband for support but found Nathaniel wary, his grip on his gun slackening. It seemed that calling the police would not be the Barrow’s best line of defense.

“And what of the other child in the basement-?!“ Thomas threw a hand out to gesture at the open basement door. “What of the one you keep wrapped beneath the sheet?! Christ, you couldn’t even be bothered to put him in a grave?! Had to keep him the basement like an extra jar of-“

“Shuttup!” Alice screamed, stamping her foot. It was clear that her lost son was a raw blistering wound even after all of these years. “Shuttup, you devil! I should have never let you live!”

But Thomas didn’t care. Even if his mother had strangled him in his pram, it still wouldn’t change the fact that she’d abducted James Crawley.

“You stole James Crawley, like a goddamn thief in the night,” He advanced around the kitchen island towards his mother, so that she panicked and took several steps near her husband to gain protection. It would do her very little good.

“You and your wicked bitch of a sister! You stole him right from his pram, ripped him out of the arms of the mother who loved him! Of the twin sister who needed him! Do you have any goddamn shame?!“

Alice couldn’t handle the heat of Thomas’ interrogation. She broke down, burying her palms against her eyes to hide her tears. They were ugly, noisy things, and they stirred no pity in Thomas’ frozen heart.

“Oh it’s the rope necklace for you!” And how glorious it would feel to watch her swing. To know, for once in his life, that he’d done the right thing. “If It’s the last thing I do, I’ll see you hanged for this!”

“L-Laura will protect me!” Alice quaked.

Ha!

“I killed Laura last night,” Thomas said. So shocking were his words. So horrifying, that they rendered Alice’s tears to a pause. She looked up, her sodden cheeks blotchy and her eyes wide.

“…What?” She whispered. She shook her head, unwilling to believe it, but Thomas just kept talking. It felt cathartic, to finally get back at the woman who’d made his life hell.

“That’s right,” He grinned as he said it. “I killed her with these hands,” He offered them up, wishing in that moment that there was still blood dripping from them. “And now, I’m going to make you pay for what you did to the Crawley’s!”

Alice looked to Nathan, silently imploring him to do something.

Thomas knew his father was going to shoot a split second before it happened and dove to hide behind the kitchen island.

The gun shot exploded close to Thomas’ left leg, and he jerked his legs to his chest just in case before taking off running around the kitchen island.
His father and mother followed, both intent on killing him.

The front door would be double bolted as an insurance against thieves. Thomas’ only hope of getting out alive was to go for the back door which was infinitely weaker. He threw himself against the back door, using the whole of his body weight to bring down the flimsy sliding lock that kept it shut.

Glass exploded near his ear, cutting him on the temple as he rolled over broken wood and skittered onto rock. He got up, but not quick enough-!

Nathaniel aimed, fired, and struck Thomas in the left shoulder.

Thomas yelped in pain, fire spreading through his left arm- oh God how it hurt! Like knives and needles were twisting beneath his skin, branding him with his father’s hate!

But that shot had been close. Too close! If his father had been able to aim only a little bit higher, he would have managed to shoot Thomas in the neck or head!

Thomas took off running, flying out of the back alley like a bat out of hell to around the corner of the high street and take off into yet another alley. He did not know if his parents were following him but did not stop to look back. The back streets of Stockport were narrow, dank, and filthy from sewage. Thomas crouched low beneath a trashcan, hiding as best he could till he heard the sounds of two people running past.

Not even daring to breath lest he be discovered, Thomas waited a good few minutes more before poking his head back out.

He was alone, but he was also shot and bleeding… he needed a doctor.

There was only one doctor in Stockport.

Dr. John Hudson could be found on Wind Mist Road, which lay in the center of the town perilously close to the church. Normally, Thomas would have been much too frightened to get that close to Stockport’s religious center, but desperate times called for desperate measures. He had to get the bullet out of his arm, the sooner the better, and if memory served him right Dr. Hudson was one of the very few men in town he wasn’t a complete and total twat.

Christ, Thomas only hoped that he hadn’t left town.

Sneaking back out onto the high street, Thomas ran the opposite way towards Christ Church where a paved side road took a visitor down several flights of steps into a sub-level that offered little more than a tea parlor and a doctor’s office. There were no lights on in Dr. Hudson’s flat above the office, but Thomas did not care. He pounded on the door, ringing the doorbell too just for good luck. God, but what if the man wasn’t in town?!

I’ll have to leave Stockport and walk on the tracks to the nearest station, Thomas decided, even as he continued to pound on the door. Maybe if I’m lucky, I’ll be able to find shelter until the five o’clock train.

A light clicked on in the back of Dr. Hudson’s office. A long shadow cast a deep plume upon the waxed wooden floor.

“Help me!” Thomas croaked, his voice hoarse from shouting and near strangulation. “Help me, I’ve been shot!”

More lights turned on. Thomas was relieved to see that it was still Dr. Hudson, though his beard was grayer and there were heavy lines around the corners of his eyes. He was in a housecoat, a cap over
his thinning hair, and carrying a candle lamp to show him the way. He set his candle aside, unlocking his front door hurriedly so that Thomas could fall over the stoop.

Thomas gasped on one knee, falling before Dr. Hudson to hold his left arm tight. Blood was now soaking from his wound, pooling at his elbow so that his whole upper arm was dyed crimson.

“Help,” He groaned. “Help me, I beg you-“

“Dear god! Thomas Barrow?!” Dr. Hudson pulled Thomas to his feet, relocking his front door only to peer cautiously out the foggy glass into the night. “Who did this to you? Are they still out there?”

“…M’parents,” Thomas moaned. Dr. Hudson bristled, looking down on Thomas with an ugly sort of pity. “Please… help me.”

Dr. Hudson did not have to be asked twice.

He took Thomas to a visitation room in the back of his office, turning off the lights as he went so that they were only guided by the candle. “I don’t want my neighbors getting suspicious,” Dr. Hudson explained as he helped Thomas to sit in his visitor chair. “The less they know the better. Take off your shirt, lad.”

Thomas felt like he could not move his left arm. He used his right hand to clumsily undo his buttons, with Dr. Hudson helping him to remove his outer jacket and vest. As he did so, papers fell to the floor. Dr. Hudson picked them up, confused.

“What I got shot for,” Thomas croaked, closing his eyes momentarily as spots burst in his vision.

“Who shot you? Was it Nathan?” Dr. Hudson was fastidious, pulling out a surgical tray from within an antique cabinet to begin prepping for bullet removal.


Instead of continuing on with conversation, Dr. Hudson wholly focused on the task at hand.

“The bullet seems to have missed any main arteries. You’re quite lucky,” Dr. Hudson praised. “I have nothing to offer you for pain; whiskey, perhaps?”

“And do it,” Thomas grunted. He’d already had a bullet removed from his hand before. He was under no illusions as to the gentility of this surgery.

Dr. Hudson had to be slow, using a pair of forceps no larger than a finger to gently trace the bullets path. Of course, the whole process was riddled with fiery pain till Thomas was cursing and spitting on Dr. Hudson’s name.

“Mary mother of God!” Thomas yowled.

“Nearly there-“Dr. Hudson was practically digging for gold at this point. Yet just when Thomas felt he might pass out from the pain, his head buzzing and his lips numb, Dr. Hudson exclaimed “Got it!” And pulled the forceps back.

Out popped a bloody, ugly little ball; mercifully no cloth seemed to have been torn in the act. Dr. Hudson examined Thomas’ bloodied shirt sleeve, pressing the clothing flat to see if any clothe had been torn. Examination complete, Dr. Hudson sat the bloodied bullet aside to wash his hands and pluck up a needle and thread. Thomas relaxed back in the visitor’s chair, a dappled sheen of sweat salting his brow.
“I’m sorry about all that you’ve been put through,” Dr. Hudson murmured. “Truly, I am. Losing your family, then being thrown out of another home? That’s orphan’s luck I suppose.”

For a moment, Thomas was so exhausted by pain and emotion that he could not properly register what Dr. Hudson had said. But the more that Thomas reflected on Dr. Hudson’s words, the more something stuck out to him. But what?

“What was that?” Thomas mumbled, opening one bleary bloodshot eye. Dr. Hudson seemed embarrassed, but why?

“Well, I mean…” Dr. Hudson paused to snip off a trail of thread so that he might pick up gauze instead and begin wrapping Thomas wound. “You know the saying. Orphan’s luck? How they always seem to have it worse than anyone else?”

“… I suppose so,” But the words hardly applied to him. Right?

“She’s not your mother,” Thomas could hear Laura Carney’s voice in his head. Why had she said that?

“I’m sorry,” Dr. Hudson paused to adjust the trail of gauze, making sure it was adequately tight against Thomas’ upper arm. “That must seem very crass to you.”

“Why should I mind?”

“Well, because you are one,” Dr. Hudson said.

“One what,” Thomas couldn’t connect the dots. Nothing was making sense.

Dr. Hudson was clearly conflicted. He finished wrapping Thomas’ arm in silence, mulling over his words with care as he put away his soiled surgical tray and washed his hands yet again. As he dried them upon a tea towel, Dr. Hudson sat across from Thomas in a spare visitor’s chair to address him frankly.

“Thomas…” Dr. Hudson pursed his lips and took off his half-moon spectacles, “Do you really not know?”

“Know what?” His throat felt painfully tight.

Dr. Hudson put his glasses back on and rose from his chair. “Wait here,” He said. “There’s something I think you need to see.”

He left, allowing Thomas a moment of reprieve. Thomas used it to put back on his shirt, though his sleeve was tacky with dried blood. To hide it, he put on his jacket; his left arm felt heavy like lead. Thank god it wasn’t the arm of his dominant hand!

Dr. Hudson returned, holding a heavy manila folder. It was dirty and crumpled, as if it had been shoved in the corner of a waterlogged box for far too long. Dr. Hudson re-took his seat, opened it to the first page, and offered it over to Thomas who accepted it with his right hand.

It was an adoption file.
“…. I don’t…” The words were spoken through numb lips. Words flashed past his eyes, aged
“I don’t understand.”

He looked up at Dr. Hudson, who was still regarding his with utmost pity. “What is this, Dr. Hudson?”

“… It’s your adoption certificate,” Dr. Hudson finally replied.

Thomas blinked; he could not summon the strength to speak. It was like the whole world had quit turning.

It could not be. It simply couldn’t be.

Attached to the file was a tin type photograph of an infant, swaddled in rags with a burn mark on his arm. The infant was awake, blinking bemusedly up at whoever was taking his picture, and had a head full of inky black hair. Beneath the child’s photograph was the inscription:

Adopted Name: “Thomas Barrow”

“You’re not a Barrow, son,” Dr. Hudson said. At this, he leaned in and clasped Thomas’ hands in his own as if to show him kindness. “You’re adopted. You were brought here, to this very office, when you were a wee bairn. I guessed you to be about eight months old, an’ you had a horrific burn on your lower arm. Alice Barrow found you abandoned at the edge of a gypsy tent sight in the woods near Grantham. Downton village, is what you’re looking for.”

“I don’t know what you’re saying, sir,” The more he repeated it, the more he could deny it even though his brain was screaming from the strain. All through it, he just kept hearing Laura Carney’s voice in his head.

She’s not your mother.

“Son, listen to me,” Dr. Hudson took the adoptive papers out of Thomas’ hands, laying them aside so that Thomas would not have to deal with them. “You’re not biologically related to the Barrows. Your real parents, we think they might have been gypsies. They lived in the woods of Downton, in the county of Grantham.”

It could not be.

He jerked from his chair, scrambling at papers to clutch them all to his chest. He needed to go, he needed to get out of Stockport and never return. He wanted to run as far as he possibly could, as far as it took to get away from names like Barrow, Grantham, and Crawley.

Because it seemed that Thomas was not a Barrow.
That he was from Grantham.
And god help him… he might even be…--

“I have to go-“ Thomas babbled.

“Son, you’ve been shot!” Dr. Hudson pleaded. “For god’s sake, you cannot go out now. The Barrow’s could be looking everywhere-!”
But Thomas did not care. He left Dr. Hudson’s office in a muddle, terrified as he made a bee line for the shop door. Dr. Hudson was right behind him, trying to hold him back on his one good arm.

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know-“

“What will you do-?”

“I don’t know!” Thomas shouted it, his agony echoing off the walls of the doctor’s office.

For a moment, the pair of them simply stood there, with Thomas on the verge of an anxiety attack holding a locked door handle. Then, Dr. Holden carefully peeled Thomas’ hand off the door to guide him by the shoulders back towards his office. Thomas went with him, too numb to register what was happening and too exhausted to even care.

“Sleep here, tonight,” Dr. Holden said. “And in the morning, you can decide what to do.”

It was as good an idea as any, and frankly Thomas did not have the mental capacity to make decisions for himself any more.

That night, Thomas found it impossible to sleep. His life seemed to be stretched out on an ever-thinning thread, disappearing into nothing just when Thomas needed to get back to the source. The very tapestry of his nature, so convoluted and abnormal, seemed now to make perfect sense to him. All the sign posts that had been read in a foreign language were suddenly clear, as if a fog had been pulled back to show him a wooded glen where before he’d thought only of barren wastelands.

He hadn’t looked like a Barrow because he wasn’t a Barrow.
He hadn’t acted like a normal boy because he wasn’t a normal boy.
He enjoyed the Grantham woods because he had come from the Grantham woods.
He was a homosexual because his parents, whoever they had been, were gypsies.

He told himself these things, over and over again that night, to keep from thinking about the other. It hawked over him like a vulture, threatening to gobble him whole if he dared think about it too much. It warned him that while the excuse of being an orphan was good and well, it did not hide over the fact that something was askew regarding the missing Crawley heir and Thomas B-…. Well, he supposed his name was just Thomas now.

He wasn’t a Barrow anymore.

James Crawley had been abducted in May of 1891, and he had been brought forward to Dr. Hudson for adoption by Alice Barrow in June of 1891. Try as Thomas might, he could never recall there being another little boy in the house. His only sibling… well- she wasn’t really his sibling was she?

The only other child in the Barrow household had been Margret. She’d been a Barrow child by birth and had also been good friends with next door neighbor Phyllis Baxter. As a matter of fact, Phyllis was ten years older than Thomas… so if anyone really ought to know if there had been another little boy, it would be Phyllis. She would have remembered, surely.

Because if there hadn’t been another little boy…
Then that meant…

But Thomas dare not complete the thought, not even in the sanctity and privacy of his own inner mind.
Instead, he waited until the sun rose, and slipped quietly from Dr. Hudson’s home to walk in somber silence back to Stockport Station. He left behind nothing save for a note of thanks, alerting Dr. Hudson to Dr. Clarkson’s practice in case he needed to forward any other medical files.

He was resolved to never return to Stockport again.

Thomas did not have any other clothes, and so he was forced to wear his bloodstained shirtsleeves where everyone could see. Women regarded him with abject horror, avoiding him on the train. Men watched him warily, not allowing their children or fiancés to get too close. Thomas sat huddled in a third-class compartment, hiding from the rest of his fellow travelers for four hours until he arrived back at Downton village around ten o’clock.

From there, Thomas walked back to Downton Abbey one miserable footstep at a time. As soon as he was able to slip from the path and walk through Grantham Woods, he did so. It felt oddly right to hide amongst the trees, wounded and sticky with dried blood. His arm hurt horribly, and ought to have rightfully been in a sling. He would have to make an appointment with Dr. Clarkson as soon as he was able to continue healing his arm.

As Thomas took shelter in Grantham Woods, he tried to imagine his parents walking amongst the leaves. Would they have roamed in a caravan, clad in rags and selling woven bracelets by the side of the road? Would they have hunted fox and rabbit to survive, using primitive tools and hand forged knives? Had Thomas been born beneath the stars, his naked heated flesh hitting fresh earth before feeling the comforting touch of another human being? And why had he been abandoned by his parents? Had it been because of the mark on his arm? Perhaps their superstitious nature had warned them of any abnormality.

But Thomas had been eight months old when Dr. Hudson had seen him for the first time… so why had his parents waited eight months to get rid of him if they were superstitious of birth marks?

Downton Abbey cast deep shadows in the morning sun, throwing Grantham Woods into premature gloom. Thomas stepped from the brush to begin a long sloping trek up the hills that surrounded the estate, his heart beating unnaturally fast as he clutched his adoption papers tight.

The letters. The journal entries. All of it would be a bombshell to the Crawley family.

Yet before Thomas spoke to the Crawley family, there was one last person that he wanted to interview. Someone he really ought to have interviewed at the very start, if he was perfectly honest with himself.

Thomas reached the servant’s area yard and knocked on the back door with a clumsy hand. His left arm hung like a deadweight at his side, with his right holding all the papers lest they fall to the ground and become soiled. His nose was running from the walk in the cold; he had to take several deep sniffs, and felt light headed when the door finally opened to reveal Mrs. Hughes.

She was taken aback at the state of him.

“Mr. Barrow!” She did a double take at the sight of blood on his coat, “Is that blood-?! What on earth happened to you, you look dreadful-“

Thomas pushed past her, stepping inside to the warmth and comfort of Downton’s servants hall. When Mrs. Hughes tried to take his coat from him, Thomas warned off her needy hands.

“In the servant’s hall,” Mrs. Hughes kept trying to hold him back. “Thomas, tell me what’s happened to you right now or I shall ring Dr. Clarkson-”

“Already been to a doctor-”

“But why did you have to go in the first place?”

Thomas didn’t answer her, pulling away to stumble down the hall. He found the servant’s hall mostly empty, save for Ms. Baxter who was mending several feathers in one of Lady Grantham’s many walking hats, and Andy who was in the middle of polishing a large silver soup tureen. Mr. Carson was at the ledger, registering activity for the day, and paused when Thomas entered the room with Mrs. Hughes on his heels.

At the site of blood on his coat, Mr. Carson stepped away from the ledger to try at take Thomas by the upper arm.

“Come to my office,” Mr. Carson commanded. Thomas shook his off, side-stepping around the aged butler to look Baxter in the eye. She was startled to find him standing there, and immediately put down her hat work to address him.

“What have you been at?!” Andy demanded. “Is that blood on your arm-”

“Did you know?” Thomas cut across Andy, his voice grated and rough from a sleepless night and a horrid gloomy morning.

“Know what?” Baxter asked. There was clear tension in her face, as she spotted Thomas’ blood-stained shirtsleeves beneath his coat. “What’s happened to you?”

“Oh come on, you know what-“ Thomas was losing his patience. He was too sleep-deprived to think clearly or remember his voice in the servant’s hall. ‘Have you known all this time an’ said nothing?! You’re ten years older than me, so you’d a been ten years old when I showed up in Stockport!”

He almost began to cry at this and had to hurriedly turn away so as to wipe at his eyes. He didn’t want Andy to see him cry.

Baxter was speechless.

“Thomas, what are you saying?” Mrs. Hughes asked. “Why are you in such a state, you look like you’ve had to fight for your life-”

“What is going on?” Mr. Carson demanded. “What did you find in Stockport to put you in such a state?”

“An bloody your clothes!” Andy added from the corner of the room. No one made to address him.

“…I thought I killed my aunt,” Thomas croaked, turning back around to look Baxter in the eye. “But I didn’t, did I?”

Baxter’s face fell.

For a moment, there was nothing but silence as Baxter considered her words and Mr. Carson fretted at her elbow. Finally, Baxter shook her head and confirmed what Thomas already knew: “No.”

“No.” Thomas hissed the word, wishing he could scream it in that moment.

“Thomas, tell me what has happened,” Mr. Carson demanded.
“Oh I’ll tell you what’s happened-“Thomas gave another mighty sniff, pushing past Mr. Carson again to storm up the servant’s stairs. “I’ll tell you all what’s happened! I’ll tell the whole ruddy world what’s happened!”

“Thomas!” Mr. Carson thundered after him as he fled up the stairs. “Thomas, come back here at once-!”

Thomas reached the top of the stairs and shoved the green baize door open to head in the direction of the library. Mr. Carson was hot on his tails, and should he stumble at any point he was certain Mr. Carson would drag him either to the attics or his office.

“Thomas, you cannot go before the family so poorly dressed and with blood on your clothes!” Mr. Carson tried to grab Thomas by the arm, but Thomas managed to rip himself free, grabbing the door handle to the library and fumbling with the latch. “Thomas, listen to me-!”

“Leave me alone-!” Thomas cried out. The pair of them practically fell over the threshold, suddenly given a wide audience of Lord and Lady Grantham, who were clearly going over estate papers with Lady Edith and Lady Mary. At once, the family looked around, dismayed to find their butler and footman acting in such a scandal.

“Thomas!” Lady Mary jerked out of her seat, setting aside a stack of yellowed papers to take him in hand. Mr. Carson was still waffling about, trying to hide Thomas’ disheveled state from Lord and Lady Grantham. “What on earth has happened to you?”

She paused noting his shirtsleeve inside of his jacket. “My god! You’re soaked with blood! Carson call for Dr. Clarkson-“

“No-“ Thomas stepped aside, needing a moment to clear his head. He didn’t want anyone to touch him, and when Carson reached out to try for yet another time, Thomas jerked back with an angry cry.

“Don’t touch me!” Thomas shouted. “Give me a moment for pities sake!”

Carson was taken aback and dropped his hand at once. Even Lady Mary was silent as Thomas took several shuddering breathes.

“Did you find anything in Stockport?” Lady Mary asked.

Lady Grantham rose from the sofa, coming around Lady Mary’s side. “What about James?” She asked.

Silently, Thomas handed Lady Mary the entire stack of papers. Lady Mary took them to begin reading at once. Lady Grantham read avidly over her daughter’s shoulder.

“I need to sit down,” Thomas croaked. “I feel light headed.”

Carson guided him by the shoulder to sit on a visitor’s chair, while Lord Grantham and Lady Edith were left wondering at the fringe what was going on.

“Barrow tell me exactly what has occurred,” Lord Grantham said. At his elbow, Lady Edith fluttered nervously, twisting at the fringe of her beaded pink frock.

“…I got back into the Barrow house,” Thomas felt like he was recounting a year in his life, and not the last twenty-four hours. “I broke into the basement, an’ I saw a chifforobe locked up tight…
Looked suspicious so I broke it open.”

He shook his head, still haunted by the awful site of the dead Barrow baby. “It was a crypt. For a… for a mummified infant.”

Silence fell.

Lady Grantham and Lady Mary both stopped reading, each of them watching in abject horror and fear as Thomas summoned up the courage to go on. “An’ at first, I thought the worst. I wept on that dirty floor. But then I saw the journal entries, and I read them. And I realized the truth.”

At one, Lady Mary flipped through the stack to take up the journal pages. She read through them a tiny hitch in her breath alerting Thomas to her realization.

“This is…. The diary of your mother?” Lady Mary asked.

“Not exactly,” Thomas croaked. “But it is the diary of Alice Barrow.”

Lady Mary continued to read. “It says here that Alice Barrow miscarried a baby while she was a maid at Downton Abbey, and buried it in the forest? So that must have been the grave you originally found… but then… “Lady Mary trailed off. Her eyes went wide, a hand coming over her painted mouth as she reached the crux of the journal’s contents. “Oh my god!”

“You had a baby, an’ she wanted one,” Thomas spoke to Lady Grantham, though he dared not meet her eyes. There was too much emotion within him. Too much fear and hope. “So when her sister broke out of prison, Alice begged her to steal your son. An’ so she did it, I thought that Laura was the bad one, that Alice was the helper, but it was the other way around. Your son was abducted by Laura Carney on the orders of her sister, Alice Barrow. She gave Alice the baby in secret, and Alice left the abbey to return home to Stockport.

“But… but it says here that things went wrong?” Lady Mary wondered. “He isn’t the same, he isn’t mine, I cannot hide from the pain any longer. I want my baby back-“

“So she goes back to the forest, to Grantham Woods, digs up the grave, hides the evidence of her crimes, and brings home the original corpse to keep it in the chifforobe. That was the mummified baby I found, not James Crawley.”

“But then, what happened to my brother?” Lady Mary demanded in a panic. She paused, however, upon finishing the letters and turning to Thomas’ adoption file.

The photo had caught her eye, and she held it up. “Mama! Papa! Edith, look!”

And now all the Crawley’s were clustered around Lady Mary’s elbow, staring delightedly at the image of Thomas as an infant.

Thomas could not meet their eyes. He did not want to admit it. He did not want to even imagine it. His face suddenly felt terribly hot.

“My baby!” Lady Grantham cried out, taking the picture from Lady Mary to hold it up to the light. “This is my baby!”

“It’s James!” Lady Edith said in amazement. “And he’s okay! Look-“

“No-“Thomas shook his head.
“The wound hasn’t healed on his arm, look-” Lady Grantham was showing Lord Grantham, her voice stumbling. “This must have been taken right after Carney abducted him-”

Lord Grantham was yet to speak, his face like stone. Thomas couldn’t tell if he was furious or not.

“This is it!” Lady Mary said. “This has to be it!”

“No!” Thomas shouted.

The babble died down as each member of the family looked at Thomas in shock and upset. He’d never screamed at any of them before.

“That cannot be your son!” Thomas snapped, jerking out of his chair to run an erratic hand across his eyes.

Too many thoughts. Too many horrid thoughts.

“But… but why not?” Lady Mary implored.

“… Because that infant is me,” Thomas ground out.

Silence.

Lady Mary looked down at the adoption file, reading it intensely with Lady Edith and Lady Grantham hovering at either of her elbows.

Lord Grantham wasn’t looking at the document. Instead, he was staring at Thomas, glaring rather. He looked ready to set Thomas on fire if only someone would hand him a match. Beyond them all was Carson, clearly afraid. For the first time in living memory, Carson seemed eager to protect Thomas from Lord Grantham, and not the other way around.

“… I got caught, by Mr. Barrow,” Thomas explained. “The man who I thought was my father. An’ he shot me.”

“What?!” Lady Mary gasped. Thomas gestured to his left arm, which still hung useless at his side.

“I managed to escape the house with my life, but I had to hide,” Thomas explained. “There’s only one doctor in Stockport, an’ I had a bullet in my arm, so I ran to him for aid and managed to wake him up. He took the bullet out of my arm, and when I told him what had happened… he decided to tell me a secret. That I was adopted.”

Thomas looked up at Mary.

Her eyes were watering, on the verge of spilling over as she held Thomas’ picture close to her chest.

“I’m not a Barrow,” Thomas finally said. “So at least I know I didn’t shoot my aunt. Just some random nutter in the woods.”

“But-“ Lady Mary sniffed, fumbling with Thomas’ adoption application. “It says here in these papers that she brought you in, in June of 1891! June! So surely you would have been in the house at the same time as James-!”

“Yes,” Thomas said.

“Then can you remember him?!”

“No,” Thomas said. “I’ve thought an’ I’ve thought, but I can’t remember another little boy. God help me, I’ve tried though… I don’t know what to tell you.”
Lady Edith took the picture of Thomas from Lady Mary, holding it up to the light. There was a peculiar expression upon her face, as she looked first from Lady Mary to Thomas and finally to Lady Grantham. It was like she was forming a bridge between the three of them, building up evidence like stones.

“… No, I don’t think you would have,” Lady Edith agreed. “Because… I think there only was one boy.”

“What are you saying, dear?” Lady Grantham asked. Lord Grantham was still silent, his cold disposition sending out an aura of horrible gloom.

“Think about it!” Lady Edith urged her mother, gesturing with Thomas’ photo as she spoke. “These adoption papers say that you were found by the woods in Grantham!”

“Yes-” Thomas could not deny it.

“That you had a burn mark on your arm! That was healing! Wrapped in gauze!”

“Yes.”

“Now, these papers say she stole James in May!” Edith took Alice’s journal entries from her mother to hold them with the opposite hand. “But that by three years in, she didn’t want him anymore.”

“Yes.”

“Thomas how did Alice Barrow treat you, growing up?” Lady Edith asked.

Thomas bowed his head in shame. “Beat me, ignored me… treated me like dirt.”

“For god’s sake!” Lady Edith exploded, her eyes misting with emotion. “Look at yourself, Thomas! Look at Mary and look at yourself! James was her twin! Now look at your appearances in the mirror-“

“Edith-“Lord Grantham growled, but Lady Edith cut him off.

“Look!” Lady Edith grabbed her sister by the arm and pulling her over towards Thomas. He suddenly felt like a rabbit caught in the gaze of a hunter’s gun. Lady Edith forced Lady Mary and Thomas to stand side by side, so that they were practically pressed arm to arm.

“What are you-“Lady Mary asked, but Edith cut her off.

“Look at yourselves next to one another,” Lady Edith implored.

So, they did.

Thomas turned to look at Lady Mary, the pair of them still pressed arm to arm. Her nose, her eyes, even the shape of her mouth… all of it was so familiar to him. Like he could have painted a perfect replica on a canvas. Lady Mary was gazing at him with such obvious longing that it physically hurt to witness. The tears in her eyes were misting, clouding her vision to where at any moment Thomas thought they might fall and wet her rosy cheeks. But Lady Mary was strong, strong in a way he had only ever know internally before. Nothing, it seemed, could take her out without her consent.

And Thomas could respect that.

A sudden knock upon the library door gave everyone a pause. Thomas noticed Lady Mary wiping her eyes, though he said nothing about it. At the door, Ms. Baxter poked her head in, looking terribly
nervous but determined. Carson waved her off, but Baxter was persistent, tiptoeing in to close the
door to the hall.

“Baxter,” Lady Grantham addressed her with a weak and strained voice.

“M’lady, forgive me for interrupting,” Baxter began. “But there’s something I need to say to the
family and to Mr. Barrow both. Mr. Barrow has been working outside of the abbey and he’s kept his
work very secret, but Mrs. Hughes told me just now what’s been going on… and I feel that there’s
something that needs to be said, because I was the Barrow’s next-door neighbor.”

Lady Grantham sucked in a breath, the weight of Baxter’s words hitting her with full force as she
brought a hand to her eyes as if to massage away pain. “Oh! Of course, how could I possibly
forget?”

She dropped her hand, renewed with a vigor, “Baxter, you must tell me everything you know about
the Barrows. Do you remember when Thomas was brought home as an infant?”

“I do, M’lady,” Baxter replied. “Mrs. Barrow was very good to me, and she let me hold Thomas. He
was around eight months old at the time.”

“But there had to be another little boy!” Thomas blurted out. “Did you ever see a little boy, or hear
one? Anyone besides me!”

“…It was only ever you, Thomas,” Baxter said. “Only you-“

“God-“Thomas groaned, sinking back down into the visitor’s chair.

“…Thank you, Ms. Baxter,” Lady Mary spoke up. “Will you please leave us now, so that we may
speak privately as a family?”

“Of course, M’lady,” Baxter left at once, uneager to outstay her welcome. The closing of the door
was akin to the slamming of a jail cell.

If there was no other boy… then…-
But he couldn’t even imagine it, not now or ever. It terrified him too much-

“That—“Lady Grantham was on the verge of saying it, but it seemed she lacked the nerve. “Then
does that mean…”

And suddenly, in her moment of need, Lady Grantham looked not to her husband (who was still
glowering silently in the corner and refusing to meet anyone’s eyes) but her butler.

To Carson.

“Carson,” She croaked. “Help me understand.”

Carson was kind, unbelievably kind in such a moment of abject horror. He reached out, and with
weathered trembling hands clasped Lady Grantham’s in his own. In that moment, she looked upon
him with the adoration of a saint.

“Let us consider what we know,” Carson said, his tone as gentle as if he was speaking to a child.
“Thirty years ago, we know Laura Carney broke out of prison two weeks after her arrest and
returned to Downton Abbey to abduct Master James on behalf of her sister Alice. We know now that
Mr. Barrow was adopted a few weeks after Master James was taken. We know that Mr. Barrow has
found several incriminating documents stating that Alice Barrow knowingly raised Master James as
her own son… but Ms. Baxter has just told us that there was only ever one little boy in the Barrow household… and that was Mr. Barrow. We finally know that Mr. Barrow has a mark upon his arm that is identical to the mark branded upon Master James in his infancy… and that he looks strikingly like Lady Mary.”

Lady Grantham turned to Thomas.
Her bottom lip was quivering; there were tears in her eyes.

She reached out a hand to him, as if hoping to take him in her arms-

“Enough.”

Lord Grantham had finally chosen to speak, and it was with icy indifference that made Thomas’ blood run cold. Lady Grantham stopped on a pin, turning about to look at her husband like a stranger. Even Lady Mary and Lady Edith were shocked.

“Papa?” Lady Edith blubbered.

“Lord Grantham,” Carson was determined to have his say, “As your butler, and the man who held your son when he was but an hour old, I urge you to invest in a paternity test. It is my opinion that Mr. Barrow- Thomas- is your lost son.”

“I won’t believe it!” Lord Grantham shouted. Thomas had never seen him so mad before, and suddenly wanted to hide somewhere dark and deep, anywhere to get away from such a frightful man.

He began to inch backward, trying to put as much distance between himself and Lord Grantham as possible. Unfortunately, it would not be enough.

“You don’t have to believe it, my lord,” Carson urged, “You need merely take the test-“

“They’re not fool proof!” Lord Grantham snarled.

“I won’t comment on a Doctor’s profession, my lord, but I seriously advise you to speak to Dr. Clarkson-“

“Well I won’t!”

“Well I will!” Lady Grantham shrieked. Tears fell from her exhausted eyes as she railed herself against her beloved husband. “As god as my witness, I will do it!”

“Cora, this nonsense has to stop-“ Lord Grantham tried to take Lady Grantham into his arms but she would not have it. She actually pushed him back, refusing to let him hold her as she turned away.

“No, what has to stop is your constant disengaging!” She cried out. “This is happening, Robert! It might be happening thirty years too late, but it’s happening, and I need you to take notice! Your family needs you to take notice! Look at the evidence piling up around you! Look at what Thomas and Mary have found!”

But he wouldn’t. Lord Grantham turned away, raking a manic hand through his curly graying hair. He was on the verge of exploding-

“You cannot deny that something is deeply amiss,” Carson urged. “That the evidence is too much to
“Listen to what we are saying, Papa!” Lady Mary begged.

“No,” Lord Grantham would not look at her.

“Papa!” Lady Edith wailed. “Listen to them! They’re right and you know it—”

“ENOUGH!” Lord Grantham roared.

The women fell silent, scandalized to be screamed at by their patriarch.

In the cold, swelling silence that had suddenly befallen his ancestral library, Lord Grantham had turned from a man into a monster. He had been pushed too hard on a topic he’d long ago sworn cold. He’d been forced again and again to relive a pain that was too deep to handle properly. Now, he was aggressive in his determination to not feel pain again, and stormed forward in a sudden shocking move to grab Thomas tight by the collar.

Lady Grantham gasped, her hands at her throat. Carson raised a hand as if to physically restrain Lord Grantham!

Thomas waited for the blow to fall, unable to even breath. But nothing happened.

Lord Grantham was not a violent man, and for all his sharp edges he would never strike a servant. Lord Grantham seemed to realize just what he’d nearly done, and let Thomas go at once.

Thomas took several steps back, frightened to be in the same room as the man.

A gypsy father had terrorized him.
And now…?

“…For three years…” Lord Grantham spoke in a whisper, but it was clearly audible in a silent room. “For three years night and day, I looked for my son. I looked, and I prayed, and I fought, and I wept. And it came to nothing. I cannot endure anymore. Perhaps Cora can, but it is because she is stronger than me. It is clear to me now, that my family will no longer listen to me when I tell them that I am suffering, and so I take my fate in my own hands.”

Lord Grantham looked at Thomas, with a murderous malicious gaze. “I want you out of this house, this very moment—”

“Papa!” Lady Mary gasped. Lord Grantham spoke over her, his voice growing with every syllable.

“And I never want to see you again!” He shouted at Thomas. “Am I clear, man?! Ever again! I curse your name! I curse every inch of your heinous, abnormal flesh!”

“Papa, stop!” Lady Mary shrieked. Finally, the tears fell, for the first time in front of her family. She wept openly, horrified to find her father so demonically transformed.

But Lord Grantham could not stop. If he stopped, he would have to grapple with the facts; after twenty-seven years of enduring bitter silent grief it seemed that he could not go back and relive the horror of losing a child again.

“Until this very day, I did not realize how much I hated the site of you,” Lord Grantham hissed at Thomas. “How much your existence has plagued this house! Now get out of my house, you vermin, and may God have mercy upon your wretched soul if you ever step foot in it again!”
“What you saying?” Lady Grantham croaked. “Robert, how could you say such horrible things to him, after all he’s done-?”

“NOW!” Lord Grantham would not dare look at his family. He was too ashamed, too emotional to face their distress. Only Thomas was privy to see the tears sparkling in Lord Grantham’s eyes. To see the way that his bottom lip quivered as he became the man he most despised. The man who was cruel for no reason.

Thomas took a step back, and then another.
He turned and headed for the door.

“Thomas!!”

Lady Mary broke away from her family, grabbing him so that he could not leave. She barred the way from the library, desperate to keep him close. To see her now, so frightened and feeble, made Thomas feel sick to his stomach.

“Thomas, please!” She wept openly, grabbing onto him though it made his wounded arm smart. She pressed her head to his sternum, her tears falling upon his soiled vest. “Please, I beg of you. I beg of you, don’t leave me! Don’t leave me alone again!”

But he ahd no choice.

With gentle, loving hands, Thomas carefully detached Lady Mary from his chest. He held her back, taking a moment to stroke her upper arm; to feel how smooth and soft her flesh was. How familiar.

“… Forgive me, Mary,” It was the first time he’d addressed her informally. “I’ve failed you.”

He could bear the shame no longer. He left.

AS the library door closed on Thomas Barrow’s retreating back, it left the Crawley family rocked to their core. Lady Mary crumpled, falling back into her mother and sister as she shakily sat down upon the same visitor’s chair Thomas had only recently occupied. Even Carson did not know what to say.

Lord Grantham was ancient, ragged in those horrible moments. By allowing the beast within him to come out and play, he’d forever disgraced himself in front of those he most loved. The fiery guilt was licking at his insides, baking him till he felt he might shatter from the stress of it. In his mind, all he could see was the last time he’d seen his son alive.

He’d been asleep in his crib with Mary at his side, the pair of them camped down underneath their shared blanket.

He’d had his thumb in his mouth.

Spurned by the memory, unable to bear the pain of thinking about his lost son again, Lord Grantham snatched a crystal whiskey glass from the counter and hurled it as hard as he could against the stone mantle place.

It shattered upon impact, glass raining down onto the carpet to lay in a heap of glittering shards.
The Mourning Period

Chapter Summary

A police order moves the Crawley’s towards an inevitable conclusion. Meanwhile, the family must gather their strength to carry on.

Chapter Notes

No trigger warnings in this chapter. Posting it early because I'm doing a show tomorrow (I made handbound books) and won't be able to post.

Next chapter's the big one folks.

Thomas Barrow’s disappearance from the abbey was like a cold wind sweeping through the empty halls.

He left, just as Robert commanded, and did not put up a fuss on the way out. With him, he took only the papers he’d carried, and the clothes on his back. The only trace of his presence after that day had been a notification from Mrs. Hughes that Thomas had requested the rest of his investigative findings be handed over to him. Cora had told no one of this request, instead silently ordering Baxter to be the one to hand off the documents. That day, Cora had sat and watched from her sitting room as Baxter had walked with arms laden down in papers, her slender shadow disappearing into the woods of Grantham. When she returned, it was almost time for Cora to change for dinner, and she brought with her poor tidings.

Thomas was ill, desperate, exhausted, unable to do much besides bunker down in the woods and hand his findings over to the Downton Police. His arm was in dire need of medical attention, infected and too sore to move naturally. Cora had tried to reach out to Dr. Clarkson, but it was in vain. Wherever Thomas was hiding, Dr. Clarkson could not find him, and Cora highly doubted Thomas would ever return to Downton Abbey unless he was forced.

That ugly, baited tension had not left with Thomas. It had remained, soaking into every floor and wall so that Cora suddenly felt like she was abiding in a tomb instead of her home of thirty years. Robert had shamed himself and did not know how to regain his confidence in his family. He was shaken, as a man, and hardly spoke a word even to Carson or Tom. Instead, he spent a great deal of his time sitting in the library, almost in the exact same spot he’d been in when he’d shouted at Thomas to leave the abbey. He sat there, staring at nothing, seemingly swimming in memory until Carson offered him tea or Tiaa whined for a walk.

Mary was another story altogether. The loss of Thomas was a deep and personal wound to her; in losing Thomas, Mary had become inconsolable and unwilling to connect with her family. Thomas had filled a strange void within her, one which Cora was growing to understand had little to do with the balance between servant and mistress. Instead, Thomas had seen to understand her, sooth her, and ground her with a sense of purpose. With him gone, all of Mary’s old demons had come out to play again. She was moody, prone to fits of rage and jealousy, and refused to socialize. Instead, she
spent a great deal of her time wandering listlessly about her home, a glassy and unfocused expression upon her face.

Cora knew better than to test her eldest daughter’s lack of humor.

Three days after Thomas had been forced from the safety of Downton Abbey, an unexpected visitor came to call, or rather a group of visitors. On a cloudy and windy fall afternoon, five police man came walking up the gravel drive; amongst them were an Inspector and Chief Inspector from York who had requested a personal audience with the Crawley family.

Of course, Cora had been raised to attend to guests with courtesy and tea, but the police officers required neither of her. Instead, all they asked was for her compliance with a rather unusual request.

“I understand if this subject is difficult for you, Lord Grantham,” Chief Inspector Wilson ranked as the senior most police officer in the room (indeed, in the county) and as such all other men were silent in his presence. A tall, foreboding officer with a large gray mustache and gleaming brass buttons upon his chest, Chief Inspector Wilson kept his hands clasped behind his back as he went toe to toe with Robert.

After shaming himself in front of his family, Robert was unable to speak on any subject, never the less the subject of his son.

“I don’t think you do,” Robert stood like a hawk, guarding his writing desk as he glared at Chief Inspector Wilson.

“This is no longer a private matter,” The Chief Inspector spoke with smooth authority. “It is officially in the hands of York police, and as the Chief Inspector, I am the final authority on what must and must not be done. The original inspector of this case has passed, god rest his soul, and so his cold cases fall to me.”

Robert scoffed, rolling his eyes. “So, what would you have us do, Chief Inspector? What hoop should my family jump through next? Or should I simply put on a frock and do a jig for your amusement- “

“Robert,” Cora hissed from the couch. How she detested when he spoke out of turn!

“You can keep your frock, Lord Grantham,” Was Chief Inspector Wilson’s smooth reply. “But I will require you to submit a blood sample for analysis.”

“No,” Robert turned away, storming back and forth in ugly stomping lines upon the library floor. “No, I shall not do it! They’re not fool-proof!”

This was, admittedly, a difficult issue. Even Cora, the more determined of the two, could not help but feel fretful when she wondered about the limits of science. But it seemed that Chief Inspector Wilson had been expecting this and had his answer ready.

“In the past five years, York Police have developed a relationship with the London School of Phlebotomy. All police offices have,” The Chief Inspector explained. “A Dr. Stevenson of the school has agreed to help in solving this case and has told me confidentially that if we can amass blood samples of varying strengths and shades, they could be compared. Mercifully, five such samples can be obtained.”

Robert paused; for the first time in what felt like months, Cora noticed a sense of tension draining for him. He was undeniably curious, even daring to draw closer though he still would not look at Cora (his shame was overpowering even now).
“How?” He asked.

“Dr. Stevenson has requested a blood sample from the Dowager Countess of Grantham, Lady Grantham, yourself, Lady Mary, and Lady Edith. In particular, we absolutely must have a blood analysis from Lady Mary because the subject of our investigation was her twin. Any blood sample from her would be a fool proof method.”

“But- “Robert seemed to be searching for problems at this point, “But what if they’re wrong? What if something doesn’t add up?”

“Lord Grantham, we have three living generations of the Crawley family,” The Chief Inspector said. “Dr. Stevenson feels that we have a very high chance of finding out if Barrow is your son.”

“What is your personal opinion on the matter?” Robert asked. “Given that you’re a man who’s seen a great deal of the world.”

“I don’t have opinions,” The Chief Inspector shrugged. “I have facts. And the facts are that Dr. Stevenson has requested six blood samples to be sent to his laboratory for analysis at once. I trust we have your support in this matter?”

The smart thing to do, the English thing to do, would be to agree and let the matter solve itself. But Robert was past being smart, too emotional to think rationally as he said, “And what if I don’t consent? Will you hold me down and force the blood from me?”

Chief Inspector Wilson was taken aback. “Lord Grantham, if I had a child and lost him but was given a second chance to reclaim him, I would jump through every hoop, put on every frock, and dance every dance.”

Robert blushed, turning away so that the policemen could not see the obvious shame written upon his aging handsome face.

Cora had had enough of this trauma. She was ready to put the matter to bed once and for all, even if it ended a dream in the process: “We will do as you say, Chief Inspector. You have my word.”

Chief Inspector Wilson eyed her with obvious gratitude, tipping his hat in a professional curtesy. “Thank you, Lady Grantham. I bid you both a good day.”

~*~

It was difficult for Cora to engage in polite conversation with her mother in law, but in times of trial such as these it was necessary to gather one’s allies.

She’d donated a blood sample, just as she’d promised to the Chief Inspector. She’d taken Edith and Mary with her, the three of them giving blood before returning to the abbey to lay down for a much-needed nap. Upon waking up, Cora had rung for Baxter to run her a bath, and afterward had gone to town to visit the Dowager who had been scheduled to give blood the day prior. As far as Cora know, Thomas Barrow had likewise given blood, but no one had seen him in town. In fact, no one had seen him anywhere, and Cora was starting to wonder if he was going to survive the gap until the truth was outed. Dr. Clarkson certainly hadn’t painted a picture of enthusiasm.

“I can’t tell you anything specific, but I will say he’s doing poorly,” Dr. Clarkson had mentioned to
The Dowager sat upon a chair as aged and refined as her, carefully stirring a cube of white sugar into her cup of rosehip tea. Cora watched her, unsure of how her mother-in-law would react to such a violent spill of information.

“… Well,” the Dowager sighed. “I can’t say that I’m fully surprised. I did see this sort of thing coming when Barrow started helping Mary poke her nose into the past.”

“You saw the evidence piling in Barrow’s favor?” Cora wondered.

“Well look at the pair of them!” The Dowager gestured with a withered hand. “Mary has always been difficult, and Barrow’s just the same as her. Stand them up side by side and tell me they aren’t physically similar. And the burn mark… we can’t forget about that.”

“Do you think he’s James?” Cora asked.

“If I didn’t think it was possible, I wouldn’t have given blood,” The Dowager reminded her. Sure enough, an ugly piece of plaster had been tacked to the underside of her bony wrist to hide a needle mark. “I’ll have you know I was a good soldier for the fight.”

Cora smiled, rubbing her own wrist. It had been rather painful, if she were honest.

“The truth will be worth the pain,” she said. “but can I count on you to back my corner with Robert? He still won’t give blood.”

“Honestly,” The Dowager huffed, looking rather like an irritable sodden owl with wiry hair and bulging purpling eyes. “Does he think that this will all just blow away? He’s as moody and unpredictable as his father.”

Lord Grantham had been a difficult man, as Cora remembered him. Constantly prone to fits of ennui, which he satisfied by leaving the Abbey late in the night so that he might frolic in foreign pubs. Cora could remember the first time she’d met Robert’s father, and how she’d felt unnerved by his stare.

He’d been drunk and had spoken to her about politics; it had been the first time in her life a man had asked her opinion about such matters.

“I don’t know what to do,” Cora admitted. “Will you help me?”

“Yes,” The Dowager said. “I think I will.”

And if that wasn’t a victory, Cora didn’t know what was.

~*~

In the cool and quiet of her ancestral bedroom, Mary lay upon her bed fully clothed and played with the frayed edges of her plaster.

She’d felt such a sense of ugly victory when she’d given blood; the pain had thrilled her, had made her feel like she was making tangible progress in getting Thomas back. His absence was an ugly wound within her, eating at her day and night. She could tell no one without risking scorn, and so she’d begun to withdraw into herself where she could mourn Thomas’ loss in private.
Every so often, long past words of his would drift through her mind and comfort her.

*Go back to sleep, don’t worry about me.*

Even now, weeks later, Mary could still see in her mind’s eye how Thomas had stood against the outline of Stockport in the moonlight. His lean back had cut a sharp curve, forever embedding itself deep into her mind as he’d smoked by the window.

A timid knock upon her door was an unwelcome intrusion upon her solitude, and she closed her eyes as the door opened to reveal Anna with a fresh frock over her arm.

“I’ve come to dress you for dinner, my lady,” Anna said.

“I don’t wish to do,” Mary mumbled.

“The Dowager has come to sup and wishes to speak with you,” Anna said. “What shall I tell her?”

Papa she could put off, and happily. Granny? She’d have better luck avoiding a tiger.

Sighing, Mary sat up and slumped off the bed to sit frumpily at her vanity mirror. Slightly cowed, Anna laid the fresh frock upon Mary’s bed to begin brushing her hair. After laying down all afternoon, it had lost its usual shape.

For a moment there was an unnatural silence as Anna brushed her hair and sorted out the tangles. Her belly bump forced her to stand slightly out from Mary so as not to brush against her.

Mary felt like screaming.

“…Have you seen him?” Mary asked Anna. Anna pursed her lips, seemingly chewing over a difficult answer.

“No, M’lady,” she said. Mary was crestfallen as Anna continued. “Mr. Carson thinks that he’s in the woods surrounding the abbey. Mrs. Hughes tried to find him the other night, but it’s like he’s vanished into thin air.”

Vanished… How queer that Thomas should disappear just like James. And yet-?

“He’s James,” Mary whispered. She spoke more to herself than Anna in that moment, sensing Anna would be an unwilling conversation partner should Mary continue much further. “We held hands once on the train. And for a moment, I felt whole. He’s James, Anna… I know it.”

Mary glanced up and found Anna bristling in the mirror. She was incredibly uncomfortable.

“Mr. Carson has forbidden the subject, M’lady,” Anna explained. “I’m not supposed to talk about it with any of the family.”

“But you think me mad?” Frankly, Mary had never cared about what another soul thought of her, but for some reason over time Anna had come to occupy a different territory. She was pure, gentle and bright. Much like Sybil had been, Anna was the sort of person whom another ought to aim for.

Anna shrugged; Mary could sense that she was afraid of being honest “I’m terribly sorry for the family, M’lady. None of you deserved this.”

But Mary had learned to read between the lines, and knew what Anna was trying to say. She didn’t
care about Thomas, not really, and she didn’t seem to want to imagine him in any sort of peril because it would make her uncomfortable. She didn’t want to care about him. Whatever chance Thomas had once had to have a place in Anna’s enormous heart was now over and gone.

It made Mary feel sick to her stomach.

“You don’t care about him,” Mary said. Anna paused mid-brush stroke; it was unnerving to see the guilt written upon her beautiful face.

“I’m not a fool, you know,” Mary warned her. She pulled away from Anna’s tender hands, rising up to walk to her bedroom window so that she might observe the darkening lawns. Far in the distance stood the massive stretch of Grantham Woods. Somewhere, on this chilly evening, Thomas was wandering through them alone and injured.

“You, Mr. Carson, Mr. Bates… all of you really. You never have sympathy for him, do you?” Mary wondered aloud. “Not even for a moment. It must be terribly hard for him, to know he has nothing, and no one.”

Anna was defensive, “If he has nothing and no one, M’lady, it’s because of his actions.”

But Mary could only see herself in the same situation. Could only see how awful she’d been to Edith, and how frankly she deserved the same. Nothing and no one.

“I don’t wish to be dressed tonight,” Mary said. “I’ll go down as I am.”

“My lady-“

“Please,” Mary snapped. She didn’t want to hear any more excuses.

Anna fell silent, embarrassed and somber. For a moment, she simply stood there still holding Mary’s pearl handled brush. Then, she sat the brush down and left in silence, closing the door gently behind her. For all the tension in the air, however, it felt like Anna had slammed it.

~*~

Mary hadn’t changed for dinner. Cora watched her eldest from across the dining room table, noting how terribly depressed and deflated she looked. Even Edith, who normally had a hard time sympathizing with Mary, seemed terribly sorry for her. The pair of them sat side by side, and every so often Edith would glance at her older sister to see if Mary was eating.

She wasn’t.

Robert was having just as much a difficult time, brooding over a glass of port and ignoring his sumptuous turkey feast. The bird lay ignored in the middle of the table, carved by the attentive hand of Carson who every so often made rounds filling wine goblets.

The Dowager and Tom were the only ones truly eating. She paused, glaring irritably at Robert who was still brooding.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” The Dowager snapped, setting her fork down with a sharp clink. “Robert, this nonsense must stop. You are the only one left to give blood. You must do so at once and put this
“I refuse to pander to such idiocies,” Robert growled. It was a defensive tactic and Cora knew it. Robert didn’t think it was idiotic, not really. He was terrified of the answer that would come. A yes would be just as damning as a no.

“If you really think it’s all black, then give your blood and be done with it,” The Dowager parried. “At least that way we’ll know the truth. By not cooperating, you’re making us all wait.”

“What are you waiting for?” Robert demanded, his fingers tightening around his sherry glass. “For yet another bad answer? For another dead end? Forgive me if I don’t want to be put through that.”

“You’re putting us through it!” Mary said. The emotion in her voice was raw and grating, making Robert flinch.

But he could not face the pain. He ran from it, desperate to avoid the truth. “If you hadn’t pandered to these fantasies, that gypsy wouldn’t have been given the ammo to-”

“His name is Thomas!” Mary cried out. In a shocking move, she even smacked her hand upon the dining room table, causing several glasses to rattle in their crystal holders. She stood from her chair, shouting at them all! “And he is not a gypsy! He served you for fifteen years, can’t you at least have the decency to say his name?!”

Robert rose up too, now facing his eldest head on. Cora and Edith watched them, horrified silent witnesses to the battle.

“After what he’s done?!”

“What has he done?!” Mary demanded, cutting her father off before he could continue. “But give us so much headway! He’s broken down one excuse after another and has found out what happened to James! Your three years of searching looks pretty poor in comparison-”

“That’s below the belt!” Robert seethed.

“Well I’m about to go lower, so buckle up!” Mary shouted. The table bristled, knowing full well when Mary went low, she practically scraped the ocean bed.

“I think he’s James!” Mary said. Utter silence followed her words, as even Robert shrunk from her words.

*Finally, Cora thought. Say it and set us free.*

“I think that my brother- my twin brother- is out there somewhere-” Mary pointed to the windows, darkened with night. “Freezing in the night, because you can’t get over you own grief and guilt! And it sickens me! I only thank god that Matthew isn’t alive to see it, because if he were, he would lose all respect for you! God only knows I certainly have!”

Mary threw down her napkin and left, brushing right past Carson to slam the dining room door.

Robert still remained standing for a moment, seething outwardly. When he finally sat down, it was with jerky movements. There was a muscle jumping in his jaw, and Cora could hear him breathing heavily.

There were tears sparkling in his eyes, but Cora was the only one close enough to see it. Robert rubbed his brow, using the cover of his hand to let a tear fall so that none could see it besides Cora.
He was heartbroken, and he couldn’t reveal it.

“… I think he’s James too,” Edith said. In comparison to her sister, her voice was but a whisper.

She rose and left the dining room silently. Cora didn’t even hear the door close; Edith was like the ghost of Mary’s presence, barely leaving a trace.

Now it was just Tom, the Dowager, Cora, and Robert left at the table.

Cora considered the last time she’d seen her son; he’d been fussing with his nanny over his blanket and bandage, a pert pink tongue sticking out between perfect lips. Cora had kissed him goodnight, showering her son with love till he’d been soothed for sleep.

He’d smiled at her, his sparkling blue eyes full of joy.

Cora stood up, well aware that all eyes were upon her. She carefully pushed in her dining chair before turning to her husband who was watching her with terror. No doubt he expected Cora to shout at him.

“… We’ve already lost one child, Robert,” Cora said. “Please, don’t make us lose another.”

With that, Cora left to retire early. She had no desire to sup anymore.

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The very next day, on a quiet and chilly afternoon, Lord Grantham headed into town to have his blood drawn by Dr. Clarkson. Both men were exhausted, bitter, and neither were in the mood for company as the head nurse showed Lord Grantham in. Dr. Clarkson was worried for Barrow, thinking of how the man had looked when he’d come to have blood drawn. His arm had been stiff and hot, clearly heavy with infection, and he seemed to have gotten little to no sleep in the woods. He was down to his last pair of clothes, and as a result looked like a vagrant. Dr. Clarkson was not used to seeing Barrow appear so bedraggled; Barrow was a fastidious sort of man who cared about the way that he was seen by others. In Dr. Clarkson’s eyes, all of this had been avoidable if only Lord Grantham had been able to see past his pain. In sum, Dr. Clarkson was not in the mood to be trifled with.

“Will this take long?” Lord Grantham jerked out of his rich fur coat, allowing it to cascade over the side of Dr. Clarkson’s visiting chair. Dr. Clarkson noted that Lord Grantham would not meet his eyes. That he was obviously ashamed in the way that he kept a stiff and rigid posture.

Suddenly Dr. Clarkson felt the tiniest bit of sympathy wash over him. He wondered what it must feel like, to have all your old wounds be ripped open and fresh. He wondered if, flung in the same situation, whether or not he would act like a gentleman.

“Not long,” Dr. Clarkson prepped a simple tray as Lord Grantham flounced into his chair and stewed. “I just need to take one sample.”

He worked best when sitting next to the patient, and so he drew up another visitor’s chair so that the pair of them might be eye level with one another. Dr. Clarkson was intently focused when working, and so he only heard Lord Grantham’s words in passing.
“Has Barrow been by?” Lord Grantham asked.

“He has,” Dr. Clarkson said. He carefully swabbed at Lord Grantham’s inner arm with a gauze wad dipped in rubbing alcohol, then tied a rubber band about Lord Grantham’s upper arm to apply pressure to the veins.

“Where is he staying?”

“In the woods somewhere,” Dr. Clarkson paused to test the resistance of Lord Grantham’s veins. They were in rather good shape for a man in his late fifties. “From what I understand he’s not doing too well. His arm is infected and ought to be tended to, but he doesn’t have the money. He’s down to his last brass farthing.”

Lord Grantham refused to meet Dr. Clarkson’s eyes. In the silence that followed Dr. Clarkson’s words, he drew blood with a careful and level hand. The only inclination that Lord Grantham was in pain came from a slight wince. Beyond that, he was silent and resolved.

His draw finish, Dr. Clarkson set the syringe aside and put a plaster upon Lord Grantham’s arm. “All done.”

“How long will it take to get the results?” Lord Grantham asked. As Dr. Clarkson carefully deposited the blood sample into a travel container, Lord Grantham did up his shirtsleeves and shrugged back on his fur coat.

“A week,” Dr. Clarkson said. “I have to send the lot off to London for testing. The results will be telegraphed to me to sign off on.”

But Lord Grantham was unsatisfied with this measure. The wariness showed on his aged face, as he paused mid-button. “I don’t want Barrow knowing about it,” Lord Grantham said. “Keep it absolutely secret.”

But this was foolishness. As a doctor, Dr. Clarkson was bound to a set of standards and principles. He would sooner break his arm than break his hypocritic oath. “I was going to do so anyway, I assure you.”

“I don’t trust him not to tamper with the results,” Lord Grantham explained.

Once again, Dr. Clarkson was less than understanding. For all of Barrow’s difficulties (of which there were a great many), he was hardly so devious as to deceive a family in regard to paternity. Even so, how would he be able to fake a stamp from the London School of Phlebotomy? But Dr. Clarkson doubted that Lord Grantham would be able to understand this. He was emotional, frightened of being deceived, and dealing with too many open wounds to have a logical conversation. So, in order to keep his patient happy, Dr. Clarkson extended an olive branch.

“If you like, I could have the results sent directly to your lawyer so that they’re never even sent to Downton and stay in London.”

“Yes…” Lord Grantham softened at this, fiddling a bit with his top hat before putting it back on. “Yes, that would put me greatly at ease.”

“Very good, Lord Grantham,” Dr. Clarkson said. Even so, he could not help but detect the traces of fear in Lord Grantham’s face and voice.
A week passed in relative silence, with the Abbey residing in an odd standstill.

Mary did not take nor receive calls, instead spending her days sitting on the lawn pretending to read while instead watching the woods for a hint of Thomas. Robert watched her come and go, unable to shake the feeling that he had lost a great ally in his daughter through his fear. In his mind, he found himself inventing a ghost that followed her. It was, in his mind, the image of her brother, unable to part from his beloved sister’s side. That ghost lingered in Robert’s mind as well, watching him as he worked and lying beside him as he slept.

At night, Robert would lay awake, staring up at the ceiling and remembering the last time he’d seen his son alive. It had been a quiet and warm night in the nursery with Mary already swaddled and her brother floundering upon his changing table. He’d been unwilling to nurse, unhappy with his bandages, and had only been soothed when Cora had plucked him up from his nanny’s arms to kiss him all over.

He’d fallen asleep chuffed, his tongue sticking out. He’d been holding onto his Grantham blanket… the very same one that Robert now held in his hands.

It was dirty from the forest, faded from years spent underground. Mrs. Hughes had washed it and attempted to bring some life back into the old quilt, but it was a poor process. In truth, this blanket would never harbor warmth again, much like Robert. The pair of them were too grieved, too cold to be of much use anymore.

It was the night before the results would be known, and as a result the entire house was on edge. Dinner was canceled to instead be served on trays, and all the girls went to bed early to try and get some rest.

But Robert could not sleep and found himself instead sitting listlessly in the library holding onto his son’s old blanket. He was trapped alone with a memory of a ghost, of a boy who might have loved him and fulfilled him… been his heir.

When he’d held James for the first time, it had been with pride and joy. He’d lifted his son up high, and declared to Carson, “I have a son!”

His perfect boy.

“Shall I tell Mrs. Patmore you’re taking a tray, M’lord?”

Robert was startled from his reverie and looked about to find that Carson was lingering in the shadows. How long his butler had been standing there, Robert did not know.

“No…” Robert whispered. He shrunk back into the couch, unable to look the man in the eye after such an awful week. He wondered, what must the staff think of him now with Barrow cast out and the family in shambles.

“Do you remember that awful night, Carson?” Robert asked. “The night we lost James?”

“I doubt I shall ever forget it, M’lord,” Carson drew closer so that Robert was no longer talking to a shadow. In the light of the fire, every wrinkle upon Carson’s aged face seemed deeper.

“The last time I saw my son, he was in the arms of his mother… asleep with his tongue out,” Robert
scoffed, damning himself for the tears that pricked at the corners of his eyes. “Holding onto this very blanket.” He looked down at it. “Do you remember? Nothing could sooth him but this blanket… and that awful witch buried it in the ground.”

Buried it… like a corpse.

Robert could feel every sinew, every muscle in his body tightening. He was fighting a losing battle with his grief, and he was on the verge of waving a white flag. He had screamed at Barrow. He had flung a glass. He had shouted at his daughters and ignored the pleas of his wife. He had done all of this to try and hide from the pain inside him that now threatened to swallow him whole.

He had been a terrible man to avoid a terrible pain, and in the end, it had found him all the same.

A tear fell from his eye, and then another.
And suddenly, Robert could not hold it in anymore.

“Why?” He choked out. “Why are people so cruel, Carson? Why is this world so wicked? What did my son ever do, to deserve to be stolen away?”

He looked to his butler, face sodden with tears, and just kept spilling his soul.

“If I have sinned, let me be punished but not my son… my poor, poor son. If I have hated Barrow, if I have spoken cruelly to him, it is only because he has opened a wound so deep and so black within me that it threatens to swallow me whole.- “

But Robert could not speak anymore. The grief destroyed him at last. He laid his head into his son’s dirty blanket and wept like a broken man. The silence from Carson was deafening, though the man radiated nothing but pity for his master.

When Carson laid a hand upon Robert’s shoulder, Robert felt even more pain spill from him. It was a desperate desire to be head after thirty years of swallowed grief.

“I was wrong to curse him as I did!” Robert sobbed, “B-but how I wish this could have been left well enough alone! Have I not grieved enough?! What if the b-blood work comes back n-negative and we’re back to square one-?! We’ll know nothing about what happened to my son.”

Robert seized in several breathes, desperately trying to quell his tears. At his side, Carson watched over him as a constant protector. Now both of Carson’s hands were upon his shoulders, offering him all the kindness that Robert so desperately needed.

“M’lord,” Carson murmured, his thumbs tenderly stroking the jumping muscles in Robert’s tense shoulders. “What if the blood work comes back positive?”

“…Positive,” Robert echoed the word, unable to fully register what it might mean.

“If the blood work returns and is positive, we will know exactly what happened to James,” Carson murmured. “We will have him back. Is that not worth everything else? And even if it is negative, Thomas has given everything to try and solve this mystery. He has given you a gift… a difficult gift, but a gift none the less. A true lord must show gratitude and grace in the face of such a present. And I know that you will when the time comes. We will help Barrow to find a new place to work, and we will wish him well.”

Robert sucked in a shuddering breath, closing his eyes. Two tears fell down his sodden cheeks.

“… I’m not a true lord,” Robert whispered. “Not if it’s a positive. Because that will mean that I did
not recognize my son for nearly twenty years. And that I nearly damned him to suicide out of my own apathy.”

Robert wiped his eyes, abusive with his aging flesh. “How could any father, lord or not, forgive themselves for that?”

But at this, Carson almost laughed. “My lord, the last time you saw Master James, he was but seven months old. When we first met Thomas, he was eighteen. A great deal changes between those ages.”

“But a father- “

“You told yourself that Master James was dead!” Carson reminded him. “You were unwilling to so much as even discuss the subject for thirty years. How could you have been expected to recognize a clue if it was laid before you, when you’d closed your eyes?”

Robert considered these words, wondering if they held any true weight. Was this the forgiveness he needed? Or would Robert have to look deeper to find true peace after so much pain?

“As to the other,” Carson let out a sigh, considering the weight of Thomas’ attempted suicide. “I have just as much blame in the matter as you, I fear. I was convinced that Thomas did not have a heart, but Lady Mary helped me to see that Thomas is a man of flesh and blood, hardly an island. I was wrong to have treated him coldly.”

“Do you think he’ll forgive me, after all the awful things I said?” Robert whispered. Suddenly he felt like a child again, hiding in his nursery after being scolded by his nanny.

“I think the only way you’ll ever know is to ask, my lord,” Carson said. And Robert had to admit, there was great wisdom in those words.

Outside of the library, while her father considered the weight of his words, Mary sat upon the entrance stairs to the gallery floor and pondered what the coming day would bring. In truth, she did not know why she sat her save that it was a quiet area and she was left alone. It was too difficult to lay in bed, and she could not sleep either way. She wanted so badly to pack a valise and run to London, to bang on the door of the School of Phlebotomy until someone let her in. She wanted to know now, and it burned her terribly to be kept in suspense. In her heart, she knew that Thomas was her twin brother… but she needed to see it vindicated through science. She needed to know their searching and fighting had not been in vain.

A flitting shadow upon the wall did not bother her.
The sounds of soft feet coming down the stairs did not stir her to move.
When someone sat next to her, Mary didn’t even look to see who it was.

“For better or for worse, we’ll know tomorrow.”
How queer that it was Edith to come to her in this moment. And why? Mary looked at her younger sister and found Edith in a pink housecoat with her hair undone. Mary was much the same, sitting in her green housecoat with her hair a shaggy mess about her ears. The pair of them hardly looked like nobles, hiding upon the stairs.
“I know, now.” Mary murmured. “He’s James. I could feel it when we touched.”

“You’re certain it wasn’t because you wanted to feel it?” Edith asked. It was a plausible concept, but one that didn’t hold much weight for Mary.

“No. I don’t think my heart could trick my mind like that.” She was much too clinical, much too calculating to be so taken in. She knew for a fact that when she’d touched Thomas, she’d felt a strange deep connection. It had soothed her and completed her. That sort of sensation couldn’t be doubled.

“You’re lucky,” Edith mumbled, lacing her fingers over her lap. “My heart tricks my mind all the time.”

“Not really,” Mary mumbled. “That’s just me meddling, as you’ve said before….” But the subject of her meddling gave Mary pause. In all her attempts to find her brother, she had forgotten about her sister.

“…Have you…” It felt almost impertinent of her to ask, “Have you heard from Lord Hexam at all?”

“…No,” Edith said. Mary was shocked to find there wasn’t a trace of anger in her voice. “But then again, I haven’t reached out either.”

“You should,” Mary advised. “I ruined your life, but that doesn’t mean you can’t fight back. Go on and make me miserable. It’s what I deserve.”

Edith scoffed, raising a fine ginger eyebrow at Mary’s theatrics. “And what about Henry? He was perfect for you.”

Mary shook her head. Perfect was not a word she would associate with Henry Talbot. Henry had been far too scruffy and greasy to be perfect. If she had to align a word with him it would have been ‘delightful’. Deviously delightful.

“Matthew was perfect for me,” Mary corrected her. “Henry was just lots of fun.”

“Maybe you need more fun,” Edith teased.

“Maybe,” She certainly wouldn’t say no to fun at this point. The past week had been utterly hellish. “But I need my brother more. My twin…”

Edith considered her words, deep in thought. The pair of them weren’t in the habit of sharing, and yet… Mary had no one else to share with now.

Consolation and a desire to be understood won out over her insufferable pride. “I don’t know how to explain to you, how much our connection means to me. In a way, I think I first grew to hate you because I saw you as a bandage for my twin’s loss. Papa stopped looking after you were born.”

Edith could have taken this as an insult, and Mary wouldn’t have blamed her. Instead, Edith simply considered her words and replied in kind. “Maybe it hurt him too much to continue.”

“Maybe,” Mary said. “These past weeks have certainly hurt me.”

Edith drew a little bit closer, and carefully laid her hand upon Mary’s arm. The pair of them were shoulder to shoulder; it was the first time they’d been so close in years. Mary was hard pressed to remember the last time that she’d been so intimate with Edith.
“No matter what happens tomorrow, we’ll take care of Thomas,” Edith promised her. “We’ll find somewhere for him to go, and you can always correspond him. You won’t lose him if he isn’t James.”

“That’s just it, Edith,” Mary’s voice was tightening, her throat closing up in grief. “…He is James.” The words squeaked out, barely discernable. To keep from crying, Mary bowed her head and looked away.

Edith placed her arms about Mary, comforting her though she did not ask to be comforted. Edith was just sensible like that.

“…It’ll be alright, Mary,” Edith whispered in her ear. It was good to know that someone was confident in this awful situation… but neither Crawley sister noticed a shadow slipping past. There was one last Crawley on the move, but this one was glad in a heavy coat and heading for the door.

Cora Crawley slipped right past her two daughters, barely making a sound as she crossed the entrance hall and exited out the front door.

~*~

The grass was cold and biting beneath her feet. In house shoes and a coat meant for summer outings, Cora felt a bit like a fool as she crossed the lawn to Grantham Woods. She could not say why she felt the desire to search them, save that there was a sense of closure in walking among the fallen leaves. If these were the woods that her son had been taken into, Cora wanted to know them back to front. She wanted to understand what he might have felt and seen; to be close with him even if it was thirty years too late.

But was it?

Mrs. Hughes, Mary, Baxter… all of them had searched the woods in an attempt to find Thomas and had come up empty handed. Even Dr. Clarkson had been unsure of where Thomas was hiding in the woods. But Cora was a different animal.

She wasn’t looking for Thomas. She was simply using her mother’s intuition to find her son. Cora held her coat tight to her body as she descended the slopes of Grantham Woods. The deeper she went, the wilder the wood became until her feet were getting caught on twigs and her ankles were covered in scratches.

Still, she kept walking.
And walking.
And walking.

In her mind, only one thought replayed over and over again. It spurred her to keep going, though the cold was biting, and her ankles were bleeding.

There had only ever been one boy in the Barrow household. Baxter had said as much. One boy… and that boy had been Thomas Barrow. But Thomas had been adopted on paper, and Alice Barrow had admitted in writing to stealing James…

And so…?
Cora paused, the grief within her welling up so that she momentarily reached out and held to a tree if only to catch her breath. Her tears were frozen upon her cheeks as she stared out across the gloom. There were no traces of supposed gypsies in these woods, no wagon trails you could follow to a makeshift campsite. Instead, there was only the tiniest glow in the distance. A strange… orange glow. What could it be?

But Cora knew instinctively that it was a campfire, that it was Thomas, and she ran to it on instinct. In her frantic pace, she lost her house shoes but still she kept going. She did not want her house shoes, she wanted her son. She wanted her baby back.

As Cora overtook another hill barefoot, she came into the view of a tiny campsite occupied only by one man and a pitiful fire he protected from the cold.

Thomas sat upon his coat, his sleeve dirtied with dried blood and makeshift bandages. He looked onto his fire, lost deep in thought.

As he kept watch over his fire, Cora thought of her child. Of that tiny pink tongue, sticking out of her baby’s mouth. Of how she’d smothered her son with kisses only hours before he’d been abducted. Had it been Thomas’ cheeks she’d kissed? Had it been Thomas’ tongue she’d once smiled at?

There had only ever been one boy in the Barrow household.

Cora descended the slope, almost falling in the steep incline as she came to rest at the bottom. Thomas looked up from his fire, gaunt circles beneath his crystal blue eyes.

He observed her, blinking slowly at her housecoat and bare feet.

“May I join you?” Cora whispered.

“Are you not cold?” Thomas asked.

“I’ll be warmer by the fire,” Cora said. Without a word, Thomas gestured to the coat upon which he sat so that Cora might sit beside him. Her feet were numb, bruised from the scramble in the brush. She collapsed beside Thomas to stick her feet near the fire so that they might warm up again. The ground was hard and unforgiving; she could not imagine sleeping in this awful place. How on earth had Thomas survived for over a week out here? What had he been eating? Where had he been sleeping?

But Carney had lived in these woods for years-- years! How had it been possible?

“Is this where Carney stayed?” Cora asked.

“No, M’lady,” Thomas said. “It’s far deep into the woods. Don’t like goin’ out there, it gives me the willies.” He poked at his fire with a thin stick, tending to the flames so that they were kept strong.

“My gypsy parents supposedly lived in these woods,” Thomas mused. “I keep thinking if I look hard enough, I’ll find a gypsy camp or just the remnants of one… haven’t found tuppence though.”

“Thomas, I’ve lived here for thirty years,” Cora said. “There are no gypsies in these woods.”

And so, they were left with the other option, which weighed heavy on both their minds.

“… Dr. Clarkson told us that the results will be in tomorrow morning,” Cora said. “I wanted to talk to you before, to tell you how grateful I am that you agreed to help Mary investigate.”
Thomas smiled, though it was a wane and fragile thing. “I’m happy to bring you some knowledge M’lady, even if it is too late.”

“I don’t think it is,” Cora leaned heavily upon one hand, allowing the other to play with a pebble upon the ground. “I think it’s right on time. Lord Grantham talks about how he grieved and fought, but I did as well. He’s right, you know. I’m stronger than he is. I’m an American; have gun will travel… but I’ve known since I saw the mark on your arm… I’ve always known.”

She looked at Thomas full in the face and allowed herself to see what had always been there. Allowed herself to see her father’s cheekbones and her grandmother’s blue eyes.

Mary’s blue eyes.

“You’re my son,” Cora whispered.

“We don’t know that.” Thomas whispered back. The pair of them were sharing a sacred in these deep woods. Their serenity could be shattered be the merest movement.

“I do,” Cora said. “I can feel it in my heart. And tomorrow, when the results are read, I’ll know it for a fact.”

“And what if it’s a negative?” Thomas asked her. “What if one of the tests comes back inconclusive? Lord Grantham will never accept it and frankly I don’t blame him. I wouldn’t wish me on any family.”

Cora smiled and took Thomas’ hand in her own. She hoped that the action brought him the tiniest amount of comfort and noted that Thomas’ hands and palms were covered with scratches and bruises from living in the woods. It only made her hold him all the tighter.

“If the results are negative, then I will grieve on my own time and help you to find another place to work.” Cora said.

“No,” Thomas shook his head. “I’m going to stay here, M’lady. I’ll live off the land, somehow. I’ll starve or feast here. If I’m not your son, if I’m the son of a gypsy couple, then I won’t hide from my fate or my kin.”

At this, he looked away from her to instead gaze deeply into the fire. Cora had to remark at how smart he was to build a fire from scratch. She wondered if she would have been able to do the same thing if pressed for warmth.

“All my life, people have pushed me around just because I’m different,” Thomas admitted. Cora felt sympathy rise within her, and she held his hand all the tighter. “I’m tired of living amongst people who will never accept me. I’m just… plain tired, I suppose. I’m tired of pretendin’ to not give a damn. I give too many damn to hide. I see saw from wanting to die and wanting to live, from wanting to hate the world and wanting the world to love me. Everyone loves a winner, but all my life I’ve been a loser so what does that mean?”

“Oh Thomas…” His words pained her deeply. “If you were my son, I’d always accept and love you. Always.”

“But how can you say that when you know what I am?” Thomas asked.

What nonsense.

Thomas was admittedly the first person that Cora had met whom she’d known was different; God
only knows how many poor souls had been different and hiding. And she wouldn’t have known either way if it hadn’t had been for all that bother in 1920. O’Brien had been kind enough to inform her of Thomas’ proclivities. Admittedly it was a little odd, but what did it even matter in the end?

“I do,” Cora said. “But it doesn’t matter an inch to me.”

This was a foreign concept to Thomas. He considered her words, and his face softened as he realized that Cora was truly understanding to his situation. To his credit, he met Cora’s gaze head on and held it despite their differing rank.

“You don’t mind?” He asked, “Truly?”

“Truly,” Cora repeated with a smile. “And neither should anyone else. It’s certainly not your choice.”

“Maybe now,” Thomas looked back to the fire, “But it is my burden.”

“I don’t see love as a burden,” Cora stroked his arm with care. “If I did, I wouldn’t be out here. I’ve already lost my shoes in the process.”

Thomas winced at her bare feet, looking over his shoulder back out onto the woods. “I’ll find them for you.”

Cora could not help but laugh at this, “You’re already a doting son.”

It was nice, to sit there and imagine that they truly were mother and son. That this was just some sort of camping trip, and the pair of them were having a late-night chat after everyone else had gone to bed. In the spirit of her fantasy, Cora looked to Thomas with pride and love and leaned into his side.

“I’d be honored to be your son,” Thomas told her.

“I’d be honored to be your mother,” Cora replied. “Now go fetch my shoes.”

Thomas threw back his head and laughed.
It was the first time in living memory that Cora had heard him do so … and it was a joyous lovely sound.
James

Chapter Summary

The blood analysis required by the courts is returned, leaving the occupants of the Abbey in hysterics.

Chapter Notes

This chapter was finished early so I decided to post it early as a show of good faith in my readers (I know you wanted to see this for a long time so I decided to post it before Friday). Now, this means that there will be no update on Friday. You can expect the next update next Friday.

**Trigger warnings for this chapter include anxiety attacks and slight medical gore**

Note: Due to review notifications, I have edited a few details of this chapter.

It was five in the morning, and the only glow in London came from the open windows of a lab on the third floor of the School of Phlebotomy. A hurricane lamp was burning on low oil, shedding dim warm light on a steaming cup of coffee and a blood analysis report from North Yorkshire. Dr. Laurel Stevenson was finished after a night spent hard at work; he took off his round glasses to rub at tired eyes.

His workmate and close friend, Dr. Bradshaw, leaned in over Dr. Stevenson’s shoulder to observe his hard work.

“Marvelous,” He praised.

“No,” Dr. Stevenson parried. “Just science.”

With that, Dr. Stevenson pulled on a bell rope to notify the lab assistant on call that there was a letter to deliver.

Within minutes, the verified lab reports were on their way to be sent by train to 174 Wind Mist Lane in York… the residence of a Mr. George Murray.

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At eight thirty-two in the morning, George Murray sat eating breakfast with his wife, his fat fingers drumming nervously on the edge of the table. His cup of coffee sat undrunk in the other hand, though the smell was sumptuous with sugar added to taste.
He’d fretted over the Grantham case, working hand in hand with Chief Inspector Wilson of the York Police to apprehend the Barrows before they could flee the country. They were currently being held, awaiting charges that would rest entirely on the blood analysis that would come today. Murray had to admit, Barrow had been meticulous in gathering detail. The more Murray had read, the more he’d connected lines in his private study, the more he could not deny that Barrow had to be James Crawley. There were too many strange details and events to be coincidence. He didn’t know how to convey any of this to Lord Grantham without inspiring the man’s wrath upon his head but by god… it was remarkable. Over and over again, Murray had tried to deduce another option out of Barrow’s case, but the core detail kept sticking out like a rogue nail: *There had only ever been one Barrow boy.*

If this was true, then Barrow had to be James.

His wife looked up from the other end of the table; she’d been regarding The Sketch with mild interest until Murray had interrupted her.

“Honestly George,” She grumbled, “Either eat your breakfast or do something else but don’t just sit there jiggling your leg. What on earth are you so nervous about?”

Yet even as Murray opened his mouth to explain it was a business matter, the door to the parlor opened to reveal their lone maid Sarah. In her black and whites, she bore a silver-plated tray upon which sat a single enormous envelope stamped from train passage.

“A letter, Mr. Murray,” Sarah said. “Straight from London. The postman said it was urgent—“

“That’s what I’m nervous about,” Murray jerked out of his chair, abandoning his morning coffee and wife in order to take the letter from Sarah. It was sealed with a heavy red wax stamp, a clear indication that none had opened it since it had left the School of Phlebotomy.

“I’m off to Downton,” Murray said. “Sarah, fetch my coat and hat.”

“Right away sir- “ Sarah left at once.

“But George, you haven’t even finished your coffee!” His wife said.

“No time!” Murray shouted from the hall, “I’ll eat on the train!”

And just like that, he was gone in a flash.

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It was eleven thirty, and the entire Crawley clan was gathered in their library along with Mr. Murray who’d come up from York on the morning train. Mary sat next to her mother upon the couch, Edith on her other side with Tom across the way nervously thumbing the handle of a cup of coffee. Robert was by the window, sitting in a lone visitor chair with his head in his hands. Granny was in an arm chair, the only one attempting to have any modicum of decency in the ten. Though Carson had been kind enough to offer them all tea and coffee, no one besides Tom had dared to take a cup. Instead, everyone sat waiting for the eventual phone call that would come when Dr. Clarkson left the hospital with Chief Inspector Wilson in tow. It would be Dr. Clarkson to read the results (for they were like Greek in Murray’s hands).
When the phone rang, Mary flinched. Carson answered it swiftly, only to speak in hushed tones and finally hang up without offering her father a chance to speak.

Carson turned, inclining his head to Robert. “Dr. Clarkson is on his way over, M’lord. He has Chief Inspector Wilson with him.”

Robert just nodded. He could do very little else.

“Where…” Robert croaked, unable to speak eloquently. “Where is Thomas?”

Strangely enough, it was her mother to speak, “I’ve asked him to stay close. He’s at the edge of the woods. He wouldn’t touch the lawn.”

“I should wonder why,” Mary muttered nastily under her breath. After being screamed at by Robert and thrown out of his only home, Mary was under no illusions as to Thomas’ mental state. He was probably frightened of being chased off by a one-man mob if he dared get too close to the abbey.

“I went to see him last night,” Cora admitted, speaking in a hushed whisper so that only Mary could hear her. Mary looked about, shocked.

“You did?” She wondered. “How did you find him?”

“Mother’s intuition I suppose,” Cora smiled. Mary could not help but be touched in that moment. “He looked horrid though. He can’t stay in those woods another night. It’s inhuman. His arm certainly needs to be tended to.”

Across the way, Robert was still staring at the letter in Murray’s trusted hands. “No one’s touched it?” He asked.

“No, Lord Grantham,” Murray said. “I received this letter straight off a postal train from the London School of Phlebotomy this morning at half past eight. Its seal is unbroken.”

“And Thomas didn’t approach you?” Robert wondered.

Murray looked at his client incredulously, “No, M’lord. I didn’t even see him when I came up.”

But this inspired Mary to look. If Cora was correct and Thomas was close, then she wanted to see if she could spot Thomas from the library lawn. She approached the window, failing to notice how her father bristled when she brushed past, and stood on tip toe near the window so as to look out over the lawn. Sure enough, the barrier of the Grantham Woods was unbroken save for the tiniest speck of black. She soothed herself with the knowledge that it was Thomas… that her twin was close, even if only on the horizon.

Cora was at her side, watching from Mary’s elbow as Mary pressed her hand to the glass.

“He’s there,” Cora said, pointing to the black speck.

“I wonder if he’s alright?” Mary said aloud.

“He seemed fine last night, apart from his arm, but he wants to stay in the woods if things don’t go as we hope,” Cora explained. But this would never do. Mary didn’t want Thomas in the woods. She wanted him close, always.

“I won’t have it,” Mary said. “It’s not right…. To live in the woods like that when you’re wounded. He’s not a criminal.”
“I agree,” Cora seemed to be trying to soothe her… and Mary could not help but appreciate it in that horrid moment.

And yet…?

“If things go poorly today, let me be the one to tell him,” Mary said. She did not know how she would feel if the blood tests came back negative (it seemed impossible to her in that moment). If it happened, she would need to be consoled by him, and she didn’t want to be around her family when it happened.

Cora just rubbed Mary’s arm, stroking it lovingly in a silent offer of support.

The door to the entrance hall opened to reveal Andrew the footman, flanked by Dr. Clarkson and Chief Inspector Wilson who had his police hat under his arm in a show of respect.

Mary’s heart began to beat frantically within her breast, as if begging her to move quicker, to make time go faster so that they could know the results now.

“Lord Grantham, Lady Grantham,” Dr. Clarkson his head to both of them.

“Dr. Clarkson- “It was Murray to make the first move, striding across the floor of the library to shake both visitor’s hands. “Chief Inspector. I’m Mr. George Murray, Lord Grantham’s legal advisor. This was delivered to my personal residence early this morning, straight from the London School of Phlebotomy, just as requested. Lord Grantham has asked that I be the one to break the seal for authenticity.”

“Very good,” The Chief Inspector said. “I have my men at the ready. If it’s a positive reading, we will be moving at once to arrest the Barrows. At the moment they’re detained in Liverpool.”

“I thank you for your haste, Chief Inspector,” Murray praised. “This matter is very dear to my client, and to myself.”

“I took great pleasure in it, I assure you,” The Chief Inspector said with a crooked grin.

“Shall we?” Murray gestured, offering space so that Dr. Clarkson and the Chief Inspector could stand in the middle of the room instead of being crowded at the door.

All of a sudden, it was a show of force as every member of the Crawley family besides the Dowager stood to gather around Murray.

Mary was trembling in her shoes, though she noticed it only absently. She seemed to be humming with some kind of raw wild excitement that had not seen doubled since she’d been about to give birth. She was not the only one panicking. Edith was a shade beyond ivory, her delicate hands clasped into tight fists about her beaded shawl. Cora held tight to Mary and Edith’s arms, relying upon them both to stand up straight as Murray held the heavy envelope up with both hands.

“Are we ready?” Murray asked them all.

“Don’t keep us in suspense,” Mary blurted out. “Just read the damnable thing before we all die.”

Murray’s eyebrows were in danger of vanishing into his hairline, but he did not question Mary’s tepid tone. Instead, he flipped the envelope over to show a heavy red wax seal. He cracked it with a fat finger, opening the envelope at long last to reveal that it held five smaller envelopes inside. Murray pulled them all out and flipped them on their front to reveal that someone had written names with a fine hand:
Murray held them all up so that everyone could see them easily. “I have here five envelopes. Everyone can see that they are individually sealed. You can observe they’ve not been tampered with.” He passed them to Robert, who took them one at a time to test their edges. They were intact.

“Very good,” Robert handed them back to Murray, satisfied with their authenticity.

“Dr. Clarkson, I now entrust them to you,” Murray said, handing the bundle over to Dr. Clarkson who took them to start with Mary’s envelope.

He opened it to reveal a fine piece of paper laden with heavy print full of medical text.

Unfolding the paper flat in his hands, Dr. Clarkson scanned it carefully with his eyes in total silence. He did not speak.

A full minute passed.

Dr. Clarkson looked up, his mouth slightly ajar. Mary was close to vibrating, her fingertips trembling as she held tight to her mother.

Cora was close to screaming, her teeth clenched tight and her eyes closed. Upon her chair the Dowager was holding her breath, her hand upon her warbling throat.

“Well?!” Edith blurted out when Dr. Clarkson still did not speak. “For god’s sake, what does it say?!”

“My heart isn’t strong enough to endure this,” The Dowager added. “I’m not seventy anymore!”

But Dr. Clarkson still did not speak. Instead he opened the next envelope, and then another, until all four were in his hands and spread out. He shuffled from one sheaf to the next, his expression growing more incredulous by the second.

Why had he not just said what he found?
Why had he looked to the next test?
What was he trying to silently validate or confirm?

“I…” Dr. Clarkson shook his head, unable to bring to words what needed to be said.

He looked up, eyes locking on Roberts when he found Cora’s still closed.

“All five tests are positi- “

Cora screamed so loud and violently that it made Dr. Clarkson jump. She fell, her knees giving out so that she crashed to the floor. At first, Mary was terrified her mother was having a heart attack, but she was far from it- she was crying and laughing, shaking wildly in the arms of Edith and Mary-

Because if all five tests were positive then that meant-
That meant-!!

“What?” Robert could barely get the words out, too numb to speak. Next to him, Tom was gripping his hair, his Irish tongue slipping in his shock.

“Jesus feckin’ Christ- “Tom turned away, “You have got to be kidding me!”

“Lady Mary, complete and utter blood analysis match! Identical!” Dr. Clarkson’s voice was loud. He was triumphant, blue eyes blazing in delight as he showed the paper to Lord Grantham. “Look at it! They’re twins!”

“Oh my god- “Mary could not control the words coming out of her mouth, the bliss was overtaking her, making her ramble like a fool. “Oh my god, Mama. Oh my god-!”

Cora held tight to her, hysterical as she sobbed in her arms.

Dr. Clarkson was just rambling by this point: “Lady Grantham, shares fifty percent DNA, susceptible parent! Lord Grantham, fifty percent, susceptible parent! Edith Crawley, forty percent, susceptible sibling or close cousin! Dowager Countess, twenty five percent, susceptible grandparent or distant cousin! But he is Lady Mary’s match down to the bone and that proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that he is her twin!”

“Oh my god- “Tears fell down her father’s sunken cheeks. His hands trembled violently around the paperwork that declared Mary and Thomas twins.

“He’s James- “Edith warbled. “He’s actually James-!”

“God in Heaven- “The Chief Inspector was just as in shock as the rest of them.

“My baby- “Cora was gasping upon the floor, trying to stand. Both Edith and Mary helped her up; she clawed at the front of Robert’s suit, trying to use him as leverage to get to the door of the library. She was out of her mind with a mixture of grief and joy!

“My baby-!” Cora lunged for the door, only to be held back by Robert of all people.

“Cora, stop-!” He begged her. Cora was hysterical, sucking in one savage breath after another as she clawed at her husband’s arms. “Breath, just breath! If you go to him now, in a panic, it’ll terrify him! Just try and gather yourself- “

“Gather?!“ Cora screamed the word like it were the darkest of slurs. “I won’t! I want my baby!”

But even as she tried to get away again, she only began to cry in Robert’s arms. Why then was she smiling, raising her violently trembling hands to the ceiling.

“Thank you, god, - “She wailed. “Thank you for my deliverance!”

Robert held her tightly from behind, burying his face in her neck. They both wept upon one another, too shocked to be able to speak.

Mary did not realize she was crying herself until Tom offered her a handkerchief. She took it to wiper her face clean, leaning suddenly upon her sister who supported her without question.

“We all need a feckin drink,” Tom said aloud. “Or a horse tranquilizer.”

In her chair, the Granny was silent. Mary did not know if she wept, or if she was overjoyed. All she could see was the shining look in her grandmother’s eyes. In the way her hands trembled upon her
lap. Was she thinking of how she’d danced with Thomas once? How it meant that she’d danced with her grandson and not even known it?

“…M’lord…”

Mary looked around, her eyes swollen and hot, and found Carson on the fringes of their breakdown. He was ashen and sweating profusely, clearly in shock. Mary wondered how he must feel, after working as Thomas’ boss for so many years? They’d been enemies at one point, fighting against one another downstairs. What did it mean now?

But Carson was not thinking of himself in that moment. His love for the family was so strong that he could not deny its call even now in this shocking moment.

“M’lord, let me fetch him,” Carson urged. “I know where he is. I saw him this morning when I sent the hall boy to fetch coal.”

Robert nodded. He couldn’t even summon the words. Carson left at once, not even bothering to close the door behind him. In his absence, Granny slowly began to react, her trembling fingers playing at an opal broach at her throat.

“…Little James…” She whispered in disbelief. “Thomas.”

Chief Inspector Wilson cut through them all, heading to the phone to dial for the operator. “Liverpool Police,” He requested, only to then say, “Yes, I’ll hold.”

“My god, it can’t be true though!” Tom wondered aloud, looking to Dr. Clarkson for an answer. “This is bloomin’ insane! Barrow- the missing Crawley?!”

“I assure you Mr. Branson, it is true!” Dr. Clarkson said at once, “If it wasn’t, at least one test would have come back inconclusive. To have all five tests, of varying shades, come back positive? That’s absolutely unheard of. And he shares a total match of DNA with Lady Mary. That, in and of itself, proves he is her twin. That he must be James Crawley!”

“But I see it now- “The Dowager rose from her chair on shaky legs, holding tight to her ivory cane lest she fall. She walked to Robert and Cora, laying a hand upon them both to aid them in their time of need. “When you put them together side by side, of course he is her twin.”

Robert just shook his head, his face buried in the back of Cora’s hair. He was not ready to face his mother. He was not ready to face anyone.

Cora was still mildly hysterical, smiling blissfully even as she sniveled.

Chief Inspector Wilson suddenly spoke up; clearly he’d been connected: “This is Chief Inspector Wilson of York. Code word ‘Carnival’… Very good.” And with that, he hung up the phone.

He turned and grinned at them, putting his hat back on with a smug air.

“Carnival?” Mary repeated, too weak to have much of a personality in that moment.

“If this isn’t a circus, I don’t know what is, but the Barrows are both officially under arrest for the abduction and physical abuse of James Robert Crawley. So, if you’ll excuse me, I need to catch the next train to Liverpool. We’re taking this case before the crown as soon as possible and asking for a hanging.”

“Of course- “The Dowager was the one to see the Chief Inspector out, stepping up for both Robert
and Cora who were too out of their minds to behave normally.

Yet as Chief Inspector Wilson passed Robert, he paused to clap him gently upon the shoulder in a show of support.

“The worst is over,” The Chief Inspector declared. “And I congratulate you in this moment, My Lord. You have your son back.”

~*~

Across the lawn, completely unaware of the transpiring events, Thomas Barrow sat with his back to a knotted pine and methodically massaged his left arm. The pain was growing worse by the day, and he knew soon fever would overtake his mind if he did not cure the infection soon. He needed medicine and rest, but he would find neither out here in the woods. The past two weeks had been like something out of a hallucinogenic induced dream. Thomas had been living off a mixture of caught game and wild mushrooms (most of which he was certain were poisonous on some level). He also might have stolen food from the Bates’ shed three nights ago.

Desperate times and all that.

Upon the horizon, breaking the silhouette of the abbey was the shape of a man heading in Thomas’ direction. He paused, straightening up as he realized it was none other than Mr. Carson who seemed to be running.

Which was queer, because Thomas had never seen Carson run flat-out in his life.

The closer Carson got, the more he realized the man was in a panic. Wondering what on earth could have gone wrong, Thomas finally decided to break Lord Grantham’s law and stepped onto the Abbey green to meet Carson half-way lest he have another heart attack.

“Mr. Carson?” Thomas stopped before the man, wondering at Carson’s pale demeanor and shocked expression. By god, was someone dead?!

“Breath-!” Thomas added, for Carson seemed close to passing out.

“Thomas…” Carson had to take several more breathes before he could get out in a rush, “You must come with me at once.”

“Lead the way,” Thomas said. Carson took off, nearly leaving Thomas in the dust until Thomas took off in a sprint to catch up.

They were heading for the front door of the abbey.

Thomas could not comprehend why Carson was taking him through the front door, why they were not instead going through the servant’s passage since they were both technically members of staff. As they headed for the library, they passed by a police officer who tipped his hat to Thomas with a strange grin upon his face. Thomas looked over his shoulder, watching the man go.

Who had he been, and why had he been smiling so peculiarly?
They reached the library door. Instead of pausing to do up his hair or fix his tie, Carson pushed the
doors open at once and stepped aside so that Thomas might enter. Why hadn’t he at least attempted
to look semi-decent before his masters? What was all the rush about?

Inside the library, Thomas found a rather shocking scene. Nearly everyone was crying in some form
or fashion, with Lord and Lady Grantham leaning upon one another like crumbling towers. Lady
Grantham was hysterical, but for whatever reason she was smiling at the same time which slightly
frightened Thomas.

Lady Edith was trembling, holding onto Lady Mary as if for support. Tom Branson was on the
outskirts, pacing and mumbling to himself. The Dowager Countess was by the sofa, clearly having
just shown the policeman to the door. She regarded Thomas with a mixture of shock and awe.

Dr. Clarkson and Mr. Murray were both there as well, and both men were looking at him with
strange expressions of amazement that Thomas did not fully appreciate. What in the devil was going
on? Had the results for the blood work been read or not?

Lady Mary was there, weeping. She reached out for him, a wild look upon her usually cool face, but
even as she opened her mouth, Dr. Clarkson cut her off.

“My lady!” Dr. Clarkson said, rather sharply. “Allow me?”

Lady Mary froze mid-step, looking over her shoulder at Dr. Clarkson who still held out a hand as if
to physically keep her back. She bowed her head after a moment, stepping aside so that Thomas
could walk forward unimpeded in a room of weeping nobles.

He almost wanted to remain outside.

“…Thomas, sit down, please,” Dr. Clarkson gestured to the sofa.

“I’d rather stand,” Thomas said.

“You’re going to need it,” Dr. Clarkson added.
Given how weirdly everyone else was acting, he had a feeling Dr. Clarkson was right. Cautious of
being shouted at by Lord Grantham, Thomas carefully toed around the Crawley clan to take a seat
upon the sofa. It was wrong of him to sit upon such fine furniture when it was only meant for family,
but if Dr. Clarkson was telling him to then maybe it was alright.

Dr. Clarkson’s hands were full of letters, which he shuffled through to pick one seemingly at
random.

“Thomas, these are the results for the blood work,” Dr. Clarkson explained. His tone was too gentle
to be natural.

Dr. Clarkson stood directly before Thomas, a ludicrous smile upon his face.
Thomas was too frightened to know what to think or do in that moment.

“They’re all positive,” Dr. Clarkson whispered.

But what did that mean? “I don’t understand,” Thomas said.

Why was Dr. Clarkson on the verge of laughing? “Thomas, this is a test between you and Lady
Mary. It’s a 100% match. You are confirmable twins.”

Twins.
Thomas slowly looked to his right, staring at Lady Mary who was still looking at him with a mixture of longing and grief.

Twins?

He rose from the couch, stepping around Dr. Clarkson, his brain desperately trying to digest what Dr. Clarkson was saying though his heart could not keep up.

Twins…

He stared at Lady Mary, desperately soaking in all that he could from her eyes to her skin and hair. From the shape of her nose to the fullness of her pink lips and her jawline. Her cool demeanor so easily pealed back to reveal the beating heart beneath. Her sharp edges dulled by kindness rarely shown.

“…I still don’t understand,” Thomas said. It was the only way he could protect his brain, which was slowly starting to fill up with a high-pitched shrieking sound of hysteria. “What does it mean?”

“Thomas,” Dr. Clarkson moved to his side, and carefully put a hand upon his shoulder. “It means that you are Lady Mary’s twin…. You are James Crawley.”

No.

No, it could not be.

Thomas shook his head, his brain crawling to a stop as he tried to assume some form of identity that he could fling back at Dr. Clarkson’s words.

But none could come to him that had not already been denied.

“No that…” Thomas swallowed, his tongue thick in his throat. “That… I can’t… I’m Thomas Barrow… the son of…” But he wasn’t. He was adopted.

“My parents were….” But they weren’t. There were no gypsies in Grantham Woods.

There had only ever been one Barrow boy, Baxter had said, and the burn mark upon his arm was identical to the one James Crawley had borne in infancy. He was apparently a blood match to Lady Mary. And so…?

Thomas slowly turned around to stare at Lord and Lady Grantham, whom he had served for so many years. Lady Grantham was staring at him, still held back by Lord Grantham whose arms were tight about his waist.

Her eyes were boring into his own, swollen from tears but so obviously filled with love. He had never been stared at in such a way.

As if, by a mother.

He turned back around at looked at Lady Mary, who was still watching him with hope.

Hope for what, he wondered?

And yet, in a way he already knew… a hope to be understood. A hope to finally find someone in this god-awful world whom she could fully connect to. Because they were twins and understood one another intimately. Because they saw the world through the same eyes.
“…Oh my god…” Thomas could hardly comprehend the words. They flowed from him with ease, but they had no taste in his mouth. He spoke neither with joy nor horror. He knew no emotion in that moment. He was void of all identity, nothing more than a husk of a person still needing a name.

“I’m James Crawley.”

His words were the enchantment which broke the spell, so that suddenly Cora Crawley was freed from her husband’s embrace to at last fling her arms about her son.

They collided, the pair of them locked tight to one another as if magnets, and so Thomas allowed himself to be held for the first time since he was seven months old by his mother. He knew in an instant as she held him that she was his flesh and blood, that he had come from her, for her embrace was rough and rigid much like his own. The smell of her flesh, the scent of her hair, all of it was too familiar to ignore or deny anymore; when they pulled back if only for a moment, Cora looked up at Thomas with such awe, such adoration, that it was like the sun had been swallowed by her eyes. That all warmth and goodness in the world now radiated from within her instead.

She touched his face, her smooth and loving hands running over his eyes, nose, and lips. It was like she’d been bidden to memorize him by touch alone. Like she could touch him forever, and it would be enough.

Because it was enough.

“My baby- “Cora beamed, her hands cupping his cold cheeks. “My James. My sweet, darling James-

“And before Thomas knew what was happening, she stood up on tip toe to kiss his brow. He froze beneath her lips, closing his eyes as he was washed under by her love. He had never known such adoration in all his life; he did not know what to do with it now that he’d received it.

And yet she was not finished, holding him tightly in her arms so that he could even rest his head against her shoulder.

He did so, allowing her touch to be memorized by his starved body. Was this a hug he’d known before? Had she held him in his infancy just as she held him now? Had she kissed him and washed all his worries away? Was this what it felt like to be loved by your mother? To know that someone loved you more than anyone else in the world?

Was that why Thomas’ eyes were burning?

His bottom lip quivered as he held his mother close, desperately needing her comfort and guidance. To know that he was someone’s favorite, that someone loved him best... it saved him. It let him know that he could not be all bad. Not if someone so good as Cora Crawley thought him worthy of love and respect.

It made him feel like the world could crash about his ears and all would still be well if she were near. Like she was all that he needed, for now and forever. Like so long as she were alive, he would be okay. The world would keep on turning.

He swallowed around the knot in his throat, pulling back so that he could look his mother in the face. So that he could see her and memorize her as well. She was so very beautiful to him in that moment, almost angelic. Terrified, he reached up to touch her face with trembling fingertips, only to be shocked when she cupped his hand and brought it to her cheek so that he could feel the warmth of her flesh.

Cora beamed at him.
“James,” She said the name over and over again, praising him with it.

Was that his name now? Had that always been his name? Was Thomas like a veneer covering a raw abyss within him where James existed? Was it wrong that he felt strangely about being called James? That it almost didn’t seem natural? Where had Thomas ended, and James begun? Were they interchangeable, or did one mean the opposite of the other? If he was still called Thomas, would he still be a Crawley?

“Robert- “Cora turned to Lord Grantham, reaching out to him to try and get him to turn and look. But Lord Grantham was so shamed that he couldn’t manage it. He still, as tightly wound as a compressed spring, staring at anywhere but his family with blotchy cheeks and puffy eyes. Could it be that this man was his father?

Not Nathaniel Barrow, who’d abused him.
Not an unnamed gypsy father, who’d abandoned him.
But Robert Crawley, Earl of Grantham, who’d ruled over him.

As Cora let go of him, if only for a second, Thomas found himself turning around to stare at Lady Mary again. She’d not moved an inch and was seemingly captivated by the site of Thomas being held by her mother.

Their mother.

Thomas reached out a hand, fingers trembling as he sought Mary’s flesh with his own. Certified 100% DNA. Twins. The very same flesh and heart within her was equaled only to Thomas’ own in his breast. They’d been born together, wound tight around one another, and their fates had been matched above and below stairs. She was the dark horse of her family. Thomas was the dark horse of the staff. She was cold, sharp, aloof, and cutting. Thomas was just the same. She yearned, and so did Thomas. He wept, and so did she. When they’d touched on the train, it had been like electricity rippling through his hardened flesh, reminding him that he was at last home again.

“Mary…” He said.

She came to him, arms wide open, and the pair of them collided with such force that Thomas’ teeth clicked. The electricity was back in an instant as Thomas brought a hand up to cup the back of her head. She was holding as tight as she could, weeping upon his shoulder from joy and relief.

“Thomas-!” His name was an antidote to every wound she’d encumbered in a solitary life. Together at last, able to feel one another, sense one another, rely upon one another, the pair of them were cast into a world of two. She pulled back and he went forward. She pushed forward, and he went back. They were nose to nose, eyes boring deep into the other as Thomas cupped her cheeks (his cheeks), her hair (his hair). It was like falling in love with the mirror, no narcissism attached.

“How could we have been so blind?” Mary wondered aloud. “How did we not see it?” Admittedly, Thomas was stumped.

“Robert?”

Lord Grantham was still frozen in place. Thomas looked about, Mary still in his arms, to see how Cora plaintively attempted to get Lord Grantham to communicate. Tears were streaming down his cheeks; tears of equal parts shame and joy.

Mary and Thomas pulled back from one another, the pair of them waiting to see what their father would do.
Lord Grantham shook his head, too shamed to meet their eyes.

“I did not recognize… my own child,” He finally managed to choke out. “And I have damned you to heartache… out of my own wretched convenience.”

He took a shuddering breath, “And you wonder why I abstain.”

Wiping his tears away, Lord Grantham turned his back on his children and his wife. “I have…”

He had to wipe again. “I have committed the ultimate sin of a parent. I have destroyed the thing I loved completely.”

But was Thomas truly destroyed?

Was it feasible to blame Lord Grantham for being unable to know him as a son, when Thomas himself had not known Lord Grantham as a father? He’d acted as he’d thought was best, and so had Thomas. And though Thomas had admittedly attempted to take his life, he had not done it exclusively because of job troubles. He’d done it out of a loneliness, which he now thoroughly understood.

Cora was crestfallen. She reached out to take Lord Grantham in her arms, but he pulled away. He could not stand to be comforted when he was so horribly in the wrong.

But Thomas knew what it felt like to be horribly wrong, to not know how to fix your transgressions and be in the cold from human kindness. He knew how it felt to sit outside in the freezing rain, sobbing into a wrinkle hat and wondering what on earth was to become of him just because he’d been so foolish as to love. He knew what it felt like to not be trusted, to be considered filth, and did not wish any of these things on Lord Grantham…

…. On his father.

So, Thomas reached out, and carefully took Lord Grantham’s arm in his own. He could feel the muscles tensing and wondered if the man could sense that it was Thomas holding him.

His father was warm, real, and solid. He was not a bully, nor was he vacant. He’d not locked Thomas in a basement, nor abandoned him on the edge of a wood to die. He loved his daughters. He loved his wife.

And perhaps, just perhaps, he might love his son.

Lord Grantham looked about, swollen and bloodshot eyes finding Thomas just over his shoulder. The two men regarded one another, suddenly close together after years spent on opposite sides of a chasm. Thomas found himself getting lost in his father’s eyes. They were a warm honey brown, the same shade that Sybil’s had been.

*Christ,* Thomas thought. *Sybil was my sister.*

No wonder he’d loved her so much.

“…Please understand…” Lord Grantham croaked. “… All I did, I did for you.”

And Thomas believed him.

It was hard to say if Lord Grantham—Robert—moved to hug Thomas first, or if Thomas moved to hug Robert first. In the end they met in the middle, with his father’s arms as tight as a vice around him. Robert seemed to be trying to smother Thomas, as if hoping they could merge and become one
after so many years of being separate.

But we weren’t separate, Thomas thought. Not really.

“My son- “Robert croaked in Thomas’ ear. He’d never known the love of a father, though he’d yearned for it all his life, and to have it now was something akin to being high. Thomas almost felt like he was floating, with only his father’s arms holding him to the ground.

Christ, it was more than worth being shot over.

~*~

The entire family could do little else besides cluster tightly around the fireplace while Murray made phone calls and Carson went downstairs to alert the staff. Absolute silence presided over the abbey, with Thomas sitting between Cora and Robert.

Cora was transfixed by the tiny details of her son; the slightest wrinkles around his eyes and the hook at the top of his nose. He was identical to Mary, now that she could sit them side by side and truly look, but there were slight differences which marked them unique. Thomas was broader in the chest than Mary, his shoulders larger and his jaw squarer. He was obviously a man, and yet he was still uniquely feminine in a way that Cora had never seen before.

He was beautiful, absolutely beautiful, and entirely hers to love forever more.

A terrible wound inside of her had been filled, and though there was still an ache around the edges Cora felt complete in a way that she hadn’t since she’d been twenty-five and a new mother. Her son was home and would never leave it. Cora was determined that until her death they should never be parted, not even for an instant.

Mary and Edith were positively glowing (though that might have been the work of the fire), smiling as they watched Thomas hold Cora’s hand. Robert had his hand upon Thomas’ leg, and was carefully stroking Thomas’ shoulder as if to soothe away any worries. Tom was out the outskirts, but still supportive, casually sipping a well-deserved whiskey while Murray was on the phone with the Liverpool police department. As soon as Murray finished with his conversation, he sat down the phone to return to the fold where the Dowager was waiting with bated breath.

“Well?” she demanded. “Have you arrested the fiends?”

“I just got off the phone with the Liverpool police, ma’am,” Murray addressed her first. “The Chief Inspector is due to arrive by five, and the crown is already making a case against the Barrows. They’ve been taken to jail this very hour and will stand trial in a week.”

“I want them hanged for what they’ve done to my family,” Robert said. There was venom in his voice, even while he tenderly stroked their son’s knee.

“They’ll certainly be facing stiff charges,” Murray consoled him. “Child abduction, child endangerment, lying to the police, obstructing justice… it will truly be a circus by the time it’s all over.”

“But what happens now?” Edith piped up, her hands clasped upon her lap. Thomas looked up, catching his sister’s eyes. “We’ve spent all this time, working so hard to get to this moment, fighting
for the truth. But what happens now that we know it?”

“We live,” Cora said, and as she spoke the words, she held Thomas close. “We live happily ever after.”

It was the perfect ending to a tragic story tale, and one that Cora was certain would go down in Grantham history.

“We’re together again,” Mary said. “And that’s the way it will stay.”

The fire crackled merrily in the hearth. It was like the very soul of Downton was beginning to hum again. As if the house could understand that everything was right with the world.

“I’m a Crawley…”

Thomas was in shock, that much was obvious. His skin was unusually clammy despite him sitting close to the fire, and he looked oddly pale.

“I served you for twenty years,” He whispered, “An’ now, I’m one of you.”

He could not digest it, not that Cora could blame him. It would no doubt take years for Thomas to fully understand who he was. She did not pity the journey laid before him.

She rubbed his shoulder in empathy, lending all her love and support to him in that terribly fragile moment. On Thomas’ other side, Robert was just as shaken.

“The thought of my son serving in my own house,” He shook his head, disgusted. “It makes me go cold. How could I have been so blind all these years? How could I have treated you so poorly? My own child…” He turned, pressing his nose into Thomas’ temple. It was strange, to watch Thomas react to his father’s love. It was obvious to Cora that he craved it, that he needed it perhaps more than any other type of love; he seemed almost afraid of receiving it but equally as afraid of losing it. He was frozen, rigid as Robert cared for him.

“We weren’t to know, Robert,” Cora said. “Thomas’…” She paused. Was it right to call him Thomas or James? “James’ mark is hidden by his arm.”

But this just set off another round of thoughts.

“James,” Thomas whispered the name, allowing his tongue to fill out the consonants with care. “My name is James.”

He shook his head. “I was named Thomas by my kidnappers, my abusers, and now I can’t imagine being called another name. It’s enough to make me sick.”

Funnily enough, it was not Robert or Cora to offer Thomas sympathy on that particular matter. Across the couch, the Dowager was regarding Thomas with the sweetest expression Cora had ever seen her wear.

“Well,” The Dowager offered with a gentle smile, “Perhaps you could be James Thomas Crawley. Although, that’s rather ghastly.”

Thomas looked up, regarding how the Dowager smiled at him. It dumbfounded him.

“…You’re my grandmother,” He said. Once again, it was difficult for the fact to sink in.

“You sound surprised,” She teased.
“Maybe I am.”

At this, the Dowager tilted her head and considered the matter of names. “James Thomas Crawley sounds too plebian. Thomas James Crawley sounds much better. Your original name was Robert. So perhaps we can make it tidy with Thomas James Robert Crawley.”

But Cora could hear Thomas’ breathing beginning to tighten. The more people talked about names and families, the more that Thomas seemed to withdraw in on himself. It was like his very identity had been shaken to the core and he had nothing left to hold onto.

Cora rubbed his shoulder again, but he did not stir. He was far away, though he sat right next to her, awash on a sea of turmoil she could not free him from.

Her beautiful boy; her little northeastern storm.

She could remember being a child and watching a ship come into port, it had borne her father home from England, and she’d missed him sorely. The weather had been terribly rough, waves chaffing at the shore and sending seagulls flying. But she’d marveled at all of it, amazed at how the dark blues and foamy whites collided together to create something dangerously harmonious. Everything had had its place, even if that place had been instilled from chaos.

To Cora, her son was the embodiment of that storm.

“I’m going to stay the night, if that’s alright, M’lord,” Murray was speaking to Robert. “There will be a mountain of paperwork to sort through after all this- “

“Of course, Mrs. Hughes can sort out a room for you- “

Cora watched Thomas shakily press a hand to his chest, rubbing it as if to soothe away a pain. His breathing was becoming more labored, his complexion more ashen.

“Darling,” She leaned in, speaking to him alone. “Are you alright?”

“What am I?” Thomas croaked. Though he did not speak loudly, Cora could hear the terror in his voice. “I’ve gone days now thinkin’ I’m a gypsy. An’ years more before that thinking I’m the son of a clockmaker who hated me. But I’m neither. I’m not a Barrow, I’m not Thomas- “His voice was growing louder, catching the attention of the rest of the family. “I’m not the son of a clockmaker, I’m not a servant, I’m not from Stockport, I’m not from the woods, my parents aren’t dead, they aren’t gypsies, an’ I wasn’t adopted, I was kidnapped- “He spoke in a garbled rush only to pause under the crushing weight of it all.

“… I don’t know who I am,” He whispered. “I’m nobody. All the stuff that made me ‘me’ is gone. I’m a doll without paint on its face.”

Cora couldn’t stand it. She leaned in, wrapping her arms around Thomas to pull him to her breast. He went willingly, collapsing against her to shake upon her collarbone. She pressed her nose into his hair, speaking as sweetly as she could manage to soothe away his fears.

“My darling, you’ve found out everything in a matter of minutes,” Cora pleaded with him. “You’ve been so terribly hard on yourself these past weeks, fighting for the truth. Now you’ve found it out and you’re being hard on yourself again, demanding that you soak it in immediately. You’re a human being, and you’ve been through a terrible torment.” She stroked his cheek, feeling how cold his skin was beneath her fingertips. “It will take a while before this feels normal… it may even take years. But we will love you every minute that it takes.”
Thomas shuddered beneath her arms. “I…I feel like I can’t breathe—“

And suddenly he pulled away from Cora, taking enormous gasps of air as if he’d been choked instead of hugged. Robert watched Thomas, fearful of their son’s deteriorating condition. “I can’t breathe—“

But the answer came in the form of Dr. Clarkson, who stepped around the couch to squat before Thomas on bended knee. Thomas’ predicament seemed to touch Dr. Clarkson, which made sense to Cora. After all, he’d been the one to help Cora give birth, the one to initially declare she’d had twins and hand Thomas over to his father.

“Thomas, you’re going through shock,” Dr. Clarkson explained. “It’s all very normal, and it will pass. You can breathe, you’re doing it right now. I want you to take deep, slow breathes… and focus.”

Thomas did as he was bidden, though Cora could see that he plaintively had trouble managing it.

“Your arm is also wounded,” Dr. Clarkson added.

_Oh!_ Cora thought, _My god that’s right, he’s been shot!_

Her own son shot- oh she could murder that Barrow man! Murder him on plain site with her own two hands!

“My god, I’d forgotten- “she wasn’t the only one; Robert was gob smacked as well.

“We have to have his arm seen to!” Mary piped up.

“We most certainly do,” Robert agreed. “Dr. Clarkson can you manage a moment- “

“I can manage several,” Dr. Clarkson said. “We don’t we head upstairs and find a nice quiet place out of the way.”

At this, Mary added. “You’ll need to pick out your room anyways. Why don’t we get you settled into one-?”

But this just spurred Thomas into more of a panic.

“I can’t- “He babbled. “I can’t sleep there- I- the attic- “

Her poor _poor_ child. Cora began to rub his back again, whispering in his ear. “One day at a time, my darling. It will get easier.”

“Carson- “Robert caught their butler’s attention. “Can we get Thomas settled into a room? Perhaps the one I occupied as a boy- the blue room?”

“Certainly M’lord. I’ll be glad to,” Carson said at once. Cora was touched to see that Carson’s eyes were glistening with unshed tears. The sight of the family back together stirred great emotion from within the aged butler. He was, in a way, a member of their family though not by blood. This reunion was just as momentous to him as it was to them.

Mary rose up from her chair, offering her hands to her twin. Thomas had to take a moment to accept them, his hands trembling violently. Cora and Robert rose in unison, helping their son up.

“Come on,” Mary urged him. “I’ll help you.”

“We’ll all help you- “Edith added. So emotional and loving was she that she could not bear to see
Thomas in pain.

“Allow me to follow,” Dr. Clarkson brought up the rear.

“I’ll stay here and drink,” Tom quipped.

“Keep Murray company,” Robert advised.

“I’ll do that too.”

It was difficult to move Thomas without tripping him. He was shaky on his feet, seemingly unsure of where he was going, and once or twice he simply stopped walking to just stare at the house around him. He was frightened of how grand it was, how big it was, and Cora could only imagine how small and insignificant he felt in response. By the time they’d gotten him up to the gallery landing, Thomas was being led like a blind man, stumbling on the heavy carpet underfoot as they finally made it to the blue room.

There was Carson, already ahead of them, nervously offering Thomas a silent seat on the edge of the bed even as he opened the shutters barring the windows. The sun was high in the sky, and it only served to make Thomas sparkle from all the cold sweat upon his skin.

Dr. Clarkson was there, hesitantly drawing out his bag if only to attempt a rudimentary examination while Edith and Mary moved spare pillows out of the way. This room was set up for guests, with none of the comforts of a true bedroom. It would need to be modified heavily to suit Thomas’ purposes if he were to use it full time.

“I’ll have the maids air out this room immediately, M’lord,” Carson said.

“Don’t bother, Carson- “Robert paused Carson with a hand upon his butler’s arm. Cora could barely hear the words Robert spoke, he whispered them to Carson alone, “Let Thomas rest first. I fear he’ll be in a state for the rest of the day. Perhaps we could trouble you for a glass of water?”

“Certainly, M’lord,” Carson said at once. He left without another word, allowing the family to have a tender moment as Edith shut the door behind him.

“I don’t feel good- “Thomas croaked. He certainly didn’t look it, that was for certain. The pupils in his eyes were the size of pinpricks. He seemed frightened to even look up, trembling upon the blue duvet spread as Dr. Clarkson attempted to pull his cuff loose to take his pulse. Cora winced when she saw a ring of dirt and sweat about Thomas’ lower arm. He was so filthy he’d permanently ruined his clothes. How had she not been repulsed by the smell before?

“Take it one second at a time,” Dr. Clarkson advised, giving up Thomas’ wrist for lost and trying to find his pulse at his jugular. “All you have to do is breath- “

But it seemed that Thomas had forgotten how to do such things. His shaking turned from a mere vibration to an outright palsy. He was panicking now, full and outright as he struggled to get the words out.

“Christ, I think I’m gonna die-!” He blurted out, his face contorted with agony.

“Why do you say that?” Mary asked. She was nervous, Cora could hear it in her voice, but she was trying to remain brave and act calm before her twin. Perhaps she hoped to inspire some confidence in him.

“I can’t breathe- “Thomas was beyond convincing, gasping wildly with his hands upon his throat. “I
can’t- I’m going to die-…M-Mum-!”

Cora had never been called ‘mum’ in her life. To hear it from Thomas’ lips, to hear him beg for her help, just as he’d once wailed in his cot for cuddles and kisses, caused her to fly to action. In that moment, thirty years evaporated as she grabbed Thomas to her side and held him to her taut stomach. Once more, she was a new mother of 25, and her baby was wailing for comfort.

“Sh- “She pressed his head to her breast, stroking the sweaty curls at the nape of his neck. “Don’t you worry sweetheart- “her voice broke,” I’m right here.”

She’d always been right there, she just hadn’t known he was next to her.

“Your anxiety is getting the better of you, Thomas,” Dr. Clarkson advised. “You’re having a panic attack, that’s all. You’re not dying… Though I still want to look at your arm.”

Thomas trembled against Cora’s stomach; she could feel her dress getting wet- was he weeping? She prayed not.

Dr. Clarkson rummaged through his bag, only to pull out a small crystal vial stoppered with a miniature cork. He checked the label for accuracy before saying, “I have something I can give him to help him calm down and sleep. Amytal- “He showed Cora and Robert the vial; Robert took it from Dr. Clarkson to observe it up close with great scrutiny. “I’m afraid it only comes as an injection. Would you like me to give it to him?”

“What will it do?” Cora asked. Thomas was still trembling against her chest.

“Allow him to relax and sleep,” Dr. Clarkson explained. “I highly recommend it. He’s endured a terrible amount of mental confusion today, and he’s already prone to anxiety. If he sleeps, it may help him to feel better, see things more clearly.”

“I think that would be wise, given everything,” Robert decided, handing back the bottle.

Dr. Clarkson set to work without another word, pulling forth a needle from his kit to draw an oddly small amount of Amytal into the chamber. Why so little? Was it potent?

Cora winced as Dr. Clarkson rolled up Thomas’ sleeve to reveal his burn mark. He sterilized the crook in Thomas’ arm before positioning the needle with care.

Cora had to look away.

She did not want her son to suffer any more pain.

But Thomas was a good sport and didn’t wince as Dr. Clarkson worked. Instead, he sat complicit and quiet in Cora’s arms; Dr. Clarkson pulled back, rubbing at the injection site with a bit of fresh gauze.

“Hold pressure on that-?”

Thomas crooked his arm to his chest, closing his eyes as he turned his face into Cora’s breast.

“Now for that bullet wound,” Dr. Clarkson said. “I’ll want the room cleared-?”

“Edith, go take care of Murray and Tom,” Cora commanded. Edith did as she was bidden at once, but not before casting Thomas a loving look. There would be plenty of time later for the pair of them to connect. Thomas needed to be cared for, to rest. Tomorrow was another day.

“Mary- “Cora said, but Mary just glared.
Cora sighed, giving up mid-command. There was no point in trying to make her budge. They were twins and they would not be parted.

“Take off your shirt?” Dr. Clarkson said, catching Mary’s eye to see if she might turn away. She didn’t.

Thomas was clumsy with his buttons, but he finally managed to pull off his shirt to reveal a litany of bruises and stains from living in the woods for two weeks. Worst of all, his bullet wound was any ugly red at the core, the flesh about it a terrible bruising purple with heat and strain. Robert was taken aback at the damage.

“God in heaven,” He muttered aloud as Dr. Clarkson leaned in for a closer look.

“Just as I thought,” Dr. Clarkson worked fast, rummaging through his bag to pull out a bottle of saline and gauze, “It’s an infection. I had a feeling it would be, that’s why I brought my bag. Regardless how today turned out, I was prepared to examine your arm. We’ll do a wet-to-dry gauze wrap, and with luck it’ll draw the infection from your wound.”

“Is there anything you can give him for pain or fever?” Mary begged.

“Not much,” Dr. Clarkson said. “But what I have I’ll certainly give him.”

But Thomas was growing still; Cora drew back a bit, confused to find that Thomas was asleep! Asleep, of all things, who would imagine-?

“Dr. Clarkson- “Cora was taken aback, “He’s asleep!”

Dr. Clarkson did a double take, reaching out to take Thomas’ chin in hand. As he did so, Thomas’ head lolled upon his neck until Dr. Clarkson put a stop to it. He scoffed at the sight. “Clearly the Amytal worked faster than I thought.”

“Let’s lay him down,” Dr. Clarkson advised. Cora and Mary were quick to follow his advice while Robert watched, laying Thomas down upon his pillows so that he was comfortable and still. He looked so vacant and still that Cora almost feared the Amytal had hurt more than helped.

“Will he be alright?” Mary asked. Dr. Clarkson pulled a sterile dish from his bag, filled it with saline to soak dry gauze inside until it was dripping wet.

“He’ll be fine, “Dr. Clarkson soothed. “He’ll sleep the rest of the day, though.”

Mary brushed at the bangs upon Thomas’ forehead, pausing to tuck them carefully pack into place.

Dr. Clarkson was methodical, moving at an exhaustingly slow pace as he carefully packed Thomas’ bullet wound with soaking gauze only to wrap it tight with dry gauze so that no fluid could leak out. Through it all, Thomas rested peacefully upon his pillow. Cora was obsessed in counting the scrapes and bruises that covered her son; he had several nicks upon his fingers like he’d slipped with a knife over the years. The worst scars were of course upon his wrists. Without his shirtsleeves to hide the evidence, his attempted suicide was readily apparent.

The idea of losing her only son to suicide made Cora go cold. She clasped Thomas’ right hand in her own, stroking the sensitive flesh she found as she watched him steadily breath in and out.

*How can I protect you from yourself,* she wondered.
“That should cover things for now,” Dr. Clarkson advised. He wiped his hands upon a towel from
his bag, relocking the ancient clasps to see himself to the door. “I’ll come back tomorrow to check on
his progress, but for now I advise letting him sleep. The Amytal will help with his anxiety for the rest
of the day. I confess, I suspect I’ll be needed sooner rather than later while he adjusts to his new life.
This is a lot to take on, even for someone as bull headed as Thomas.”

“He’s not bull headed,” Cora disagreed. “He’s just determined.”

Dr. Clarkson did not make to contradict her.

“Mary, see Dr. Clarkson out,” Cora said.

“But Mama-“

“Please, Mary,” She warned. Slightly irritated to have to abandon her twin brother, Mary diligently
stepped aside to allow Dr. Clarkson to leave first. She followed after him, only to pause at the door
and say, “I’ll be back.”

“Of course, dear,” Cora wouldn’t question it.

Left alone with her son for the first time in thirty years, Cora could not help but feel spoil for choice.
She reached out, and tenderly played with the sweaty bangs upon Thomas’ forehead. When he’d
been an infant, he’d had a tuft of black hair that she’d played with. Her favorite tufts had been by his
ears, long and soft as they brushed past his face. As an adult, Thomas had stubble on his cheeks from
living in the woods for days without a proper bath or shave, and there were deep bags under his
almond eyes. Cora played with each feature, allowing her fingers to memorize her son’s angelic face.

“My baby…” She whispered the words, barely a breath upon the quiet noon air. “My brilliant boy.”

~*~

Thomas did not wake for the rest of the day, which was hardly a surprise.

As soon as the commotion died down, Mary returned to her post at her twin’s side while the staff
adjusted, and the family rejoiced. Her mother was intent on staying at Thomas’ bedside, holding his
hand and whispering sweet words when she thought no one could hear her. Mary, for her part, just
tried to stay out of the way and watch over Thomas much in the way that he’d watched over her for
so many years.

She’d known, how could she not, that he was her twin. She’d known before the blood test, and now
that the answers were revealed she felt an enormous sense of relief and vindication. Above all, she
was whole, and delighted in having her twin brother close again.

As the hours passed and the sun began to set, Mrs. Hughes cleaned Thomas’ bedroom herself,
attempting to freshen it up with a fire in the hearth and a fresh pitcher of water for the bedside table.
Thomas slept through all of it, completely muddled by the dosage of Amytal. Thomas had clothes
upstairs in the attic, and Mr. Bates fetched a pair of pajamas for Thomas to change into as soon as he
woke. When Thomas ended up never waking, Mrs. Hughes took the responsibility of helping him
change.

Thomas woke intermittently, mumbling and stumbling as Mrs. Hughes gave him a warm wet clothe
to wash with. Thomas fell asleep halfway through and ended up going to bed with an unshaven face.

It was just as well.

Meals were served on trays that evening, as no one had the emotional strength necessary to dress for dinner. Mary ended up eating in Thomas’ room while her parents had their own meal down the hall. Edith ate in the nursery with Tom, the pair of them keeping their children company and gossiping over the exhausting day. The Dowager had been forced to return home, much too old to endure the bitter cold of night without a coat.

She tried to rouse Thomas to eat, but he simply wouldn’t budge. She supposed he would simply have to eat well in the morning and left him shortly after to dress for bed.

Yet even as Mary wandered the halls in her housecoat, she could not help but be drawn to the sound of conversation issuing through the door of her parent’s bedchamber.

She paused, though she knew it wrong, and allowed herself the sin of spying if only to know their thoughts.

“We’ve got James,” Her mother gloated; her voice was sugared with joy.

“We’ve got James,” Her father replied. She could practically hear the smile in his voice. “Thomas, our James. My god. The shame of my words, it’s drowning me- “

“You weren’t to know,” Her mother said again. “You were heart broken, and he knows that.”

“Are you too attached to the name James?”

“Not really. I can let it go for him.”

“Funnily enough so can I.”

There was a strange series of squeaking noises, as if her parents were climbing into bed on an old mattress. Then-  

“He’ll be James on paper,” her father decided. “But you realize, this means we have a great deal to talk about.”

“Of course,” her mother said. The rim around the door went dark as her parents turned out their bedroom lights. She could imagine them now, laying side by side in their marital bed, at home in the dark with one another.

“For one, we’ll have to integrate him back into the family.”

“Naturally.”

“For two, we’ll have to deal with his particular problem.”

“What problem?”

Her father let out a sigh, and the mattress squeaked again as if he was rolling about in bed. “He’s not exactly a normal man, Cora. We’ll have to work on that.”

“Oh Robert, you don’t actually think that can be changed, do you? After all he’s suffered, he’s just a different bird. But he’s our bird, and this is his nest. You can’t ask for more than that after living without him for thirty years.”
“Maybe not,” her father conceded, “But I want to at least give him a chance at a normal life. Either way, we’ll have to keep his proclivities secret. That may be more difficult than you think.”

“Let’s talk about it tomorrow,” her mother decided. “Tonight, we can sleep easily for the first time in thirty years.”

“I’ll sleep like a baby tonight,” her father chortled. After a moment, he let out another sigh of delighted relief. “My baby back. My son…. My only son.”

Mary had no desire to hear more.

She crept away from her parent’s door, tiptoeing down the hallway past Edith and Tom’s bedchambers to reach Thomas’ new room. Cautious of waking him, she opened the door only to find him still asleep underneath fresh covers. The fire was low in his hearth, casting the room in deep shadows, and the moonlight streaming through the curtains put everything in a hue of blue.

Mary looked back down the hallway to her own bedroom, then carefully closed the door to Thomas’ so that they were sequestered inside.

Though she was a grown woman, and he a grown man—
Though she knew it wrong, and knew it odd—
Though she ought to let him rest, and get rest herself—

Mary could not resist crawling into bed with Thomas so that they could lay side by side.

He was warm and solid beneath the covers, a real tangible link to her past that did not judge her; that understood her completely. He was not a saint like Sybil had been. He was not a romantic like Edith. He was not a loyalist like Carson nor an optimist like their mother. He was not an idealist like their father.

He was like Mary: painted in shades of gray, jilted by love and loyal only to his own code. He did not look on the dawn with hope. He did not hold the world to a set of principles. He weathered the storm, and at times he was the storm. He was Mary, through and through.

Her twin.

Mary pressed her nose into the crook of his neck, holding her brother tight beneath their shared blankets.

For the first time in thirty years, she slept soundly through the night.
A New Dynamic

Chapter Summary

Thomas awakens to find he's now a part of a new family with a new dynamic.

Chapter Notes

As promised in the comments, I have amended my errors in the last chapter. Thomas will not be losing an arm. He will, however, attempt to bite Dr. Clarkson.

Trigger warnings for this chapter include slight medical gore but nothing more... except attempted biting.

An odd malaise lay over him, coating him in a muslin grey that kept him quiet and still. Thomas knew a few things for certain; that his side itched, that his arm hurt sorely, and that he was laying in an unfamiliar bed. Every so often, when he managed to open his eyes, he recognized that he was in a bedroom decked in deep navy blue. But then, Thomas would be too tired to look about and instead closed his eyes to return to sleep. Once, in his confusion, Thomas was almost certain Lady Mary was sleeping next to him. But upon waking again, Thomas saw that she was gone, and realized it had been nothing more than a dream.

Unfortunately, the pain in his arm was far from imaginary. It was ugly and throbbing, radiating from the core to span out like some awful tsunami. Every so often, Thomas would twitch the fingers of his offending arm, only to jerk from a spasm of pain that rocked him to the core.

He was sweating profusely, and for whatever reason smelt like garlic. This was far from his finest hour.

Encroaching voices alerted him to life outside his sweltering prison. He tried to call out, to ask for help, but instead managed nothing more than a whimper.

“—Unsure if we should be worried or not—“

The door opened to reveal Lord and Lady Grantham, alongside Lady Mary who for whatever reason was in a panic.
Why are they concerned about me? Thomas wondered.

Ah. Ah that was right.

He was related to them.

“You see, this is how I found him- “Said Lady Mary- Mary- what on earth should he call her now?

Lady Grantham- Cora- his mother- cor this was going to get difficult, he thought.

Cora sat on the edge of the bed, bringing her hand up to brush his bangs off his forehead. Her touch was cool and soothing; her hand slim and soft.

“Darling?” She called out to him. “Are you feeling well?”

“What’s wrong?” Lord Grantham- his father- was at her shoulder, watching over Thomas protectively.

I’m his son, Thomas wondered in awe. This man is my father.

It was a notion so bizarre, it did not seem capable of existing in a logical world.

“I… hurt,” Thomas managed to get out. It was a rough and raw affair, but it got the point across.

“I’ll have Carson ring for Dr. Clarkson,” His father said, and left without another word to leave Cora and Mary alone. Mary sat on the opposite side of the bed as Cora and took his hand in her own so that she could hold it comfortingly.

“Sweetheart…” It was a loving muse, nothing more; His mother simply just seemed to want to reach out to him, not tell him something or ask a question. She still had her hand upon his forehead.

“My arm,” Thomas moaned. “My arm- “If only he had a fully functioning brain, he could get the rest out. He was working with half his brain cells by this point.
“It’ll be alright,” Cora said. He didn’t know whether there was any fact behind that statement, but it was nice to hear none the less.

Yet as Mary continued to stroke his other hand, Cora paused and grew confused. Her fine brow crinkled.

“Mary, when did you find him?” Cora asked.

“Early this morning,” Mary didn’t take her eyes off of Thomas’ face; as a result, he could watch the guilt pass through her eyes. What was she nervous about, he wondered?

“Why were you up?”

“I…” Mary was fishing for a lie and coming up with an empty hook, “I suppose I couldn’t sleep.”

His mother’s eyes narrowed; she would not take a lie from her own child. “Mary,” she warned.

Mary rolled her eyes, embarrassed at being caught out. Thomas knew the feeling well: “Don’t patronize me, Mama. I’m a grown woman- “

“Exactly!” Cora cut her off. “And grown women do not sleep in their brother’s beds.”

Sleep in their brother’s beds… but… did this mean Thomas hadn’t dreamed Mary was beside him? Had she actually slept with him?

Hope I didn’t smell like garlic, Thomas thought absently. He certainly smelt foul, now.

“Oh, have some mercy on me, it was one time!” Mary snapped. The sarcasm was dripping from her voice.

“So long as it never happens again,” At this, Cora turned back to Thomas and continued to stroke his bangs from his forehead.
Mary was embarrassed, but there was no need for her to be. Admittedly, it was a little awkward that a woman had shared his bed (and a woman he was related to at that), but these were special circumstances and Thomas was oddly glad to have her near. So, intimate was their bond that at times when Mary drew breath, Thomas felt his lungs burning. He could feel her laying thoughts upon his mind like a sheet; such a bond was worth celebrating once or twice.

Thomas’ hand twitched in her grasp; Mary glanced up, saw him watching her, and gave him a tender smile.

“M…” Thomas could not get out the words.

But there was no need; Mary already knew what he wanted to say.

Thomas faded in and out of consciousness after that, only to be jerked back rather painfully into the waking world by a burning feeling in his upper arm; Thomas’ eyes fluttered- he could hear voices quite close.

“—Quite a good thing, if you can believe it or not,” It seemed that Dr. Clarkson had arrived. “All he’s doing is sweating out a fever, and his wound has lessened in inflammation even in the few days that he’s been sleeping. I’ll change the bandage now, but I fully expect him to feel back to normal by the end of the week. He’ll need to keep wearing a sling, of course, but his fever will be gone soon.”

Thomas opened his eyes.

It seemed that neither Mary nor Cora had moved from their initial spots. Robert, however, was back and speaking with Dr. Clarkson who sat at Thomas’ bedside fiddling with the bandages upon his arm; this was the source of his pain. If he had more strength, Thomas might have turned and attempted to bite Dr. Clarkson’s hands. Instead, befuddled, Thomas opened and closed his mouth, teeth clacking against one another.

Robert did a double take, concerned by Thomas’ actions.
“Get off me,” Thomas groaned. “Or I’ll bite you- “

“I quiver with fear,” Dr. Clarkson quipped. “Stay still.”

Thomas groaned, watching powerlessly as Dr. Clarkson pulled back a string of bloody and yellowed gauze. Why was it yellow? Was his blood yellow? That was slightly concerning-

“God, that’s a site,” Robert turned away, rubbing at his brow.

“Please, do not be modest for my sake,” Dr. Clarkson was hardly disturbed by bodily functions. Robert, on the other hand, looked slightly green.

*It’s a good thing I can’t see it,* Thomas thought. He was already feeling on the poor side.

And yet, as Dr. Clarkson worked, Thomas could feel the pain in his arm depleting. Maybe the old gauze had had something to do with it? For whatever the reason, he desperately wanted a good scratch.

Dr. Clarkson cleaned Thomas’ wound with gauze dipped in saline, only to re-wrap his wound in dry gauze and put his arm back in his sling.

Admittedly, Thomas felt slightly better.

“You’ve been sleeping for a few days, Thomas,” Dr. Clarkson explained. “You need to try and get back on a decent schedule. Tomorrow, try and wake up at a normal time and eat a meal. The more you work at it, the better you’ll feel.”

Thomas nodded, attempting to swallow around a strange knot in his throat. Once again, Cora gently pushed his hair back.

“I smell like garlic,” Thomas mumbled.
“Count your blessings,” Was Dr. Clarkson’s wise reply. “There are worse smells.”

Thomas conceded that point, re-closing his eyes so that he could be left in peace.

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Thomas sucked in a breath; his eyes snapping open.

He had to piss like mad, preferably sooner rather than later.

Like, right now.

He sat up, only to groan as a wave of dizziness hit him smack in the face. Stumbling from bed only to cling to the posters of his bed, Thomas finally managed to make it to the bathroom to relieve himself. He was too dizzy to stand and ended up having to sit in a rather undignified position. It got the job done though, and Thomas took several steadying breathes as he relieved himself.

He palmed his face with a free hand, rubbing exhaustedly at his eyes.

What time was it? What day was it? Where the hell was he, even?

He could vaguely remember Dr. Clarkson saying something to him; something about a normal schedule. He could also remember garlic coming up in the conversation, though the reason why evaded him.

Thomas rotated his arm in his socket, and heard the bone click at the joint in appreciation. His arm was still incredibly sore to the touch, but it no longer felt hot and his head was clearing. Thomas took a few deep breathes, realized he was still sitting on the toilet for no reason, and cursed aloud at his own laziness.

He washed his hands at the sink, staring at his haggard reflection with grotesque appreciation. His facial hair was out of control, with a newfound black beard encroaching upon his cheekbones. His hair was a greasy mess, flopping all over his face like a wet mop, and his skin had taken on a waxy hue without a good wash for weeks.
If there was one thing Thomas could not stand, it was a slovenly appearance.

The mercy of the situation lay in a rather well decked out sink rim, which seemed to have been laid out as if expecting Thomas’ needs.

Why would someone have done this for him?

Befuddled at his stroke of unusually good fortune, Thomas turned on the tap and got the water running as hot as he could stand it. It was a slow, methodical process, first washing his face with soap and water only to lather his cheeks and shave them clean. His hair would need to be cut and washed, but for now Thomas had to content himself with a good rinse and fresh pomade. As he combed his hair back into a simple side part, Thomas felt like he was recovering his humanity. He watched filth and shaven stubble swirl down the drain and was glad to see it go.

Was there was an odd smell in the air? Thomas sniffed, looking left and right. Something smelt like garlic.

Was it him?

He lifted an arm, only to recoil in disgust. “Christ-!” Thomas moaned. He needed more than a bathe; he needed someone to take him outside and spray him down like a soured horse.

Thomas ran a wet cloth over his body, though it did very little good. As a result, by the time he was finished he was damp but not clean.

For a moment, Thomas simply sat and stared at his reflection, wondering at the man gazing back at him from the mirror. Tiny events, miniscule details, were dripping through his subconscious like pulp through a sieve, reminding him of all that had occurred.

He remembers the rotting wet of the woods, the terrible stench of fungus and decay as he slept on a frozen forest floor. He could recall how the sofa had felt in the library, as he’d sat in the arms of his family; he was slapped with the realization of his identity once again and bowed his head in thought.

He was a Crawley. He was James Crawley.
What did it mean? There were so many layers to uncover.

It meant that his name was not Thomas Barrow. That his birthday was not his actual birthday. That Mary, Edith, and Sybil were his sisters. That Cora and Robert were his parents. The Dowager was his grandmother, Rosamunde was his aunt, and the children were actually his nieces and nephews.

But there was more.

It meant that he was a noble. That he was technically the next legal Earl of Grantham, not George, and his family legacy was one that could be traced back through history books. He would probably never work again, and certainly would never work below stairs. But after being raised all his life as a servant, Thomas still thought like a servant and could not register his situation as a noble could. He thought endlessly of his clothing and responsibilities. Who would tend to him? Could he avoid having a valet or would his father demand it of him? And what would it matter if he couldn’t step up as a noble intellectually. Thomas had been forced to withdraw from school at the age of ten in order to help his father—

No, not my father, Thomas thought irritably. Nathaniel Barrow is the man who allowed me to be kidnapped and raised in his house. He shot me when I tried to uncover the truth. He’s not my father.

But still. The fact remained that Thomas could only just read and write. He’d uncovered a great deal more through books that he’d read on his own time (particularly literature) but knew nothing of history, math, and science. He understood politics as it applied to him, but he didn’t know how the political party systems worked. He’d seen France as a soldier in war and had gone to America once, but had never traveled extensively and knew about as much as the next bloke regarding world affairs. How could he be expected to hold a conversation? To hold his head up in a room full of intelligent men? He couldn’t even write in cursive, and now he would be expected to observe himself as the future Earl of Grantham.

The thought of being in charge of Downton Abbey made him sick to his stomach. He didn’t want that responsibility. He didn’t want to have to make those decisions. He hardly had the mental capacity to take criticism without offense, and now he was going to have move the abbey into the future?

Christ, he might as well take another bullet to the arm.

Thomas let out an enormous sigh and felt the weight of the world resting upon his dirty shoulders. He shuffled from the bathroom and returned to his bedroom to find his only remaining suit folded neatly over a clothes horse by the fire. The pieces of his suit had been washed, but they were beyond
repair and littered with miniscule stains. What was more, they weren’t ironed and in short looked like an awful mess. Still, they were the only clothes that Thomas owned now after having to sell everything he possessed just to afford food.

Unsure of what else to do, or where to go, Thomas shed his bedclothes and redressed in his suit. The fabric was itchy and stiff against his filthy skin; he needed a bath but felt unsure about using the lion clawed tub in the next room. He needed to talk to someone who could understand his situation; someone who could walk him through what needed to come next. But that person didn’t exist, and if they did Thomas had a feeling they weren’t under the abbey’s roof. Tom Branson had admittedly transferred from the staff to the family, but he wasn’t a Crawley by birth.

There was no one that could identify with him fully, so Thomas would have to settle for sympathy instead.

He didn’t want to see his new family, not dressed as he was and reeking of filth; he needed to bath and to iron his clothes. Doing both would require going to the basement and asking for help from Mrs. Hughes. Nervous, Thomas poked his head out of his bedroom and found the gallery hall clear. He scooted at a ginger pace down the hall, not wanting to be caught out when he looked like a homeless beggar and slipped inside the green baize door. He could hear a gentle lull of conversation coming from the basement, and so he descended the stairs at a cautious pace with pricked ears. He had a feeling there would be only one topic of conversation on display.

That is, if Mr. Carson would allow it.

“Absolutely unbelievable.” That was Moseley’s voice; Thomas knew it anywhere. It was grating, dull, and made him want to shoot himself in the face.

Thomas paused near the bottom step, alone in the hallway to the kitchen; Daisy and Mrs. Patmore were working at the stove but had their backs to him. Pressed against the wall near a standing mirror, Thomas was virtually in the shadows.

“His Lordship is born anew,” Mr. Bates was there, no doubt with Mrs. Bates. Thomas couldn’t see them around the corner, but he could almost sense the pious energy rippling off their golden shoulders in waves.

“I still don’t understand though…” Anna was less convinced. “How can we know for sure that the tests are accurate?”
“We trust in Dr. Clarkson, Anna,” Carson was there too, which shocked Thomas. Normally Carson despised gossip of all shades; now he was actively partaking? “And the London School of Phlebotomy. His Lordship was incredibly careful about allowing false information to get through.”

“Well, I’m not too sure that I trust it,” Moseley said.

“Mr. Moseley?” Carson was taken aback.

“It just seems too strange, Mr. Carson,” Moseley explained. “Lady Mary entrusts Barrow with the task of recovering information on her long-lost twin. And Barrow does, but it’s him? How do we know Barrow didn’t somehow manipulate the information-?”

“Because he didn’t perform the tests, Mr. Moseley,” Mrs. Hughes was at the table, and from the sound of her voice she was losing her patience on the subject. “Those were done by a doctor in London, in a lab. Far away from Thomas. And I’ll remind you, we are expressly forbidden from calling him Barrow now. His Lordship has requested that he be called Mr. Crawley.”

“I’m sure he’ll like that,” Moseley muttered.

Thomas closed his eyes, shaking his head. God, how he wished Moseley would just shrivel up and die.

“Lady Mary said the envelopes were sealed,” Mr. Bates spoke up again. “Thomas couldn’t have tampered with them without Mr. Murray knowing. They never left his hand, until they were given to Dr. Clarkson.”

Was Bates defending him? That was about as queer as it got.

“It’s true,” Anna said. Ever the one to take her husband’s side on all things. “Lady Mary said his Lordship was determined that Thomas have no knowledge of the information coming and going. The envelopes were sealed, so I suppose it must be the truth.”

“I just don’t know,” Moseley grumbled again.

“Mr. Moseley…” Baxter was there, and at the sound of her voice the whole table fell still.
Baxter, who’d known him since childhood.

“This has been very difficult for me,” Baxter reminded him. “I knew the Barrows, and I assure you top to bottom there was never a little boy in their house besides Thomas.”

“But how do you know for sure-?”

“I used to have sleep overs with the Barrow’s eldest daughter!” Baxter snapped. It seemed she’d finally lost her patience with him. “I keep telling you, there is nowhere in that tiny house for another boy to hide! Thomas was the only son, and we have written confessions from Alice Barrow that she raised James Crawley as her own son. That’s the proof, end of story.” There was an odd smacking noise like Baxter had slapped her hand upon the table in an act of courage.

*My god,* Thomas wondered. *When did she get her tongue?*

The sound of heels clacking upon the grimy stone floor made Thomas bristle. Daisy walked past carrying a hot kettle of tea wrapped in a heavy white rag. Yet she paused upon noticing him in the shadows and regarded him like a deer might a hunter.

She was frozen to the spot, brown eyes wide and limbs tense.

Thomas did not know what to say to her; he kept silent, just as frightened as she.

“…Is it true?” Daisy whispered.

Thomas nodded, swallowing around a lump in his throat.

“An’…” Daisy shook her head a bit, “An’ it’s not some kind of trick?”

“I wouldn’t trick someone like that, Daisy,” Thomas whispered back.

“So, does this mean you’re one of the family now?” Daisy asked, taking a step closer so that they could speak more intimately.
“I think so,” Thomas said.

“His Lordship wants you to be addressed as Mr. Crawley,” Daisy explained. “So, I guess I should call you that now instead.”

“You don’t have to,” Thomas said. “Not down here, anyway-“

“Daisy, who are you talking to?” Mrs. Hughes called out from the servant’s hall.

Daisy looked from Thomas to the doorway, slightly taken back.

“M…” She stuttered a bit, “Mr. Crawley.”

At once, there was an elongated sound of chairs being drawn against stone. Then, several faces peered around the servant’s hall door, each of them pressing against the other to try and get a better view of Thomas.

Mr. Carson, Mrs. Hughes, Anna, Mr. Bates, MR. Moseley, and Ms. Baxter all regarded him with a numb shock that truly had no name. Certainly Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes looked warmer and more sympathetic, whereas Moseley looked disgruntled with his arms folded over his chest. But Anna and Baxter were both boggled by the realization of his identity. Bates was just… Bates. Unflappable and slightly grumpy around the edges while he relaxed against his cane.

They were staring at him, waiting for him to speak. Daisy was clutching her teapot tight against her breast.

Not wanting to be gawked at by a group of people he’d known for years, Thomas gave a nervous cough.

“Mrs. Hughes,” Thomas had to cough again, given the raw texture of his voice. “I just came downstairs to fetch an iron for my clothes. I don’t have anything else to wear and… I don’t want the others to see me looking poorly.”

Mrs. Hughes stepped forward, speaking in a gentle and delicate voice, “I understand, Master James,” she replied. The moniker put acid in Thomas’ stomach when coming from her mouth.
“If you like, we can- “But Thomas shook his head and she fell silent.

“Please,” Thomas murmured, “Please don’t ever call me Master. Ever.”

“I’m afraid we have to,” Mrs. Hughes was gentle about it though. “It’s his Lordship’s request that we either address you as Master James, or Mr. Crawley.”

When Thomas did not reply, Mr. Carson spoke up.

“…Thomas…” Mr. Carson seemed the only one brave enough to refer to him by his first name anymore. “I understand if you’re feeling poorly. His Lordship mentioned that you would be under the weather and needing some help to recover.”

“I’ve got to have a wash, Mr. Carson,” Thomas complained. “I smell like something that got dragged out of a sewer, but I don’t feel right using the tubs upstairs.”

“It will take time,” Mr. Carson replied, “But I assure you, you are well within the right to use any utility found on the gallery floor. You are a Crawley, Thomas… This is your home, and your birthright.”

Thomas swallowed, feeling oddly shamed in that moment though he couldn’t say why.

“May I please borrow an iron?” Thomas asked.

“You parents would not want you to worry about such things,” Mr. Carson reminded him.

“It’s hard not to, Mr. Carson,” Thomas shrugged. “I… I can’t stop thinking like a member of staff. I’ve been raised all my life to do my own upkeep. I don’t know how else to behave. I woke up this morning and… I couldn’t even… it all seems like some strange dream.”

Mr. Carson’s expression visibly softened, which was very bizarre indeed. He gave Thomas a tiny if tight-lipped smile.
“You need a day or so to come to your senses, Master James,” Mr. Carson explained. Once again, the moniker made Thomas flinch. “You’ve been pushed too hard for the past several weeks, and I believe the stress is beginning to show.”

It was like Thomas had had a stroke. When did these people start treating him with respect? Like he was actually worth a damn?

“What?” Thomas wondered.

“Why don’t you take a bath,” Mrs. Hughes offered, stepping up so that Thomas had to confront her instead of Mr. Carson. “You’ll feel much better. And Mr. Bates can iron your suit—“

“No—” Thomas shook his head. “No, I’ll iron my own suit, I just need to borrow the tool—“

“Well I’m afraid your father won’t allow it,” Mrs. Hughes spoke as gently as she could, as if she feared Thomas might explode. As a result, Thomas felt like he was being gently slapped in the face once again with the reminder that he was a Crawley.

He’d spent his entire life being hated by the man he thought was his father, and then a week lamenting a father he supposedly never knew.

And now?

“… I see…” Thomas murmured, head bowed deep in thought.

In truth, if there was one relationship in the entire family that Thomas was frightened of losing, it was with his father. Robert Crawley had already reprimanded him several times over the years; his poor choices and even poorer words had resulted in Thomas often being the black sheep of the staff. But Mary was the same of the family, and still Robert loved her. So, could it be that he would love Thomas too? What if Thomas put up too much of a fuss, arguing about things like ironing clothes or taking bathes in claw footed tubs? Would it cause Robert to grow tired of him?

Would he lose his father again?
“Mr. Bates- “Mrs. Hughes gestured for the man to step forward. “Take Mr. Crawley upstairs, and help him get sorted.”

“Of course,” Mr. Bates was slow on the stairs, but even he was faster than Thomas who had forgotten fundamental movements such as blinking and breathing at the same time.

“Come on,” Bates urged under his breath. Dumbly, Thomas followed.

They went up one flight of stairs, then another, till they were back on the gallery floor and walking side by side at a snail’s crawl.

“Quite a shock, all of this,” The golden light filtering in through the sky dome placed gentle brown lights upon Bates’ mostly graying hair. In that moment, Thomas realized just how old Bates actually was. Bates and Robert were good friends, they’d served side by side during the Baor war.

So, technically, Bates was old enough to be his father.

“You have no idea,” Thomas mumbled. They reached Thomas’ room, so that Bates could push the door open for them both to walk through.

“His Lordship is over the moon,” Bates closed the door to give them a hint of privacy. “He wept for joy the night he told us.”

But this only inspired thoughts of dread within Thomas. What if he failed Robert’s hopes? “I have a feeling that he won’t be joyful for long?”

“Why do you say that?” Bates asked as Thomas returned to the bathroom and sat upon the rim of the tub. When Thomas did not make to turn on the water, Bates did so for him.
“Because as Moseley says, I have a constitutional disagreement with happiness,” Thomas sneered. “But forgive me!” He pressed a hand dramatically to his heart, “Moseley is your chum.”

Bates quirked an eyebrow, fiddling with the taps to warm quickly filling tub.

“Take a bath, clean yourself up,” Bates advised. “I’ll iron your suit while you do and lay it out on your bed.”

“I don’t want to be valeted on,” Thomas snapped. In his shame, he could not meet Bates’ eyes. “Why can’t you people understand that??”

“I’m not valeting for you,” Bates said. “I’m ironing your suit. You can dress yourself, and you bathe yourself. I won’t do more than that.”

But Bates was treating him with clipped kindness and it was starting to drive him mad. He wanted Bates to snap at him, to say something shitty and cold that would leave him weeping into his pillow later.

“Treat me like normal!” Thomas begged. “Fight with me!”

But Bates did not.

Instead, he leaned heavily upon his cane and regarded Thomas like one might a stroppy child. As a result, Thomas’ cheeks burned horribly.

“… Thomas, I’m tired of fighting,” Bates muttered. “I’m fifty-five years old. I’m about to be a father. You’re the son of my oldest friend. I received a card with your inked footprint when you were born. Even if you weren’t the son of a friend, I don’t want to fight anymore. Do you? Truly? Or would you rather we be friends?”

Friends with Bates?
“… I think we could never truly be friends because we’d annoy each other to death,” Thomas muttered. But then, he scoffed to add “I never disappoint, do I?”

Bates just shrugged after a moment, taking his time to digest Thomas’ words.

“You never annoyed me,” Bates said.

“That’s a feckin lie,” Thomas finally met Bates’ eyes only to glare. Bates just crooked a bizarre grin.

“You’re right, it’s a feckin’ lie,” Bates replied. Thomas snorted.

“You haven’t annoyed me since Jimmy,” Bates said. Now, that made a little more sense. They’d developed a queer truce during those trying times. “And I know you love Lady Mary.”

Thomas sighed, rubbing his hand exhaustedly across his face. “Yes,” He whispered. “Yes, I do.”

“Whatever we choose to be, it doesn’t need to be defined,” Bates finally said. “So long as we’re not enemies.”

“…Alright,” Thomas mumbled. He dropped his gaze as Bates turned off the water taps and offered him a clean towel from the cupboards.

“Wash up,” Bates advised, “You smell a horse’s ass.”

As Bates turned and walked away, Thomas muttered bitingly under his breath, “Least I don’t look like one-”

“I heard that.”
Bathing was spiritual experience. Thomas submerged himself entirely in the water, twirling a bit like a fish only to resurface and scrub mercilessly at his filthy hair with Watkins Emulsified Coconut Oil Shampoo. By the time he was finished removing the filth from his skin, his bathwater had taken on a beige color. He drained the tub, dried himself off, and upon assuring himself no one would burst into the bathroom he immediately covered his skin in pond’s cold cream. One thing he’d never understood about ‘normal’ men was their obsession with looking filthy. Thomas loved the smell of Ponds, and the sensation of being smooth. He was a walking advertisement should anyone ever ask.

Thomas peeked outside, wrapped tight in his towel, only to find that Bates was gone. In his wake was a freshly ironed suit; Bates had even gone so far as to fetch him a purple tie though Thomas had no idea where he’d gotten it from. Thomas certainly did not own a purple tie.

He opened the bathroom door, spilling out a roll of steam into the bedroom, and hurriedly snatched his outfit from the bed to quickly return to the comforting warmth of the bathroom. He dressed at once, re-fixed his hair, and scrubbed his teeth to freshen his breath.

As Thomas looked back up at the mirror with a freshly rinsed mouth, he felt and looked like a completely new man.

He was back to normal, back to himself, though his entire identity had practically changed overnight, and he’d been shot in the arm.

Thomas sniffed, wiped his eyes, and left the bathroom behind.

The time was well past breakfast, so there was very little chance of Thomas snagging a meal before lunch, but he ventured downstairs anyways. He found most of the rooms obviously abandoned and wondered if the family- his family- was even in the house.

But then, Thomas heard the distant appeal of excited chatter drifting in from the library door which was cracked just a hair.

He approached nervously.
“Crown thinks we have a solid case-” was the voice of Robert’s lawyer, George Murray.

Unsure if he was intruding upon a business meeting, Thomas carefully opened the door and peered inside.

He was surprised to find a great deal of the Crawley clan clustered around a roaring hearth taking a cup of tea while Murray talked business with Robert. Everyone was beaming, chatting and chuckling with one another. Mary was queerly enough passing Edith a biscuit, which was downright bizarre given their relationship. Carson was watching over everyone with a barely suppressed smile.

Was this all because of him?

Thomas opened the door a bit wider, stepping fully inside to shut it so that he was lurking in the shadows once again.

But as Thomas kept watching, he found it was impossible to remain hidden. For one, Cora just seemed to know whenever he entered a room, like she had a sixth sense keyed into his arrival. She turned, saw Thomas hiding in the doorway, and rose to her feet at once with a delirious smile.

“Darling!” She cried out, eyes glistening, and arms spread wide. “Oh, thank god you’re better!”

Everyone looked about as Cora collided with Thomas, throwing her arms about his neck. He was staggered to be hugged so hard; it was rare that someone loved him so obviously, so deeply.

“…Mum…” Thomas didn’t know what else to say. Cora pulled back, stroking his freshly shaven cheeks.

“Look at you,” she praised. “You’re back to yourself again. You look so different without a beard.”

He certainly felt different. “When I woke I… I thought it had all been just a dream-”

“It’s far from a dream,” Cora assured him. At this, she kissed him softly upon his clean-shaven
cheek. “Come see your father, he’s wanted so badly to speak to you.”

She took him by the hand, pulling him back towards the center of the family. But Thomas had scarcely taken six more steps when Robert Crawley met him half way. Thomas was struck by the petrifying realization once again that this man was his father, only to be swooped up as Robert embraced him without reserve.

Thomas flushed, still nervous to show affection in front of anyone lest he be shot down. He ended up gingerly placing his hands upon his father’s back, able to take comfort in the smell of Robert’s musky cologne as he pulled back to praise, “My son.”

It was like he’d been dying to say the words all his life.

“Come sit with us,” Cora begged, returning to the sofa to sit between Mary and Edith who were waiting nervously at the edge of the commotion. “There’s so much to discuss. Are you hungry?”

“Oh, I- “Thomas stuttered, pulling back a bit from Robert to look first from his mother to his father. They were both smiling at him, so damn eager, and Thomas was terrified of not pleasing them.

The truth of the matter was that he was starving, but he couldn’t exactly say that when it was so close to lunch anyways. He would simply have to wait.

“I- I’m alright,” Thomas stuttered, “I mean to say, don’t worry about me- “

“I’m allowed to worry about you,” Cora teased. “I’m your mother.”

But Thomas had never experienced a parent that cared about his welfare before.

“Come, sit,” Robert murmured with a gentle smile, offering Thomas a seat next to him on the opposite couch. Mary and Edith were still beaming at him, but why?

Mary he could understand… but Edith?

What did she want from him? How could he keep from disappointing her?
“I should tell you Mr. B- “Murray caught himself, grimacing at the slight blunder. “Forgive me, that is to say- what would you like to be addressed by?”

“Well- “The fact of the matter was, Thomas was struggling heavily to accept that his name was James Crawley after spending nearly his whole life as Thomas Barrow. Internally, it was still how he aligned himself. He did not look in the mirror and see a ‘James’, and doubted he ever would. James had been taken from him and destroyed like fine china upon a stone floor.

Thomas looked from his mother to his father, unsure of what to say to Murray. So many people to please…

“We talked about it the other night,” Cora said with a loving smile, “and we realize it will be terribly hard or you to go by your birth name.”

“If you’re happy being Master Thomas, we’ll accept it.” Robert added. “But your full name will be Thomas James Robert Crawley, and I refuse to budge on that.”

At this, Cora tittered.

“But surely I only need a first and a last name,” Thomas wondered.

“I’m afraid our kind do things rather differently,” Edith explained. “But you’ll simply be Thomas to us if you like.”

“Mr. Crawley, I should explain- “Murray tried to start again but had to pause when Thomas did not immediately turn about to address him. It would take a while before ‘Crawley’ made him pause.

“Now that you’re with us and feeling more yourself, I should inform you that I am heading up to London tonight to get started on all the paperwork we’ve garnered for ourselves,” Murray explained. It baffled Thomas to know that Murray was speaking business to him. That they were having a fucking highbrow conversation sans cigars and port. What backed up world had he stumbled into?

“There’ll be a mountain to go through,” Murray explained, which made a pit of fear gnaw in Thomas’ stomach until Murray added, “But don’t worry, I’ll handle all of it. I’ll need your signature
on several key documents, but that should be the end of it. I should also inform you that the Barrows are set to go to trial is several weeks after the crown finishes building its case, so you will probably be contacted by a private solicitor for the crown before then. I shouldn’t let that trouble you either though. Your main concern will undoubtedly lay with your inheritance and birthright.”

Thomas didn’t know what to say to that.

“My… um…” He was making a poor impression, and silently cursed his slip of the tongue. “Yes, I suppose so. Whatever you want, Mr. Murray.”

Murray was taken aback. Robert, however, took control of the conversation before Thomas could wreck them straight into the rocks.

“I want us to head up to London as well,” Robert said. “We’ll need to speak about the family ways, and get you started on the learning process in adjusting to your role. It’ll be quite a curve, but we’re all behind you.”

“I’ll open up the house,” Cora advised. “And why not introduce him to the old families while we’re down south?”

“I don’t even know how to hold a fork correctly,” Thomas begged. “I don’t think that would be wise- “

“Nonsense,” Mary soothed him from across the couch. “Plenty of men who have the luck to be brought up in our world can’t hold a fork either.”

“London will do you well,” Edith added. “I’ll go with you, I need to check on my magazine anyways. It might help you to be free of Downton for a moment- “

“I’m afraid Thomas will never be free of Downton,” Robert corrected Edith with a gentle tone. “As a Crawley male, and my heir, he is as much tied to this place as I am. It is our cradle and tomb.”

Thomas looked up at the ceiling, wondering at the elaborate wood carved panels overhead. Could it truly be that this was his tomb? His destiny?
His nerves must have shown upon his face, for Cora said, “I’d like to take a walk; just you, your father, and I. Shall we?” She gestured to the door.

“What would we talk about?” Thomas wondered.

“Everything,” She said with a smile.

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Now that Thomas was feeling better, it was painfully obvious to Cora that he was nervous. As a servant, Thomas had had a sort of sulky air, stalking up and down the halls like a prowling panther. It might have been acerbic and sharp, but it had also possessed an obvious (if overblown) confidence. Now, however, Thomas kept fiddling with his fingers, and didn’t like to meet her or Robert’s eyes. They walked, arm in arm around the perimeter of the inner estate, enjoying the soft Fall sun and the cool western winds; still, Thomas was chewing on his lip and keeping mostly quiet.

Cora noticed all these things but said nothing. Instead, she let Robert and Thomas do most of the talking, going back and forth about what needed to be done and when.

“There’s so much to discuss,” Robert mused, his hands clasped behind his back in thought. “The estate, the family, our future. I know you must find all of this terribly shocking.”

“I do,” Thomas agreed. Cora clung a little tight to his arm in response. “I keep wanting to say ‘m’lord’ or ‘m’lady’. I keep thinking about the fact that I only own one pair of trousers, and how I’ve never been to Eton or Oxford or- “

“Don’t dwell on that,” Robert soothed. “I confess, I know how daunting it can be to try and assimilate yourself to highbred society as a young man. You want to please your fellows, to be seen as intelligent by your peers, but we can make up for lost time. We can hire private tutors. We can buy you clothes. We can, and will, forge a better future Thomas.”

But Cora had to interject at this. “But we don’t really want an intelligent son,” Cora said at once, “Or a well-dressed son. We just want you.”

But the look on Thomas’ handsome face made it painfully clear he did not believe her. She paused their walk and rubbed his back in what she hoped was a soothing gesture.
“I won’t be enough,” Thomas feared. “I’ll fail you, I’ll do something improper an’ then it will all be over- “

“Thomas, you are our son,” Robert urged him. “We won’t stop loving you just because you make a mistake or two. No true parent would ever give up on their child in such a way.”

“…The Barrows did,” Thomas mumbled.

“The Barrows were vicious kidnappers, not your parents,” Cora reminded him. Even mentioning that heinous name made her blood boil. “And they didn’t deserve you in any way, shape, or form.”

But Thomas just shook his head.

Cora was beginning to wonder if her son wasn’t seriously depressed. He certainly had anxiety to boot. Glancing at her husband, Cora noted that even Robert was obviously concerned (he usually kept up a façade till he was alone).

“Thomas, why do you truly think we’d give up on you?” Robert asked. He took a step closer, so that they might speak intimately though they were utterly alone out on the grass.

“… I’ll never be normal,” Thomas finally said.

“What do you mean?” Cora asked.

He would not meet her eyes. “You know what I mean,” He finally managed to bite out. The shame was boiling over in his voice.

Oh… did he mean-? Oh!

“Oh, Thomas,” Cora could laugh aloud at the silliness of it all. “You’re completely normal! I shan’t hear a word otherwise!”
Robert clapped their son gently upon the shoulder, offering him a patient smile in his uncertainty. “Many men of our peerage have been inclined to bat for the same cricket team. If I’d shouted blue murder every time someone kissed me on the mouth in Eton, I’d have gone hoarse in a month.”

Cora spluttered in a most unladylike fashion, unable to keep from laughing at this startling realization. To imagine! Her Robert, her love, kissing men! It was utterly ridiculous.

Thomas made a spluttering noise, his pale cheeks turning a bright pink.

“Robert!” Cora laughed gayly.

“However—however!” Robert had to chide them both, because they were too busy laughing to pay attention.

“However,” Robert smiled as soon as they’d quieted down. “I am seriously considering that it may do you good to be married.”

Thomas looked horror stricken; Cora could not deny; the idea of Thomas marrying did not set right with her.

“Please understand, I know it would never be normal marriage,” Robert added. “But marriages of our caliber don’t always have to be normal! And it would keep you away from suspicious eyes.”

Thomas looked down, pale and unsure. “…I…”

He couldn’t’ seem to finish his sentence.

Concerned, Cora leapt in to assuage her son’s fears, “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do, Thomas. You have the final say.”

He nodded, slightly comforted by her words.

“We’ll speak on this later,” Robert assured him. “You don’t have to worry about any of that for a long time.”
Cora snuggled in deep to Thomas’ side, the pair of them resuming their walk. Robert followed along, an easy smile upon his aging face.

“Don’t worry, darling,” Cora murmured in his ear. “You’re home, now. That’s all that matters.”

~*~

“It most certainly is not all that matters!”

“Oh Mama! How can you say such things?”

It was supper time, and the Crawley family was gathered around their table to feast. It was Thomas’ first time eating at the table instead of serving it, and he was decidedly nervous. It as an intimate affair, with only Violet coming as a guest. Thomas had been terribly self-conscious about being served by the staff, so he kept his head resolutely down while Carson and Andrew made circles about the table serving a sumptuous chorus of sea bass and roasted fall vegetables. It was a little simple for Violet’s lavish tastes; normally if she came to sup Mrs. Patmore was expected to put on a display. But since Thomas was at the table, Robert and Cora had specifically requested that dinner be made quiet and simple. After all, Thom only had one pair of trousers to wear and had begged Robert not to be put into his father’s clothes. Robert understood, this was a learning process for Thomas, and it didn’t matter if the first night around if he was dressed in day wear.

However, his mother was of the opinion that man out of tux at the dinner table was akin to Buckingham Palace being engulfed in flames.

“We don’t get me wrong! I’m delighted that James—rather, Thomas—has been returned to us” Violet urged, sitting across from Thomas who was resolutely not meeting her eyes. The shame rolling off of him made Robert feel heavily irritated. Why couldn’t his son be left in peace?

“I am positively bursting with enthusiasm,” She added, though she spoke in a droll tone.

Robert watched Thomas and Mary catch each other’s eyes, neither of them impressed with their grandmother’s words.
Robert had to admit, he was likewise less than amused.

“The fact of the matter is, however, that any child of Crawley blood must be raised to standards! No matter how old they are!” Violet added. “I would say the same if it had been Mary or Edith.”

Robert sighed, taking a bite of his steamed sea bass before adding, “I’ll write to tutors this very night—"

“I’ve already done it.”

Robert choked, pausing to dab delicately at his lips with his linen napkin before turning to glare at his mother.

*Really? She’d already done it? My god did she ever cease fire?*

Violet seemed to sense her family was turning on her; she huffed, setting done her crystal wine goblet with a sharp but firm smack.

“Oh, Robert, don’t be a pest,” Violet snapped, catching Robert’s angry look. “You’d only have picked someone subpar.”

“I resent that!” Robert snapped. Why couldn’t anyone in this family believe he was clever?

“Resent it all you like!” Violet shrugged. “I want the best for my only grandson. Your father wouldn’t have it any other way if he were still alive. Before James and Mary were born, he spoke endlessly to me of his plans if a boy was involved. He wanted James to be a learned man, just like him.”

Across the table, Thomas was crumpling underneath the commanding weight of his grandmother. Mary took his hand upon the table, squeezing it in a delicate if firm show of support. Cora caught Thomas’ eyes, silently bidding him to stay silent as she waged war in his stead.

“Thomas is not enrolling in Eton or Oxford, mama,” Cora warned. “He doesn’t have to learn everything.”
“I’m not saying he does,” Violet shrugged. “But at the very least, you must fetch him a pair of tails! He’s wearing day clothes at the table. Of all things- “She groaned, eyes rolling to the ceiling in despair.

“It’s his first night, mama!” Robert urged. “Give him a little room to breathe.”

“Forgive me- “Violet complained. “I am old and come from a time when men dressed appropriately for dinner.”

Cora sighed exasperatedly, rolling her eyes. Thomas still kept silent, nervously picking at his seabass. He’d hardly eaten a crumb.

“I…” Thomas flushed, head bowed. “I didn’t have anything else to wear, I thought, maybe…”

The answer to all this bickering came in the form of Edith, ever the moderator, who spoke up in the name of peace.

“Don’t let it trouble you,” Edith decided. “It’s only Granny tonight, and we all understand the situation. There are plenty of tailors in York.”

“There might even be one in the village,” Tom added from the far end of the table.

But Robert wouldn’t hear of it. Crawley men were dressed by only the finest of tailors; Smithsby of London was by far the best, and the only solution in his eyes. Earlier that day, Robert had even phoned them for a fitting in two days; it was the smartest way in his eyes to getting Thomas a wardrobe quickly.

“No, that will never do,” Robert warned his daughter. “We always use Smithsby’s for our tailcoats. I’ve already phoned and got us booked for a fitting in two days.”

But for whatever reason, Cora took offense to this. She stared at Robert as if he’d insulted her, cross and frankly a little upset.
“And you didn’t think to tell me?” Cora asked.

“Well- “Robert waffled; what did it matter? “I have to take Thomas to London anyway to speak to Murray. There’s paperwork to be signed. I might as well get him a fitting and introduce him to the club- “

“Robert I only just got him back,” Cora explained. “And now you’re taking him from me!”

“…To London,” Robert added. “Where we will open Crawley House? And stay for a while? Yes?”

Cora grumbled, pushing her vegetables back and forth on her plate. Honestly, sometimes Cora could be a little over emotional about such things.

“I don’t want to be separated from him for a single night,” Cora warned.

“Cora he will be with me the entire time, and we will phone you as soon as we reach the club,” Robert urged. “And while we’re sleeping there, we’ll have the house cleaned and prepared so that you can come the next day. Surely you won’t be put off by that?”

Cora sighed, setting her fork down and considering his offer. Robert caught a glimpse of Carson arching an eyebrow by the buffet table while Andrew stared resolutely at the wall.

“Fine,” Cora said. “But I want you to call me when you reach London, and when you’re at the club. And I won’t have it any other way.”

“Whatever you wish, we shall obviously do,” Robert said.

Yet Violet was still not satisfied. She dithered back and forth, looking quizzically from Robert to Thomas is hoping one of them would crack.

“And with Murray?” Violet finally added with an irritable huff. “Will Downton be put into James’—Thomas’—name?”
But this conversation was starting to head into dangerous territory. Robert could already sense that Thomas was apprehensive about marriage; to be saddled with Downton too early might terrify him further.

“Well- “Robert cut in to warn his mother off, only to be stopped by Thomas of all people.

“Forgive me,” Thomas cut across, his express withdrawn and pale, “But that would be a terrible mistake, in my opinion.”

Violet set her wine glass down, narrowing her eyes at her grandson; though he did not know it she was squaring up for a ‘gentle duel’ as Robert liked to call it.

“And why pray tell is that?” she asked.

“Because Master George—well, that is to say—George, is the heir.” Thomas explained. “And it would be wrong to take that future away from him just because I’m now in the picture.”

“Yes, but that’s precisely the point, dear;” Violet was being undeniably patient with Thomas, for which Robert was eternally grateful. “You are the eldest son of the current Earl, that gives you higher rank than George who is the grandson. Now, if something were to happen to you and your father both, the title would revert to George, but until then… it lays with you.”

Thomas’s cheeks were growing pink underneath the stress of Violet’s weighted words. “But…” His voice was barely distinguishable over the scraping of forks. “But… I can never… have…”

“Oh!” Violet dithered, waving a hand as if to brush off an irksome fly. “That’s no matter. Plenty of men from our line have had the same problem as you; I’ll find you someone who you can stomach, preferably someone who doesn’t ask irritating questions, and you’ll have a child of your own in no time. Why- “At this, Violet laughed at her own private joke. “Even Oscar Wilde had sons- “

Thomas set down his fork hard, eyes closed, and brow pinched.

Now Robert could truly see the likeness to Mary. He was balling his fingers into fists, barely constraining his rage at his grandmother’s rude comment.
“Mama,” Cora hissed, irritated.

At the other end of the table, Tom was busy drowning the conversation with a tall glass of wild turkey. Robert only wished he could join him. Really, why had she thought to say such a thing at the dinner table?

“Forgive me,” Thomas rose up, setting his napkin over his plate in a form of silent farewell. “I’m feeling a little peculiar, and like her ladyship said I’m in a day suit. I’m going to retire for the night; g’nite mum...da.”

Cora made a disparaging noise as Thomas left. Robert felt his heart sink into his stomach at the fact that Thomas had called him ‘da’. It had been so honest, so genuine, and to think it was over so soon because of his blasted mother’s tongue.

“Mama, you cannot speak to him about such things!” Robert reprimanded her.

“I do not require you to tell me what I can and cannot speak of!” Violet reprimanded him right back, her tongue far more cutting and sharper. “I am a grown woman, and your mother, Robert. Not a maid in the parlor. I meant it as a joke, but I can see now that Thomas does not find it amusing.”

“I wonder why,” Mary muttered across the table.

“Does he really have to marry?” Edith asked. “Honestly its 1926, can’t people mind their own business anymore?”

“Not where that subject is concerned,” Violet said. “And even so, your brother deserves a chance at happiness.”

“He didn’t look to happy,” Mary said.

“I assure you he’ll look far less happy if he ends up in court,” Violet said. “You’ll all thank me later.”

Robert caught Cora’s eyes, and gave the tiniest shake of the head.
Honestly, his mother could be such a pest sometimes.

Even Oscar Wilde had sons.

If there was one thing that Thomas hated more than any other (a long list to be sure), it was being compared to Oscar Wilde. The flowery traits, the ridiculous mincing lavender syndrome had Thomas seeing red. He had hair on his chest, he liked his coffee black, and he could play sports with the best of them. He wasn’t vitriolic, and he didn’t speak like a girl just to attract attention at underground bars. He was a man damnit! That’s what he liked about other men! He liked them manly with manly chest hair and manly voices and big burly arms he could wrap himself up in for days!

He didn’t want to get married, and he most certainly did not want to do anything that might result in the birth of a child. The idea of putting his pickles and eggs near…

Thomas shuddered, groaning as he lay upon his bed fully dressed.

Vaginas. The stuff of nightmares they were.

He couldn’t do it. He just… he just plum fuck couldn’t do it-! That’s all there was to it, no matter what the Dowager Countess said.

He wasn’t getting married. He wasn’t having children, end of story. Cora had said the final choice lay with him, so he chose to remain a confirmed old bachelor. Let the others talk, he decided. He knew what he was about.

A gentle knock upon his bedroom door had Thomas fearing that the Dowager Countess was coming back for round two. Instead, it only turned out to be Mary who was still in her dinner dress of a soft olive green. She smiled, shutting the door behind her to garner them some rare privacy.

“Did the Dow- “Thomas stopped himself, “Did Granny get off alright?”

“Oh yes,” Mary grinned, sitting on the corner of Thomas’ bed to play delicately with his steel
cufflinks. “Sent off in a cloud of gloom by Mama. She’s annoyed that your delicate matter was spoken about so insensitively. Granny apparently meant it as a joke.”

“I hate being compared to Oscar Wilde,” Thomas confided in Mary. “I can’t tell you how much it irks me.”

“You don’t have to,” Mary assured him. “I may not be a man of your distinction, but I understand how rude it must be to have that name brought up. It’s notorious.”

“…I can’t do it, Mary,” Thomas whispered. Mary turned about to watch him, her eyes calm and soaking every inch of him in. It was like the pair of them had been transported to their own little world where none could intrude. “I can’t have children. The idea of being with a woman is like something out of a nightmare. Imagine if someone asked you to lay with a woman, how would you feel?”

Mary was slightly taken aback. “I suppose I wouldn’t know where to begin. I have no interest in another woman’s body. I wouldn’t be able to fake that under pressure.”

“So you see the position I’m in,” Thomas explained. “I know what I like and it’s not a woman.”

Mary grinned, slightly mischievous. She leaned on her elbows, drawing close so that the pair of them could whisper to one another.

“What do you like?” Mary asked. “I want to see if it’s similar to me.”

“… Big muscular arms,” Thomas replied. “The burlier the better. And chest hair as thick as a carpet.”

Mary laughed, throwing her head back. Her beaded wrap nearly fell off; she had to pluck it out of her bangs to pull it free from her ears.

“Not close,” Mary said. Relaxing upon her elbows was exhausting, or so it seemed; she kept shaking her elbows out and glancing longingly at his pillows.

“Do you mind if I relax beside you for a moment?”
“Not at all.”

So, she did, laying side by side next to him so that they were pressed at the hip. So close to Mary, Thomas could smell the faint trace of her rose perfume. It was soothing and made him feel slightly sleepy.

“I’m going to fight to keep George the heir,” Thomas declared. “He’s normal, I’m certain of it. He’ll have children, and our line will continue. But it’s not in me to get married or have babies.”

“I fear you might have to at the very least get married; it’s different for men of our rank. People tend to notice if something’s off. When you’re poor you can hide. When you’re rich, everyone wants to know your secrets.”

“God…” Thomas closed his eyes, slightly gray at the prospect.

“I’ll fight your corner,” Mary promised, rolling on her side so that she could address him better. “I promise. If you don’t want to get married, I won’t let them bully you. I know what it feels like to be outnumbered.”

Thomas smiled.

It was rather funny to recall Mary being teased and heckled over Henry Talbot. Now that Thomas knew she was his twin sister, he could not help but feel a strange similarity to her situation. He knew what it felt like to be in a difficult relationship with a man. To long for happiness but not know how to attain it.

“Mr. Talbot was a different sort of man,” Thomas mused, recalling how he’d so avidly jumped into a flaming wreck. “Mr. Crawley, he was more books and brains but Mr. Talbot was all about cars and charisma. Still, he did seem to care for you very much.”

“You can call them by their first names now,” Mary reminded him.
“I keep forgetting.”

“It’s a lot to remember,” Mary relaxed back on his pillows; in doing so, their fingertips brushed and locked. Thomas turned upon his pillow, gazing deeply into Mary’s beautiful blue eyes.

“I slept in your bed, the first night,” Mary whispered. “Are you angry?”

“No,” Thomas shook his head.

“…I suppose I just… missed you,” Mary explained. “I missed having my other half close. I missed being understood.”

“I know the feeling.”

Mary tipped her head forward, relaxing against the pillow so that she could rest upon Thomas’ shoulder. It was a moment that continued to stretch itself, with Thomas deciding he would eventually tell Mary to remember to go to bed in her own room so that they would stay out of trouble.

Yet minute after minute passed, and still neither of them moved.

The fire was low in the grate, a quiet lull had overtaken the hall, and somewhere in the distance Thomas could hear the soft shuffling of the lone hall boy collecting shoes to be polished.

Downstairs, the servants would be eating their supper, and Carson would be reading the newspaper. Mrs. Patmore would be putting left overs in the ice box, and Daisy would be reading another book of foreign politics.

It was all so… comforting and familiar. And here, beside Mary, Thomas felt like he’d finally found some semblance of a place where he belonged.

He fell asleep at her side… but come morning, Mary would be found back in her own bed.
Two weeks after being pronounced the long-lost James Crawley, Thomas James Rupert Crawley found himself on the gravel drive of his ancestral home, saying goodbye to his family in the only suit that he had to his name. The day before him was an enormous one, and so he was to take the six o’clock train to London with his father, his sister Edith, and John Bates who would serve as a valet to both Thomas and Robert. Normally, such early trains were sent off without splendor or fashionable goodbyes (who wanted to get up at the crack of dawn if they didn’t have to), but Cora Crawley was hard pressed to send her son off and Mary was determined to say goodbye.

Tom was still in bed, bless him.

A pale pink sky welcomed the new day with style, while sparrows fled their roots to start looking for bugs in the neighboring farm fields. All around them, England was waking up, but Thomas wanted nothing more than to crawl back in bed. He constantly had to rub sleep from his eyes while he gave Mary a goodbye kiss.

“When will you arrive in London?” Thomas asked her.

“Soon,” was Mary’s gentle reply. She reached out to smooth Thomas’ fraying lapel. “We just have to get Crawley house opened up. You’ll no doubt be staying at the club until we’re in town. It’ll only be for a few days. Mama is ready to run Papa over with a car for taking you away.”
Of this, Thomas had little doubt. Cora had been bound and determined not to let him go, and now she was being forced to part with him for 48 hours. In her eyes, the time length was nothing short of criminal. She stood sulking just on the fringe of the family, glaring at Robert while he shook hands with Carson and beckoned for Thomas to follow along.

“Come along, Thomas,” Robert was beaming, a silver cane in one hand and his top hat in the other. “We must get on or we’ll miss our train!”

“Right-!” Thomas took Mary by the elbow and leaned in to give her a quick kiss upon the cheek. She accepted it with a smile and clung on tight to his hand as he pulled away. They had to let go, however, as Cora was calling with a watery smile and a mournful gaze.

Thomas embraced her fully, allowing her to burry herself in his neck.

“Ring to let me know you’re safe,” She begged. “My baby - “She pulled back, stroking Thomas’ clean shaven cheek. “God, I wish to high heaven I was going with you today - “

“You’ll see me soon, mum,” Thomas urged. “I promise.”

“Ring.” Cora said. “I’ll be there just as soon as I can get through this round of negotiations at the hospital. You must know it’s not for lack of affection - “

“I know mum - “

“It’s just that it’s a new x-ray machine, darling. Top of the line, straight from London, and it could save so many lives here in the countryside - “

“Mum.” Thomas laughed gayly, cutting her off before she could go off on a tangent.

“My sweet baby,” Cora smiled so widely that the corners of her eyes crinkled. Thomas stooped down to kiss her again, and when he pulled back, he could see that there were tears in her eyes.

She didn’t want to be left behind, but she couldn’t be torn away from the hospital. Having only been a servant weeks ago, Thomas knew all too well what an x-ray would mean in this area of the world.
Thomas pulled away, heading for the motorcar which sat puttering in idle on the drive. Yet as Thomas reached the front seat and opened the door, he was taken aback by the site of Bates sitting in his seat and glaring at him.

Bates cocked an eyebrow, took the doorknob in hand, and closed the door on Thomas’ face so that Thomas was now staring at Bates through the window of the door.

Bates jerked a gentle thumb in the direction of the backseat.

“Thomas!” Edith leaned out the open car door, a dazzling smile upon her face, “Backseat!”

“…Right.” Thomas muttered.

He climbed into the backseat of the motorcar, ending up sitting at Edith’s side with their father across the way. Carson shut the car door with a smile and a wave; without another word they were off.

As they drove away, Thomas could see his mother already weeping; Mary was comforting her, patting her on the back and helping her back inside.

“It’s so funny to hear you call her mum,” Robert mused. Thomas turned away from the window, watching how his father regarded him with a warm smile. “But that is what she is, after all.”

“I like it,” Edith said. “I think it gives you character.” The word was clearly a badge of honor with her.

They were mercifully on time for their train, though there wasn’t much of a chance to mingle on the platform. Thomas was amazed to be offered a first-class ticket and sat in the dining cart with wide eyes taking in the brass lanterns and the linen tablecloths. It was a paradise in motion, complete with a full English breakfast offered on railway china. Robert and Edith had always dined and traveled in such a fashion, so they weren’t too fussed; Thomas on the other hand, had grown up in third-class and knew that as they sat eating a divine spread Bates was no doubt having to supplement with a sandwich and boiled egg made lovingly by Mrs. Patmore. There would be no paper offered to him,
no cup of tea (unless he bought it), and he certainly wouldn’t be getting orange juice. Thomas, on the other hand, got to try a taste for the first time in his life.

He sucked on his tongue and teeth, blinking rapidly at the unexpected citrus flavor. Edith could not help but laugh.

“So, what will you do in London,” Edith asked. “Besides order clothes and pay calls?”

“We’re going to speak with Murray today and get paperwork signed,” Robert explained, pausing for a sip of tea. “Thomas’ assets were absolved back into the estate over a decade ago, but they were never spent. I’ll have to reopen an account for him.”

“Oh, and we need to call up the tutors,” Thomas reminded.

“Your grand mama will handle that,” Robert assured him. Thomas grinned at the dull derision in his father’s voice. It had been mildly amusing to watch them squabble over his education.

“But shouldn’t I go to the actual school?” Thomas asked.

That’d be quite unrealistic,” Robert explained. “School is for young men, not men in their thirties.”

“Ah- “Thomas set his orange juice aside, rolling his eyes. “How soon I forget, I am decrepit.”

Edith laughed, “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“No, no- “Thomas crossed his arms over his chest, “It’s far too late for me. I’m bound for the grave.”

Edith just laughed harder, “I’ll let Mary know to plan your funeral.”

“And what will you do?” Thomas asked her. “Besides inform my twin of my demise?”
“Oh- “Edith shrugged with a little sigh, carefully stirring more cream into her coffee. “I don’t know. I suppose I’ll just check on my magazine.”

But there was something pitifully somber in the way she resigned herself to a life of business. Thomas, like everyone else below stairs, was more than aware of the blow up between Edith and Mary that had resulted in Lord Hexam running off. But they’d seemed so natural together, so happy and gay… Maybe…?

“Perhaps…” Thomas spoke softly so as not to be seen as obtrusive. “You might see Lord Hexam?”

But Edith just gave him a gentle smile. “No, I don’t think so. But you’re sweet to enquire.”

Across the table from Thomas, Robert let out a tiny if disappointed sigh.

The train arrived in London at nine in the morning, and Kings Cross was packed to the rafters with morning travelers. On the platform outside, the three Crawleys and Bates were about to part ways. Edith was bound for her office and flat. Thomas, Robert, and Bates were all bound for Robert’s club. A motorcar had been called for the men, but Edith was on her own in a taxi. As Bates fetched their luggage, Robert made a call back to Downton to let Cora know they’d arrived safely. Meanwhile, Edith and Thomas waited at the edge of the platform to find Edith a taxi.

She hailed one with ease, and as the motor cab pulled over Bates picked up her valise to tether it down in the back.

“We’ll telephone when the house is ready,” Robert assured her.

“I look forward to it,” Edith was all smiles as she hugged her father goodbye.

“We’ll sup at the club tonight, but tomorrow let’s dine with Rosamunde,” Robert urged, “I’ve already rung, and she’s out of her mind with scandal.”
“It should prove an interesting evening,” Edith said.

“For some,” Thomas muttered. Edith gave him a hug as well, and a friendly peck on the cheek.

“Chin up, brother,” Was Edith’s fond advice. “We’ll pull through.”

It was with these parting words that Edith climbed into the back of her taxi and drove away. Thomas and Robert watched her go till she was swallowed up in a sea of London cabs; it was impossible to distinguish her from the crowd.

“Your sister never caught on well with Mary,” Robert mused, “But she has a heart as radiant as the sun.”

At this, Robert clapped Thomas warmly upon the shoulder. “First, to the tailors, then Murray’s, and finally the club. Bates?”

“Mr. Carson called for your personal motorcar, M’lord,” Bates said. AS if summoning the vehicle by magic, it appeared at the edge of the platform waiting in a seamless silver cue with a hundred other personal cars. Thomas only recognized it for the Grantham crest which sat emblazoned in silver upon its side door.

Thomas took up his valise, only to have Robert pry it out of his hand and put it back down on the ground.

“No valise, in the car,” Robert warned. “I’ll break your habits yet!”

“But- “Thomas could easily carry his own-

“In the car!” Apparently not.

It was a constant checking of his state, as the drive hopped out of the front to open the door for Thomas and Robert. Thomas had no idea if the man knew about his recent trials, but either way the driver offered no quarrel as Robert and Thomas hopped inside. Bates and the driver took turns stowing away all three valises on the back before Bates climbed back up front with the driver.
Without further ado they were off again, merging into the ebb and flow of London traffic.

AS they rode, Thomas could not help but notice that Robert was smiling infectiously, positively incensed to be alone with his son galivanting about the world’s most productive city. Suddenly, Thomas realized that for all of his mother’s tears, his father was seemingly just as desperate to have alone time with Thomas too. Thomas wondered if that were the reason for Robert’s insistence that they leave a day before Grantham House could open. What if Robert had just wanted a moment to bond with Thomas on his own, to develop a relationship that only a father and son could share?

The thought put a flutter in Thomas’ heart.

In his time as Robert’s valet, Thomas had frequented Smithsby’s of London only twice. The first time had been to fetch a new tux for Mary’s wedding. The second had been to fetch a mourning suit for Sybil’s funeral. Both times, Thomas had merely taken the morning train, gotten the suit from the back door where servants gathered, and headed straight back home. He’d never been able to enjoy the front store of Smithsby’s and had certainly never shopped there for himself. Smithsby’s worked as a partner to House of Worth, hosting Worth suits, Patou in London cuts, classic leather shoes by Perugia straight from Italy, and even rare silk ascots by Fortuny. In order to even get through the front door of Smithsby’s, you had to have an appointment and be let in by an armed guard. Otherwise, you simply had to stand outside and gawk through the glass windows at red velvet mannequins which sported the latest looks in men’s fashion.

Thomas practically hid behind his father as Bates introduced the pair of them to the guard. Their names were checked, and their entrance was permitted so that the ancient oak door of Smithsby’s swung wide to incite them with an aroma of brandy and Cuban cigars. They entered and were immediately cast into a soothing gloom cut by crystal chandeliers and Tiffany lamps. Everything about Smithsby’s reeked of opulence. The floors were waxed, and covered in fine Persian rugs of deep amber and red. The walls were covered in oil portraits of owners and tailors long past. There were no clothing racks to sort through, no shelves to peruse the styles. If you came to Smithsby’s, you weren’t there to browse. You were there to buy, and preferably buy a lot. Everything was custom made, so there was no point of having a selection on the floor to examine. You drank fine whiskey in the parlor, listened to classical music from a gramophone, went into the backroom when you felt like it, and parted with fifty pounds for the finest suit you’d ever wear in your damn life.

That was the code of Smithsby’s. Extravagance for the hell of it.

“Ah- “A weedy, tall man with a pencil black mustache awaited clients behind a fine glass counter. Fortuny ascots, diamond cufflinks, and solid gold tie pins lay on display beneath.
“Lord Grantham, we have been expecting you,” The shop keeper was remarkably level headed for a man surrounded by thousands of pounds worth of goods. “May I take your coats, gentlemen?”

Robert was quick to agree, and Bates helped him to part with his coat so that the concierge might hang it up in a private closet behind the front desk. Thomas, of course, did not have a traveling coat as of yet.

“This is my son, Thomas,” Robert introduced him. “He’s been traveling abroad in Europe and needs a new wardrobe to replace a damaged one. I want him fitted for several outfits.” At this, Robert likewise gestured to Bates who was hanging out in the corner like a sinister spinster aunt. “This is my man, Bates. He will be present for the fittings; he valets for the both of us.”

“Of course, my lords,” The concierge was quick to acquiesce, and gestured with a fluid stroke of the arm for the pair of them to follow down a plush lighted corridor. A red velvet tapestry cut off any visitors from having a front window into someone’s private fitting. “If you’ll come this way, I have my best tailor waiting to dress you.”

Thomas was slow in his steps, constantly looking over his shoulder at Bates who was likewise uneasy to be in a place of such obvious wealth. These sorts of shops boded ill for the poor; too many men like Bates got accused of stealing or loitering when they were on the front steps of Smithsby’s. Bates kept close to Thomas’ side, bringing up the rear as they were shown into the back room.

It was a warm and inviting place, with a personal hearth crackling away and a wall full of angled mirrors to capture every shadow of a potential suit. In the middle of the room stood and enormous circular platform made entirely of waxed wood, which served as a pedestal for the client so that the tailor would not have to work upon his knees constantly. Another gramophone was gently playing classical music, and a personal bar in the corner offered any passing lord a drink and a smoke if he might enquire. The host of this pleasure chamber turned out to be a rather good-looking young man, with golden hair in soft ringlets and a well chiseled jaw. He wore a fine suit of purple, which was a rather shocking color on any man, but it suited his extravagant tastes well and went perfectly with his silver spectacles. This man was obviously the tailor, for he did not wear an outer jacket and had his shirtsleeves rolled up. Such lack of dress in a house like Smithsby’s was practically illegal unless you were in the process of making new fashion.

“Ah, you must be Lord Grantham,” The tailor stepped forward, his accent reeking with French aesthetics. “And Master Thomas I presume?” The tailor shook both their hands, flashing them a charming smile.

Christ, you’re good looking, Thomas wondered.
“You presume correct,” Robert said. “And this is my man Bates, who serves as a valet to the pair of us.”

Bates jerked his head in greeting. The tailor flashed him a tiny if sincere smile. So, it seemed he wasn’t snooty.

“My son is greatly in need of your services,” Robert explained, laying a gentle hand upon Thomas’ shoulder.

“Of that, there can be little doubt,” the tailor wondered, looking Thomas’ suit up and down with slight dismay. “Forgive me for saying so, my lord, but this is a Moore’s suit.”

And the damn truth of it was that it was a Moore’s catalogue suit. How on earth had the tailor known simply by looking? Was he really that good?

“As I say my son has been traveling,” Robert was quick to think up a lie, and even offered a charming smile to help it go down easier. “He’s been having a bit of a jaunt about the continent, enjoying himself, but he’s ruined his clothes.”

The tailor was quick to remember himself, smiling and waving his hands to push off any feelings of foreboding, “Forgive me my lords, I spoke with impertinence. Only, I am a man of fashion and I do tend to enjoy dressing lords well. I am Monsieur Jean Claude of Smithsby's, and I delighted to dress you today m’lord. If you’ll be so kind as step up on the platform?”

Monsieur Claude (if that really was his name) gestured for Thomas to take to the wooden platform in the center of the room. Thomas didn’t like the idea of standing on a pedestal so that everyone could gawk at him, but he supposed he really had little choice.

And hell, if he got a Smithsby’s suit out of it, he’d gladly play along.

Thomas did so, casting a nervous glance over his shoulder as his father relaxed into a soft green velvet armchair. Bates hung at Robert’s shoulder, watching Thomas quizzically as if this were all a form of entertainment.
“May I offer you a brandy and cigar, M’lord?” Claude asked.

“Tea would be most welcome,” Robert corrected.

“And for your man?”

“Tea, thank you,” Bates grumbled.

Claude pulled upon a bell rope, and when another well-dressed boy entered from a side room Claude sent him away with only a few words of French. Thomas couldn’t understand a lick of it.

“Now…” Claude rounded the platform, gazing up at Thomas with keen interest. Up close, Thomas could see that Claude’s eyes were a brilliant green which only served to make him look more curious and intelligent.

*If you weren’t my tailor and we weren’t with company, I’d flirt to high heaven with you,* Thomas thought dazedly.

“My lord, if you would be so kind as to remove your jacket?” Claude offered a hand with a patient smile. Unsure of what else to do, Thomas unbuttoned his coat and handed it over. Claude, for whatever reason, turned the jacket inside out and began to look at the inseams.

*He’s trying to figure out how my body wears a suit,* Thomas mused. He’d been a valet too, he could pick up on another’s trade secrets.

“Interesting,” Claude said before laying the coat over a clotheshorse. “You’re a very thin man, my lord. Your waist is quite small. I can see that your color palette is very cool as well. I would recommend colors such as navy and gray… not ivory nor brown.”

It just so happened that Thomas’ current suit was brown.

“I just want to see how thin you actually are,” Claude said, pulling out a tape measure to wrap himself about Thomas’ waist.
Don’t look at him when he’s near your willy, Thomas thought desperately, even as Claude leaned in and ran a hand about his stomach. Thomas tensed in response.

He wondered if Claude could sense that he was nervous.

Claude scoffed, far too curious at Thomas’ measurements to care. “My goodness! You have a twenty-five-inch waist! I’ve never dressed someone as thin as you…”

Claude wrapped the tape about Thomas’ hips; Thomas blushed as Claude’s well-worn flingers slid past his buttocks. “Thirty inches to the hips—“

“thirty?!” Thomas barked. Claude snapped up, eyes locking on Thomas’ own.

But it couldn’t be thirty! He’d been twenty-eight two months ago!

“Oh god I used to be twenty-eight inches,” Thomas lamented loudly. “I’m finally startin’ to get fat. I knew it was comin-!”

At this, Claude just laughed. He took off his glasses, wiping them carefully upon his shirt. “Lord Grantham console your son. He’s being hysterical over nothing.”

“Thomas, you are not fat,” Robert assured him. But what the hell did he know?

“I’ve put on two inches!” Thomas whined, even as Claude continued to measure about his individual thighs and knees. “Carson will skin me if I can’t fit into my liv-“

But Thomas froze, stopping mid-sentence as he realized he’d almost just given away his background. The fact of the matter was, footmen were meant to be the prides of their houses. If you were overweight, it often led to you being let go for favor of a younger, slimmer applicant. Thomas had been obsessive over his weight as a young man, vain in his attempts to constantly be better looking. Now that he was in his thirties, every pound he put on just reminded him that he was in fact getting older.
But Monsieur Claude did not know this. He looked at Thomas and merely saw the underdressed son of an Earl. He had absolutely no idea that Thomas had once served as a footman; what would happen if he were to find out? Would he be angry and refuse to service Thomas?

Thomas’ gaze fell, his tone reduced to a mumble. “Never mind,” He muttered.

Monsieur Claude failed to even bat an eyelash, instead muttering to himself as he continued to measure Thomas’ legs.

“Thighs, eleven inches. Knees, seven and a half… a hem of seven inches, and a front rise of nine inches,” Claude jotted everything down in an aged pocket book. He looked up with a gentle smile. “I should have a slim suit that I can hem for you quite easily. Of course, the classic suit is of wool or cotton, though we do have linen in stock. Given the month, I would recommend wool- “

“We’ll take wool,” Robert agreed.

“Very good, M’lord. Let me fetch a few suits for you now.” Claude was on his feet in an instance, tucking his notebook into his breast pocket to head into the back room. In his wake came the younger boy, bearing a loaded tea tray which he deposited with care before Robert and Bates upon a glass table. He exited without another word, leaving the three of them on their own.

Thomas groaned, collapsing onto the platform to sit with his head hunched between his legs. What a disaster that had almost been!

“God, I’m such an idiot,” Thomas moaned. “What was I thinking?”

“It was a simple mistake,” Robert consoled him. “And I doubt Monsieur Claude noticed anything.”

“But what if I make another mistake in front of people who do notice?” Thomas asked, perking his head up. “What if I embarrass the whole family? Oh- why did I ever think to come to London?”

“You can’t hide in Downton Abbey forever, M’lord- “Bates offered.

“And don’t you start!” Thomas snapped at the man. Bates was taken aback. “Don’t call me ‘lord’ or
anything of the like! Ever.”

“Well I can hardly call you Thomas,” Bates grumbled.

“Yes, you can!”

“No, he can’t,” Robert corrected Thomas at once in that stern if gentle voice he often used with his sisters. “Bates must adhere to what is proper, so too must you.”

“But I worked-!”

“Up, he’s coming,” Robert snapped at the sound of Monsieur Claude’s footsteps. At once, Thomas jerked to his feet, attempting to wipe his expression of any misery as Claude entered with three suits in tow. They hung upon a fine mahogany roller, which he pushed like a cart to keep the suits from creasing or touching the floor.

“Here we are- “Claude plucked a navy one from the middle, offering it up to Thomas like one might a succulent feast. It was gorgeous, a conservative cut with deep plumes of blue that were accentuated by silver thread. It was a piece of art, meant for a lord to wear, and Thomas felt embarrassed to touch it even as Claude offered it.

“Hmm- “Robert set his tea aside, rising up from his chair to examine the cloth. “Bates what do you think of this cut for Thomas?”

Bates slunk around the three of them, eyeing the suit warily.

“It looks fine, M’lord,” Bates shrugged. Bates, unlike Thomas, had never had much of an eye for fashion. It had been one of Thomas’ main contending points when he’d valeted for his father.

“I likewise want a hunting suit fitted out for him… as well as another day suit; and most certainly a dinner tux, god forbid I forget that- “Robert rolled his eyes.

“Four suits?” Thomas wondered in horror. God help, how much would they cost in total? Could the family afford such an expenditure?

“M’lord- “Bates took the navy suit from Claude to gesture for the fitting room. “Shall we?”

“Aha…” Thomas would be damned before Bates saw him naked. He took the suit from Bates, glaring at the man when Claude could not see. “I can do it myself, Bates. No need for trouble- “

“M’lord, let your valet do his job,” Claude laughed. “No need to be shy.”

Thomas’ teeth were clenched tight as he held onto the suit, refusing to let Bates take it back.

“I’m f- “But Thomas didn’t get a chance to say fine before Bates took him by the shoulder and steered him towards the dressing room.

“Come on, M’lord, don’t be a goose,” Bates drawled. He opened the dressing room door, all but shoved Thomas inside, and closed the door after them so that they were finally alone.

“No!” Thomas hissed as Bates tried to take the suit away. “Stop it or I’ll scream!”

“Oh, stop being a big baby- “Bates hissed back. If the pair of them hadn’t been a wall away from a well-respected tailor and Robert, they might have been screaming. As it stood, Bates’ brown eyes were blazing. “Give me the damn suit!”

“I don’t want you seein’ my bits!”

“I’m not lookin’ at your damn bits, you have nothing that I don’t have!”

“Well I still don’t want you to see me- turn around and face the wall- “

“Face the- “Bates did a double take at the insanity. “You’re putting me in the corner like a disobedient dog?”
“It’s not that- “Thomas drug a hand exhaustedly across his face. He was starting to get a headache from their argument. “I’m… different! I don’t like men seeing me undress!”

Bates’ eyes narrowed as he considered the implications. “But you know I’m a normal man, so why should it matter?”

“Would you take your clothes off in front of Mrs. Hughes?” Thomas asked.

Bates let out a long breath, relaxing his shoulders and dropping his expression to one of odd neutrality. He was calming himself, centering himself as if Thomas were a stroppy child instead of an adult.

“… Thomas,” Bates growled. “I have worked with you for close to fifteen years. I regard you as a… weird…cousin.”

“Well thanks,” Thomas grumbled. What kind of an arse backwards compliment was that?

“Please put on this damn suit,” Bates snapped.

Thomas sucked on his teeth, wishing to god he could shove Bates out of a tall window. Instead, he bitterly turned about and began yanking off his tie and vest. Bates took each garment from him to observe it under light with scrutiny.

“My god, you’ve worn it to ribbon,” Bates wondered aloud. “Look at the inseams.”

“It’s all I had,” Thomas muttered as he unbuckled his trousers.

“You can’t wear it in public anymore,” Bates said. “You look like- “

Bates unclipped the new trousers from their hanging pegs and offered them for Thomas to step into. Standing before Bates in nothing but his pants and an undershirt, Thomas felt utterly humiliated.

He sat down upon an offered visitor’s chair and put his head in his hands.

Bates waited for him to recover himself, oddly patient.

“I can’t stand the shame of it,” Thomas whispered thickly.

“This is who you are, Thomas,” Bates offered. He placed a hand cautiously upon Thomas’ shoulder. “You hated being a servant when you were a member of staff, and now we know why. You were never meant for it. It’s not in your blood—“

“No one’s meant for it—“ Thomas wiped at his burning eyes, his hands coming away wet. “It’s degrading. To dress other people, and wipe their arse—“

“Thomas, we both know I’ve never wiped anyone’s arse but my own,” Bates snapped.

Thomas sniffed, wiping his eyes again. After a moment, Bates patted him upon the shoulder. “Up.”

Thomas stood up and allowed Bates to finish dressing him. As Bates helped him to shrug on his new coat, Bates smoothed out the lapels and with subdued pride.

“He’s right,” Bates arched an eyebrow. “Blue looks good on you.”

Thomas turned about, staring at himself in the mirror. In that moment, Thomas did not see a young man who’d been born a clock makers son and worked as a footman for ten years. Instead, he saw a lord’s son… someone who’d made too many mistakes to be viewed with kindness. The kind of man that mothers kept their daughters away from.

“… I look like a rich prick,” Thomas whispered.

“Come on,” Bates smacked him gently upon the back. “Dry your eyes.”
Thomas wiped his cheeks impatiently and allowed Bates to lead him from the dressing room. Claude was waiting with an oddly gentle smile upon his face. He helped Thomas to step up onto the platform once again.

“Much better!” Robert praised. “An excellent suit!”

“You look a man of your birth,” Claude praised. Thomas didn’t know whether or not to take that as a compliment. Claude dropped to his knees and immediately began to hem Thomas’ new trousers; his mouth was suddenly full of pins as his nimble fingers tucked and lined.

“Now that we have your measurements, we can simply order you a suit at will,” Robert said. “No need to drag you all the way down to London to keep in fashion. In the spring, we’ll order you some hunting clothes and a summer suit or two—”

Thomas said nothing, oddly cowed from his experience of changing into a new suit. As the tailor worked, he kept himself rather close to Thomas. There was a strangely seductive air about him, and Thomas could not help but painstakingly notice the way that Claude ran his hands over Thomas’ arms as he hemmed.

He wasn’t touching Thomas without purpose.

Thomas glanced at the man, a little shy to be caught, but found Claude already looking with a wry smile.

“Are you not pleased with your suit, M’lord?” Claude asked. He spoke so softly that only Thomas could hear him properly.

“Very pleased,” Thomas whispered. “It’s beautiful. I’m not worthy of it.”

“Nonsense, my lord,” Claude extended the word, filling it with an oddly warm affection. “You are the son of an Earl. You are more than worthy of such a suit.”

“Am I?” Thomas glanced at the standing mirror, finding himself pale and withdrawn. “I don’t feel it.”
Claude’s hand came underneath Thomas’ arm to gently cup at his waist. To the untrained eye, he just looked like he was testing the strength of the fabric stitch. To Thomas, however, it made a breath catch in his throat.

Was Claude flirting with him?

Thomas cast a sly glance to his left, and found Claude watching him intensely.

Yes. Yes, he absolutely was flirting with Thomas.

Now came the dangerous dance of the pair of them testing out the waters with two unsuspecting normal men only a foot or so away. What was more, Robert was Thomas’ father and an Earl. If anyone was in danger here, it was Claude. Thomas could not help but wonder how many men Claude had touched in this way, standing upon his little wooden platform.

“If I may say so… Thomas…” Claude spoke in a whisper. “I heard you speaking to the man in the dressing room. If you have found yourself in a situation where your inheritance is new…” Claude’s fingers danced over an uneven stitch, pulling the thread tight. “It will take time to adjust. But you must look in the mirror every day and remember that it is your right. Your birthright. Your royal lineage is in your blood, and you look it.”

Claude’s words put an unexpected warmth in Thomas’ chest. It was good to be spoken too so frankly. He didn’t like being handled with kid gloves.

“Am I so good looking?” Thomas teased.

“Oh, I think you know it,” Claude grinned.

Thomas looked over his shoulder, hoping to find Robert engaged in a conversation with Bates. Instead, Thomas was shocked to find that Robert was staring at him dead on, his eyes locked on the way that Claude had him by the waist. Thomas coughed, eyes dancing from Claude to Robert so that Claude took the hint and stepped back.

They continued on without another word, each of them too nervous to test Robert’s patience.
As they got ready to leave, Thomas found himself walking out in a brand new Smithsby’s suit. He’d likewise been given a new pair of black leather Oxford shoes, along with a traveling coat and a silver tie. Frankly, he looked like a completely different man and was nervous to wear his clothes so brazenly. Robert had a standing account with Smithsby’s so there would be no need to pay. Instead, Claude offered Thomas a catalogue, which they could use to order clothes in Downton. At this, Robert and Claude shook hands while Bates made to call for the motor cab. Robert was preoccupied, speaking at length to the owner of Smithsby’s about new fashions arriving from Paris after Christmas. AS such, it gave Thomas a tiny window of opportunity to speak to Claude frankly.

He took it once, lingering in the door of Smithsby’s while Bates stood outside, and Robert lounged by the glass counter.

Claude offered Thomas a calling card, which Thomas accepted at once. He was surprised to find the name ‘Jack Whittaker’ upon it.

“Should you ever need… reminding… of how handsome you are,” Claude whispered.

“I might just, but who is this man?” Thomas asked.

Claude grinned, then opened his mouth to exude a straight British accent that made Thomas do a double take. “The man is me. Jean Claude is a fake name, an’ I’m not French either. Just goes well with the clients. I’m Jack Whittaker.”

Thomas laughed as quietly as he could, stowing Jack’s calling card in his pocket. “Jack to me then,” Thomas whispered.

“And Thomas to me,” Jack replied with a grin. Thomas’ heart was pounding in his chest; he’d not flirted so brazenly in years! My god, it had been an age.

Jack reached out and cautiously took Thomas’ hand in his own, examining the callouses he found upon Thomas’ palms. “You have such beautiful hands... the hands of a servant.” Jack grinned at him. “What position did you hold?”
“Footman,” Thomas explained.

“That’s why you were worried about gaining two inches.” Jack tutted, stroking Thomas’ palms, “But you know why I like calloused hands like these, Thomas? You always know when they’re touching you-“

“Thomas!”

Jack dropped Thomas’ hands at once, turning away as if burned. Robert was walking up, a patient if slightly tense smile upon his face.

“Shall we be off then?” Robert asked, gesturing to the door. Jack opened it at once, stepping aside so that Robert and Thomas could pass onto the street.

“A most pleasant day to you both, M’lords,” Jack said, in that snooty fake French accent of his. Yet as he closed the door on Thomas and Robert, Thomas noticed he gave a lingering sad smile.

As soon as the door to Smithsby’s closed, Robert rounded on him with a hardened gaze.

“The motorcar, M’lord,” Bates called from the curb. Sure enough, it had just pulled up. They entered at once, with Bates closing the door on them so that they could be given a bit of privacy. Thomas felt slightly like he was being caged with a lion.

A very nice lion, but still.

“Did my eyes deceive me, or did Monsieur Claude give you a calling card?” Robert asked.

“...J…” Thomas stumbled over a lie, “Just to keep in touch if I needed anything.”

Robert nodded, lacing his hands tightly together in his lap. “I overhead what Jack Whittaker said to you, Thomas.”
Thomas hitched the tiniest breath, frightened of being found subpar in his father’s eyes. Would it be just like before with Barrow and Carson?

But Robert could see the fear in Thomas’ face, could hear it in his breathing pattern, and any hostility he might have normally carried suddenly melted away only to be replaced by deepest loving concern.

“Thomas,” Robert sighed, leaning upon the seat so that he could put a hand upon Thomas’ thigh. “There will always be those who will want to take advantage of your newfound position. Be very careful who you speak to, and what you say. Above all, what you write, for if it is found out it cannot be denied in the eyes of the law.”

“My mother told me to never put anything in writing,” Philip Prevet had once said so many years ago. Now, Thomas was hearing the same advice. Had she warned Philip just as Robert was warning him now?

“… I’m sorry,” Thomas whispered, too ashamed to meet his father’s eyes.

“You do not need to be sorry, Thomas,” Robert assured him. “It is in your nature to look for love in men. Many of the peerage are the same. But you must learn to act with discretion. We cannot afford scandal if we are to survive as a legacy.”

“Of course, M- “But Thomas stopped, broken to realize he’d almost said ‘M’lord’. He put his head in his hands.

“God,” he moaned. “I’m a cock up.”

“Ah…” Robert rubbed him soothingly upon the back. “Give it time, dear one. Give it time.”

~*~

“You know why I like calloused hands like these, Thomas? You always know when they’re touching you.”
For five seconds, Robert had seen red and wanted to strangle that damn tailor. French indeed! Jack Whittaker was as French as a can of jellied eels. In Robert’s eyes Thomas was practically an infant though he knew this to be illogical and unwise. Thomas was a grown man, and it was only natural that other men of his sort might find him handsome when he was in fact very good looking. But at the same time, Robert was grappling with the fact that Thomas was his son; that the last time he’d seen Thomas and known him to be as much he’d been but a few months old and squalling over a bandage.

Now, Thomas was a man and squalling over other men his age.

But honestly… a tailor? Oh, it was one thing for Sybil to have taken up with a chauffeur, but a tailor for heaven’s sake. Why not take up with a fishmonger or a musician if that’s the way things were going?

But next to Robert, Thomas sat staring doe eyed and dreamy smiled at Jack Whittaker’s calling card. Hopefully, he would do as Robert had bade, and not write to the man.

They arrived at Murray’s office close to one in the afternoon. Robert had not eaten since breakfast on the train and was feeling slightly puckish. However, business came first and then pleasure so he allowed Bates to head to the bank on a top-secret mission while Thomas and he headed inside the gilded law firm of Pinsent Masons.

Thomas gaped at all of it, amazed at the golden statues of wealthy men long past and the marble floors holding court to a water fountain with living fish. Robert, however, had seen it all before, and took Thomas straight upstairs before he could make any sillier comments about how ‘amazing’ everything all was. In truth, Robert adored the way that Thomas was always pleased by things that Robert took for granted, but now that Thomas was in a Smithby’s suit, it would be very obvious if he started acting like he wasn’t accustomed to wealth. They would have to get Thomas over the shock value, and quickly.

Murray’s personal offices within the building of Pincent Masons was kept on the top floor, along with a large board room where Robert was expecting a meeting. They took their seats in a private waiting room and headed into the board room as soon as they were beckoned by a well-dressed receptionist in spectacles. As they walked down the long dark corridor to Murray’s board room, Thomas started to act strangely again. He was slowing up, looking pale and sweaty where before he’d been so obviously delighted and gay.

“What if… what if this is a bad idea?” Thomas wondered. “What if the board thinks I’m unfit-“
“They won’t dare mock you before me,” Robert promised. In that moment, he felt like a mighty king though he was only an Earl, protecting something precious which should never be spoiled by mankind.

Thomas smiled, but he still didn’t look convinced.

The board room opened and revealed a long glistening oak table layered with brandy in crystal goblets, fine cigars to be smoked, and a Wedgewood china set. A marble hearth at the end of the room lay crackling, merrily inviting them all in. Mercifully, only four members of the entire board along with Murry had been called forth so as not to frighten Thomas. They were the key members of Robert’s personal and financial advisory guild, and he looked upon them as equals though they were low ranking members of the peerage.

“Lord Grantham-!” He was greeted at once by Sir Beckett, an aged man who had likewise seen his father through difficult financial times.

“Sir Beckett, my son Thomas,” Robert introduced them.

“I can’t tell you how amazed I am to see you again, young master,” Sir Beckett praised, shaking Thomas’ hand. Thomas fumbled with sweaty fingers, unsure of what to do before such powerful men.

“My lord,” Sir Morrison was next, a little wary but still pleasant as he shook Robert’s hand and Thomas’. Sir Morrison was a man of America, new to England but not to money. It had been he to wisely examine Matthew’s newfound riches, and Robert prized him greatly as a result.

“Lord Grantham,” Sir Workman was there as well, which was slightly disheartening. Workman was by far the more acerbic and warier of Robert’s advisors. He had a sharp eye for property value and for taxes, but he was likewise crotchety and frankly reminded Robert of his long dead great uncle Irvine who had been (in a word) an arse.

“Sir Workman,” Robert greeted him just the same. “This is my son, Thomas.”

Workman did not shake Thomas’ hand, instead falling back to drum his fingers impatiently upon the back of his chair. Thomas dropped his hand, glancing at Robert unsure. Robert kept his hand upon Thomas’ shoulder, determined to steer their interaction to safe ground.
“Lord Grantham!” Before Robert could address Workman’s rudeness, he was besieged upon by the warmth of Sir Ellis, who was his lead financial advisor and by far the kindest of all the men. He had been Matthew’s choice, and had proven his worth a hundred times over in the past six years of his employment. “And this must be Mr. Thomas James Robert Crawley… I am amazed sir!”

He shook Thomas’ hand heartily, beaming. “Absolutely amazed. Look at you, you’re the spitting image of your mother!”

“Th-thank you sir,” Thomas stuttered.

Murray, of course, was no stranger to them. He gave Thomas a patient if kind smile. “Lord Grantham, how good to see you again… Mr. Crawley. Please, sit!”

Thomas did so at once, glad to be off his feet when under stress. In a show of support, Robert sat next to his son so that Sir Workman was forced to sit across from them. He did not look happy with the proceedings.

“Mr. Crawley, I preside over Mr. Murray,” Sir Ellis explained, relaxing at the head of the table in the largest chair. “I’ve been following your case rather avidly, I must say.”

“Um… thank you sir?” Thomas didn’t quite know what to say. Sir Beckett and Sir Morrison were just as unsure, looking to Sir Ellis for their answers.

A footman entered the board room and began to make rounds about the table with tea and brandy in turn. Robert accepted a cup of earl gray, wanting to be fully in his head for such an important conversation.

“As the presiding head of Lord Grantham’s estate, and the overseers of his affairs, I am grateful to you gentlemen for gathering on such short notice,” Sir Ellis began, addressing the room at large. “We are here today to re-open the assets closed on December of 1894, for the young James Robert Crawley who was presumed dead at the time- “As Ellis spoke, he fumbled through enormous sheaves of legal paper. These documents had been copied with care, and each board member had one of their own to examine at length. Sir Workman in particular was examining the papers as if hoping to find some kind of a foul.

“However, due to the recent solving of the thirty-year-old case, we are presented today with the adult
James Robert Crawley who is before us with his father! And brava to us all!” At this Ellis rapped his hand smartly upon the wood in a form of polite applause. The others joined him (all save for Workman who was too busy reading to notice).

The footman offered Thomas tea; Thomas accepted it, only to have the cup and saucer rattle wildly in hand from nerves.

Robert put his hand over Thomas’ own in solidarity. It steadied Thomas’ grip, but he still looked painfully unsure.

“To that, I have to enquire as to the legality of the sciences we have been presented with,” Workman drawled, setting his paper aside to take off his spectacles. He did not look amused.

But suddenly, Robert and Thomas were privy to a private argument. Sir Ellis seemed exhausted by Sir Workman’s comments, as if they’d already been made before and quieted.

“Sir Workman,” Ellis huffed, “I’ve already explained to you that the paperwork was combed by our firm, and we found it steady-“

“But can we really trust such a new science with a fortune like Lord Grantham’s?” Sir Workman demanded.

Robert’s heart was beginning to pound rapidly in his throat. Upon the table, Robert’s hand began to clench on its own.

“We have a written statement from Alice Barrow detailing her abduction of James Crawley and raising him as her son,” Sir Beckett spoke up from the other end of the table. “What more do you want, Workman?”

Sir Workman raised his hands in silent defense, but he still looked wary.

Across from him, Thomas was beginning to sweat from fear. Robert could see Thomas’ fingers trembling around his teacup.
Sir Ellis coughed, re-taking charge of the conversation before Workman could say anymore. “As I say, I have here the entire folio of James Robert Crawley’s assets—your assets—Ellis added with a smile to Thomas. “They were absolved back into the estate in 1894. All you have to do is sign for them, and legally they become yours once again.”

At this, Sir Ellis uncapped his personal marble fountain pen and passed it to Thomas along with the first sheaf of parchment. It was aged and fine, with a heavy red wax seal at the bottom signed by several hands. Robert spotted his father’s and grandfather’s signatures in turn.

“This is your legal title to Downton Abbey, on the demise of one Robert Crawley the eleventh,” Sir Ellis explained. “If you’ll sign here?” He gestured at the bottom.

But Thomas didn’t sign.

“…I…” Thomas fumbled with the pen, too frightened to raise his eyes. “I don’t wish to be the…”

But Robert knew what Thomas was trying to say. Thomas wanted George to inherit, because then the pressure to marry and provide children would be lifted from his shoulders. Indeed, they could manage it if everything went through Murray first and was ironed out for legalities, but Thomas could not decide such things at the drop of the hat in a room full of strangers. Robert leaned in, whispering quickly in Thomas’ ear before he could say more.

“We will talk about this later when we are alone, for now sign the document. Murray understands your concerns, and we are working on it with my private legal team in York.”

He leaned back, satisfied. Thomas took a shaky breath, then signed the document with care. Robert noted with a pang that Thomas labeled himself as James Robert Crawley the 12th, which was most certainly true but not something they’d discussed before. Thomas then slid the paper it back to Sir Ellis who gave it to Sir Beckett so that it might be powdered and re-sealed.

“This is the courtesy title you possess as Viscount Downton—Sir Ellis handed the document over for Thomas to sign. His hand was physically shaking as he examined the paper at length.

“Viscount?” Thomas wondered, in awe. “Oh-!” He sighed, “Oh right, of course. Viscount, as son of an Earl. That makes sense, right.” He signed the paper and handed it back over.
“This is the paper for your coronet and ceremonial robes- “

“I have a coronet?” Thomas wondered, looking back to Robert confused.

Robert smiled, “Naturally; sign the paper. I’m eager to get lunch.”

Thomas muttered nonsensically under his breath, signing the document and handing it back to Sir Ellis.

“Your personal bank accounts?”

Another signature, another paper.

“Your personal titles, assets, bonds, and stocks.”

Yet another paper, though it required several signatures instead of one. Yet as Thomas reached the last page, he paused. Robert noted that his skin had gone white.

“… F…” Thomas shook, “Fifty thousand… pounds?” He looked up at Robert horrified.

“Sorry?” Robert was unsure what Thomas was enquiring to, though his son was now an alarming shade of white.

“It- it says here- “Thomas pulled the page closer so that Robert might read. “That all my… all my things total to… to fifty thousand pounds?! Fifty thousand pounds?!” Thomas voice rose in shock as he looked to Sir Ellis and Robert in horror. “That can’t be right! That cannot be right, it’s too much money!”

But Thomas knew nothing of fortunes. Robert just patted Thomas gently upon the arm, hoping to soothe his son. “Thomas, I have more as the standing Earl. A great deal of this money is in stocks and bonds, we’re not physically sitting on a pile of gold. Don’t be frightened, just sign the paper.”

“Oh my god,” Thomas whispered as he signed. His hand was shaking so badly that his signature
was almost illegible on the last page. “Oh my god I own fifty thousand pounds.”

He sounded like he might cry. But why? Why was he so scared?

“Thomas- “Robert made to console his son again, only to be cut off by Sir Workman who was not amused by Thomas’ theatrics.

“What is this display?” Sir Workman sneered, gesturing to Thomas. “Fifty thousand pounds is not an enormous sum, sir. We have clients with greater stocks- “

“Well forgive me if I’m shocked but a few weeks ago, I was in his shoes!” Thomas popped like a live wire under stress, glaring at Workman as he gestured to the footman in the corner. “I had to polish boots and piss pots for toffs like you if only to earn a pence, so fifty thousand pounds is a great deal of money and responsibility to me! I take it very seriously, sir!”

Sir Workman was shocked at Thomas’ tone, and momentarily fell back in his chair to blink in silence. Thomas, on the other hand, was seething.

His anxiety was getting the better of him. Robert rubbed his hand with care.

“Patience, dear one,” Robert whispered. “Remember yourself.”

Thomas took a long-suffering breath, blew it out through his mouth, then licked his lips and slid the papers back over to Sir Ellis who took them meekly.

“I want my own account opened at Smithsby’s,” Thomas said, his voice still shaking, “and I want the money for today’s purchases taken out of my account.”

“If that’s what you wish- “Sir Ellis shrugged.

“We’ll discuss it later,” Robert said. He didn’t like the idea of opening up yet another account at Smithsby’s. It would be easier for Thomas to simply repay Robert if he chose. Money could easily be moved into their private accounts, but opening a new account was exhausting (not to mention needlessly expensive).
“Very well,” Sir Ellis knew better than to meddle, “I’ll leave it to you gentlemen.”

Another paper was passed to Thomas. “This is your ownership of your room at the Lion’s Den?”

“My personal rooms at the club,” Robert explained; but Thomas has valeted for him several times while staying at the club, so this could hardly be surprising for him.

Thomas signed the paper and passed it back, lips pursed into a thin white line. Sir Ellis passed another.

“Your ownership of Grantham Chateaux in Paris.”
He signed it and passed it back.

“And of course, Grantham House in London!” Thomas signed the paper but looked ready to scream.

“Ah, now this is a little something special,” Sir Ellis slid over a deed to a thoroughbred, which technically had been set aside for Thomas’ thirteenth birthday but only now had come to fruition. “This is a deed to ownership of a thoroughbred, which was set aside for you by the prominent horse breeders Rossenarra of Ireland. Now of course- “

“I own a horse?!” Thomas all but gagged, holding the deed up to light. “But- but why wasn’t I consulted on this?! This is a living animal with needs and- and how am I to provide-?!” Thomas looked to Robert in abject horror. “I can’t take up a horse, I don’t even have a place to keep it! And it’s about to be winter- “

At this, Sir Workman let out a long-exasperated sigh. Thomas stopped mid-sentence, turning to glare at Sir Workman with such fervor that Robert feared a fight might break out at the table.

My god, his temper! Though Thomas did not know it, it was a direct gift from his grandfather.

“…Do you own a horse, Sir Workman?” Thomas sneered.
“No, I do not,” Workman ground out through clenched teeth.

“Well then, I suggest you let me investigate this matter without any cheek!” Thomas spat the word.

“You expect me to believe that you are the real James Crawley after thirty years based on one blood review and a country doctor-!??”

But this sent fireworks into Robert’s brain. He’d battled with himself for far too long to be spoken to in such a way by a man of the commonwealth. What did Workman know of his family? What did he know of Thomas, and of the sorrow that Robert had had to endure for years without his son?

“How dare you sir!” Robert snarled, jerking to his feet so that he towered over all the men at the table. Thomas looked up at his father, agog.

“Workman, we have spoken about this at length!” Sir Ellis begged for peace. “We addressed your concerns.”

“I’m not satisfied! I don’t believe that blood can be analyzed, It’s practically pagan!” Workman complained.

“Then you shall disband yourself from my company!” Robert ordered at once.

It was said in heat and fury, without thought to the consequences of his future. He hated to admit it, but he needed Workman’s advice. Yet could he balance Workman’s savvy nature with taxes against Workman’s cruelty to his son?

…No. no he could not.

Workman stuttered, desperate not to find himself unemployed. “M’lord, I am trying to protect your legacy! This would not be the first time some servant from the gutter has claimed to be an heir to a dead title-!”

“My son is not dead!” Robert roared. The idea was too raw, too real, and it brought back countless memories of weeping over a cold cradle. Robert could not endure such agony; not now, not then, not
ever again.

“he is sitting at this table and has been delivered back to my arms by the very intervention of God, and you will not dismiss that simply because your too cynical to see it! You will leave this room, and my employment at once sir, Good day!”

Shocked silence fell over the room. Workman was so taken aback he temporarily forgot to breath and had to suck in a deep breath lest he faint in his chair.

“…Lord Grantham- “Workman tried to come up with an apology, but Robert would not have it. He did not want to see Workman ever again.

“Good day sir- “Robert growled, pointing to the door.

Workman blanched, quietly removing himself from the table only to walk around everyone’s chairs in order to make his way to the door. Yet as Workman reached the threshold, he paused and turned to glare at Thomas who was watching him unsure.

“…Enjoy your horse,” Workman sneered. He shut the door sharply behind him, leaving the entire room in shock.

Robert let out a shaky breath, collapsing into his seat to rub at his brow.

“…My lord- “Ellis tried to speak up, but Robert raised a hand for silence.

Next to him, Thomas put his hand upon Robert’s own, holding it tightly in a silent show of support.

It was the perfect consolation for such an awful affair.

~*~

To say that his father was steaming was a little bland on the topic. Robert Crawley looked ready to
Their meeting with the board was wrapped up in a rather hushed manor, with Thomas taking a briefcase full of signed documents to the club where Bates deposited their valises and helped Thomas to hang up his new Smithsy’s suits. Thomas sat upon the couch of Robert’s private suite, examining the deed for his horse.

In truth, he wasn’t really reading it, but was instead silently watching his father pace from corner to corner with a bitter air.

Bates was watching too, slowly ironing Thomas’ new suit for tomorrow. The three of them would be taking a tray tonight, dining in Robert’s personal rooms so as not to have to dress again.

In his dressing gown and slippers, Robert looked like an operatic character with his deep scowl.

“…So…” Bates said to a silent room. “Murray’s went well, I take it?”

“Have you ever wanted to strangle someone, Bates?” Robert asked.

“I have, M’lord,” Bates replied in clipped tones. No prizes for who the contender was.

“Today, I grappled with the reality that there will be some who never see Thomas as my son… and I confess I briefly considered the plausibility and pleasure of murder,” Robert explained.

Bates snorted from the ironing table, shaking his head at the idiocy of it all.

“Violence is not becoming of an Earl, M’lord,” Bates said.

“What about a jilted father?” Robert parried. To this, Bates could only contemplate in silence.

“Still, the tailors went well enough,” Bates added, changing the subject to a more sensible subject. “Your lordship received a call while you were at Murrays from Smithsby’s; they wanted me to inform you that Lord Downton’s new dinner tux and suits would be ready by the following evening.
I asked that a rush order be put on the diner tux.”

“Very sensible Bates, thank you,” Robert replied.

“Lord Downton,” Thomas groaned, hiding his face behind the papers for his new horse. “Why not call me ‘his majesty’ and be done with?”

“You signed the paperwork,” Robert teased.

“Including for this horse,” Thomas mused, pulling back to examine his papers further. “I feel like I’m reading Greek.”

Robert grinned and offered a hand to Thomas, “Here, let me.”

There was an ottoman at Robert’s feet, laid out in plush purple velvet with golden buttons. Thomas perched upon it, allowed himself to rest against the arm of his father’s chair so that Robert could read Thomas’ paperwork. His head was practically in his father’s lap.

“Your horse is a thoroughbred,” Robert explained. “Currently ten years old… a stallion foaled in 1916, from a rather long line of pedigree race horses. His mother’s name was Malva, and his father’s name was Blandford….”

“Blandford -‘Thomas had to laugh at the name, “Who names their horse that?”

Robert grinned, continuing on. “He has a gray coat to boot. A fine horse indeed, with a record of fast runs… he never trained to be a race horse, however. Apparently, he’s a little too feisty.” At this, he handed the papers back to Thomas. “What shall you name him?”

Thomas shrugged, “I’ll have to wait till I see him,” He decided.

For whatever reason, Robert seemed oddly charmed by this. He gestured to Bates with an easy air, saying “Bates would you…?”
“Of course, M’lord,” And at once Bates was gone. Thomas was left wondering what on earth had just happened.

“You did wonderfully today,” Robert praised him. Thomas looked up to his father, his heart beginning to swell at Robert’s kind words. “Your grandpapa would have been overjoyed to know you. He was just as resilient and determined as you, you know… and he had a bit of a mouth about him too.”

“I thought I got it from the Dowager,” Thomas teased.

“Oh, without a doubt you do.”

They laughed together as Robert considered the past; Thomas was amazed when Robert reached out to tenderly run his hands through Thomas’ hair. If Thomas leaned ever so slightly into the touch, Robert said nothing about it.

“Your grandpapa died before your birth, when your mother was still pregnant,” Robert explained. Thomas listened with rapt attention. “But his dying words were that if you were to be born, I should make you heir and look to you always as a future to mold and protect… and I intend to.”

“What was he like?” Thomas whispered. In his mind, he could not help but picture the prior Earl of Grantham. Had he been tall and domineering? Or had he been slightly short and unimposing?

“Stern,” Robert mused. For a moment, he looked slightly forlorn. “He was not a man of external emotion. He did not like being told what to think or how to feel, and if he felt that other men were trying to shift his loyalties, he was quick to exact his wrath.”

It hardly painted a picture of a loving or devoted father.

Yet before Robert could go on further illustrating Thomas’ deceased grandfather, Bates returned with a gentle knock upon the door. In his hands, he carried a small if lavish mahogany box lined in gold. He handed it over to Robert, looking quite smug as he left again.

“I’ll speak with the staff about our meals, M’lord,” Bates decided.

“Thank you, Bates,” Robert was oddly glad to see him go. Clearly, he wanted some alone time with
Thomas, but for what? And what was in the box? If it was more papers for Thomas to sign, he was going to scream.

“What’s in the box?” Thomas asked, sitting up a little straighter upon the ottoman. Robert set the papers for Thomas’ horse aside and allowed the box to sit between them on his lap.

“While we were in our business meeting, Bates ran an errand for me,” Robert explained. He patted the box gingerly. “I had these set aside after your birth, and I was planning on giving them to George when he turned eighteen. But, now that I have you again, they belong to you and should stay that way.”

Without another word, Robert unlocked the golden clasp atop the box and allowed the cover to fall back so that Thomas could see a pair of dazzling golden cufflinks sitting in upon a tuft of blue velvet.

They were a shocking thing to behold, centered around enormous square diamonds with sapphires and rubies at the edges. The precious stones came together to make the Grantham family crest, and between the cufflinks sat a pocket watch pendant made of gold with a ruby and sapphire inset. Between the two stones lay a fine inscription which Thomas could not understand:

Quod nos, pro nobis et fillis nostris

“… Oh my god,” Thomas whispered, his words barely a breath upon the air. He’d never seen something so intimately beautiful, so obviously crafted out of love and not out of the need to be seen as wealthy.

“These were made for your great grandfather,” Robert explained. “I wore them on my wedding, and then set them aside for my future son. My father wore them often, however, as a testament to his family legacy.”

“…What does it mean?” Thomas asked, pointing to the Latin inscription.

“In Latin, it reads our family motto: *What we do, we do for our children*. Do you understand?” Robert asked.

What we do, we do for our children… What a beautiful concept.
“I think so,” Thomas said, though in truth he wasn’t entirely sure.

Robert leaned in closer, speaking softly to Thomas as he might have done if Thomas had known him as a child.

“It means that all we do in this life, all that we build, all that we destroy, all that we improve or eradicate, will be inevitably inherited by our children. I do not own Downton Abbey. I am borrowing it from you. You, in turn, are borrowing it from your own children.”

“…From George,” Thomas corrected him.

Robert just smiled. Thomas wondered if his father might scorn him, but instead Robert reached out and softly placed his hand upon Thomas’ head so as to stroke his hair. He fingered the tips of Thomas’ locks, amazed by their texture.

“… My son,” Robert said the words like a prayer. “I dreamed of days like these, for so long. To see you before me, grown and healthy. Before, when I thought you lost to me, I dreamed of you each time I took to fever. Sometimes…”

Robert broke off, his voice cracking with emotion. Thomas’ heart leapt into his throat as an unexpected tear began to trickle down Robert’s aged cheek. “Sometimes, I hoped and prayed I would take ill, just to get the chance to see you again.”

So moved was Thomas by these words that he could not stand to remain at a distance. He laid his head upon Robert’s lap, though he was a grown man and Robert was a member of the peerage. Like a child, Thomas clung tight to the fabric of his father’s trousers, pinching his eyes shut to block out the evils of the world. Robert lay his hands upon Thomas’ head, wrapping him up with such love that Thomas thought he might scream out in a mixture of frustration and joy.

“All I ever wanted was you,” Thomas choked out. “All I ever needed was you.”

Robert bent over and pressed a chaste kiss to Thomas’ ear. “I know, my dearest boy. I know.”
For as long as Thomas could remember, there had been a terrible aching hole inside of his heart. At first, he’d imagined it to be some kind of undeniable proof that he was different. In those days, he’d believed his father to be Nathaniel Barrow; the man’s word had been like the testament of god to him. Barrow had sworn to his wife, to his daughter, to his whole community that Thomas was different. Different had meant foul, untrustworthy, and unworthy of affection, and so little Thomas had grown up never fully understanding what it felt like to be loved by a parent. He could remember watching his schoolmates walk home and feeling deep pangs of envy when he saw them being greeted by their fathers. He could remember watching little Harry Parker from across the lane run to greet his father every day, arms swung wide and a big dopy grin on his speckled face.

“Dad, dad, dad!” Harry had squealed, leaping into the arms of his fishmonger father to receive a wet whiskery kiss on the cheek.

But when Thomas had lain his head in Robert Crawley’s lap and felt the hands of his biological father caress his cheeks, Thomas had suddenly felt a warmth overtake that aged ice. It had felt good and right, to be beloved by another man in a way that was not sexual. To be shown as normal. To be praised as such. He was far from a child, now thirty-six years old, but he was also recovering from a lifetime of abuse and neglect and he needed all the help he could get. He and his father were a match well made, for Robert likewise was desperate to regain the time that he’d lost with his son.

Crawley House was opened with very little fuss. The pomp and circumstance of yesterday were swept aside along with a solid inch of dust to be replaced by bare bones staff and fresh fruit in the pantry. Mrs. Buce, the longstanding housekeeper of Crawley House, had been let go in lieu of budget cuts to take up another position in an equally fancy estate. It was Mrs. Hughes’ job to revive the house, and in order to do so she had to hire temporary maids from the area. Robert had been
curious to see how the maids were getting on, so the morning that everyone was to arrive from Downton, Robert, Thomas, and Bates all walked over to Crawley House to get settle in early. The trains would arrive at noon, bringing the family and the staff in one fell swoop. Mrs. Patmore, Mr. Carson, and Mrs. Hughes had already arrived the day prior, and were in the process of bossing around the maids in order to get things up to speed. On the main floor, Thomas and Robert stared about the grand entrance of their London home and wondered at how everything could get so filthy if the doors and windows were shut tight. Bates wandered about the edges of the room, squinting up from beneath his bowler hat at the canopy ceiling overhead; stained glass showered the room in a beautiful rainbow of light.

Thomas sneezed three times in a row, his nose agitated by the dust.

“I wish we hadn’t let go of Mrs. Buce,” Thomas said with a thick voice; he sniffed to clear his passages. “She always kept up with the dusting like a general commanding a troop.”

“It was terribly unfortunate,” Robert mused. “But needs must.” At this, he checked his pocket watch to add, “Your mother and sister will be arriving shortly. Bates-!”

Bates turned about at once.

“I assume you can get yourself settled without the others?” Robert asked.

“Certainly, M’lord,” Bates said.

“Very good,” Robert put up his pocket watch. “There’s no point in you waiting on all of us, Bates. Take the afternoon off, if you wish.”

“You’re very kind, M’lord, but I want to be here when Anna arrives. I’m concerned about her traveling in her condition.”

‘Condition’ was a pleasant way of explaining that Anna was the size of a house.

“Very well,” Robert said. “If you like, you could meet her at the station?”
“I could go with you!” Thomas perked up. Robert, on the other hand, was less enthused.

“I’d rather you didn’t stray from my side,” Robert said. “After all that hullabaloo with Sir Workman the other day, I’m worried that you’ll get in over your head should you meet a member of the peerage.”

Admittedly, his father had a point. The confrontation with Workman had shaken Thomas’ already unstable nerves. He was dancing and he didn’t know the steps. Every word that came out of his mouth could render him looking like an arse. If he blew an impression, he could not only ruin his future but also the financial stability of his family. At times, Thomas wished he could walk around with a padlock on his mouth. At least that way he couldn’t do any damage.

Maybe he could pretend he was mute?

“Please,” Thomas begged. “I’ll pretend I’m mute! And Bates can make sure I mind my p’s and q’s.”

Robert let out a short laugh, amused at Thomas’ insanities. “Do not pretend you are mute, Thomas.”

“But can I go?”

“Well…” Robert let out a long exasperated sigh, weighing the benefits of letting Thomas loose on London. “Alright, I suppose so. But stay with Bates and do not interact with anyone of the peerage!”

“Right!” Thomas all but yanked Bates out the door by the arm; god he wanted to get out of the house!

Thomas and Bates caught a cab to head to the station, for the Crawley motor cab was already waiting ahead of them. It was easy to blend into the London crowd, to pretend he was just another nameless face with lots of money and little cares. Bates wanted to get some chips, so Thomas wandered around Kings Cross Station while Bates grabbed a share for both of them. They ate Bates’ spoils while waiting for the North Yorkshire train to arrive; Thomas sucked the vinegar and salt from his fingers, the taste burning his tongue.

“Don’t know what I was expecting really,” Thomas sighed, relaxing against the stone pillar behind him to stare up at the ceiling. A bird had gotten in and was making a nest at the top of a plinth. “With
Workman, I mean.”

Bates mulled it over with a mouthful of chips before saying, “Don’t think on it. Some people will talk, and that’s just the way things are.”

“It would have been better if I never came to London at all.”

“It doesn’t matter whether you can to London or not,” Bates disagreed. He paused to ball up the wrapper of his finished chips, setting it aside and wiping his greasy fingers on a paper napkin. “You’re a Crawley in Downton. You’re a Crawley here.”

That was nice to hear, after a day of awful doubt. It was hard to forget Workman sneering at him. Thomas smiled at Bates, unable to keep the mischief out of his tone as he spoke: “Remember when I used to hate you?”

“Used to?” Bates sneered.

Fair enough, Thomas still hated him a little… the patronizing bastard.

He tutted, shaking his head. Bates, on the other hand, was beginning to frown. Something was rattling inside the ancient brain of his, giving him cause of concern.

“…Thomas,” Bates regarded him frankly. “Why did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“What you did in July.”

Ah.

After all the exhaustion of the past months, Thomas hadn’t really thought about that awful day when he’d tried to end his life. He supposed, in the end, it had boiled down to not know what he was living for. Being outcasted, alone, losing his place in both the house and in the world he
understood... time had been marching forward and Thomas hadn’t felt there was a place there for him.

He hadn’t felt there was a place for him anywhere.

Thomas heaved an exhausted sigh, sucking delicately at the tip of his finger where a bit of salt still lingered.

“I suppose I didn’t realize how much I cared about you lot, until I had it flung in my face that I’d never be one of you. Loneliness is a bitter mistress, and men like me are her frequent lovers.”

Bates nodded, scratching carefully at his ear as he pondered Thomas’ heavy words. This wasn’t a conversation that came naturally to them, but it was one they needed to have if they were to move forward.

“Well, as I said, you’re a Crawley no matter where you are, or what you are.”

“Am I?” Thomas mused. “Or am I just some idiot that got kidnapped.”


Thomas grinned, imagining his father’s irate look should he ever know Bates had said such a thing to him.

“Don’t tell Lord Grantham I said that.”

“Oh, I’m telling everyone.”

Before Bates could mockingly plead for his life, the sound of a distant train whistle gave them both pause. The 12:15 train from North Yorkshire had arrived and was pulling smoothly into the station amid puffs of steam and heavy chugging wheels. When it finally came to a stop before the pair of them, Thomas and Bates joined the small throng of people waiting to receive guests on board. The staff would be in third class, so Bates wormed his way down the tracks until he was a good several hundred feet away amongst a row of poorly dressed workmen and a woman with a graying overcoat.
Thomas, on the other hand, was rubbing elbows with lords in fine fur lined coats and women with pearls about their necks. He attempted to blend in, but it was hard. He was too eager, too unreserved to be obviously upper class.

The doors opened, held back by a train footman in a gleaming red and gold livery. For a moment, it was a simple matter of women and men descending to part left and right for their respective partners. Then-?

Mary Crawley appeared, wearing a pink traveling coat and an elegant wide brimmed hat. She looked about, eyes burning as they sought the Crawley driver. When they found Thomas instead, she let out an audible gasp of delight, and descended the short iron steps to give Thomas an affectionate kiss upon the cheek.

“Ah! Look at you! Goodness is that a Winston suit? Oh-!”

Thomas had seized her into a sudden hug, desperately needing her strength and love after the awful conversation with Workman. What would she say if she knew Workman had thought him a fraud? Would she be cast into doubt, or would she be irate?

“Thomas…” Mary tried to pull back, but Thomas just held on tighter. She reached up to pat him delicately upon the back. “Thomas, darling, are you alright-?”

Thomas pulled back, shaking his head. He was a fool, and his eyes were burning. Mary was agog at his emotional despondency after just two days. “But why? What’s happened-?”

Yet before Thomas could tell her, the site of his mother descending the train stairs gave him pause. She, who loved him best; she who defended him the most.

“Darling!” Cora cried out. “I didn’t think you’d be here! Oh, what’s wrong-?” She didn’t even have to hear him say a word; a simple look at his facial expression could help her know he was distressed.

Thomas hugged her as well; she soothed him at once, pressing a chaste kiss to his temple. As he pulled back, Cora pressed a hand to his cheek to smooth out the heat she found there. “Darling what’s happened?”

“It went horribly at Murray’s,” Thomas told them both. Mary was visibly crestfallen as he spoke. “There was this one adviser, Workman he was called, and Da got so angry that he fired the man for what he said to me. Awful things…”
Thomas bowed his head in shame. “I’m such a fool, I don’t know why I’m upset—“

Cora cupped his face in both her hands, smoothing out worry lines with her gloved fingers. “My darling, pay no attention to cruel minds.”

“What did Papa say?” Mary asked.

“He was furious,” Thomas mumbled. “He’s still angry, I know it. He didn’t even want to let me come to the station. It’s like he thinks that someone’s going to come get me. I’m just glad you’re both here.”

Cora held him once again, pressing his head to her shoulder. “My darling…” she soothed.

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Getting settled into Crawley House was disturbingly easier than Thomas had imagined. Below stairs, chaos was no doubt reigning as Mrs. Patmore fired up cold ovens and Mr. Carson hurriedly polished an acre worth of tarnished silver. Upstairs, however, there was nothing but warm and comfortable silence only broken by laughter and the sounds of teacups clinking on saucers. Cora and Mary had settled in easily to their rooms and wanted nothing more than to see Thomas try on his new clothes (in particular his dinner tux). Edith came over for tea, and to set herself up in Crawley House instead of her apartment. As a result, the entire Crawley clan (sans Tom who was still in Downton) was crowded in Thomas’ bedroom while he strutted about in his dining tux. The pearly breast and fine tails made him feel like he was back in livery, but the fabric was exquisite and his whites were made of silk instead of linen.

“What do you think?” Thomas turned about, spinning in a circle so that his mother and sisters could view him from all angles before a large standing mirror. Carson had bequeathed them with tea, and they were taking up positions on various chairs around his room. Cora was perched on his bed, beaming with pride at the sight of her son in his first tux.

“I think you look very handsome!” Mary praised.

“the tailor certainly knew his stuff,” Edith said. “Was he nice?”
“Very nice!” Thomas agreed. Of course, what he really wanted to say was ‘Very nice and incredibly handsome’, but he kept the last bit to himself.

“A little too nice,” Robert added around a sip of earl gray.

“What do you mean?” Cora asked. “How can someone be too nice?”

“Only that he found a lot in common with our son,” Robert explained.

“Such as?” Cora was still in the dark.

Robert raised his eyebrows, and after a few seconds of silence Cora made an expression of acknowledgement. It seemed, at last, they’d gotten to it, but Cora still looked unconcerned.

“So why should that matter?” she asked. “Thomas is allowed to know other men like him.”

But Robert was less convinced. He set his teacup aside to say, “Not if that man wants him to write so that he might be reminded of how handsome he is…”

Cora scoffed. At first, Thomas thought she might actually take up his defense, but instead she turned on Thomas with a look of great disapproval. “Absolutely not, Thomas you’re not to write a word to that man. How rude of him! To think you’d write to him like a common schoolgirl.”

“Mum,” Thomas whined, “Aren’t I allowed to have a little fun?”

“Not fun like that,” Edith warned from her perch on Thomas’ fainting couch. “It sends out the wrong impression.”

Mary rolled her eyes, detesting Edith’s sense of moral superiority. “Like you’re one to talk.”

Edith refused to bite at Mary’s taunt, instead continuing to address Thomas with a pleasant if tense
smile. “You don’t know him, Thomas. He could turn around and make a mockery of you.”

Edith had a point, Thomas reasoned. He had no idea if Jack Whittaker was a man of his word or not…. But even if Jack tried to claim that Thomas had seduced him, he’d be implicating himself in a sexual situation with another man. That was just as dangerous in the eyes of the law.

“He’d be implicating himself,” Thomas advised.

“Still,” Edith set her finished teacup aside. “It’s not safe.”

But Mary didn’t like Edith’s tone. She refused to meet Edith’s eyes, instead sneering, “Well at least you can’t get pregnant, so there’s the mercy in that.”

“Mary!” Robert was shocked at her use of language. “What do you know of such things?”

“I’ve been married,” Mary shrugged with a lofty voice. “I know everything.”

Admittedly if there were a possibility for men to get pregnant, Thomas would have been in the family several times by now. He blushed, not meeting his family’s eyes. It was one thing to say the word ‘sodomy’, it was another thing to admit to doing it.

“Are you going to write to him?” Edith asked. All eyes turned to Thomas to see what his reaction might be. It was only through years of a servant’s blank that Thomas was able to keep from flinching.

The fact of the matter was, he did intend to write to Jack Whittaker. As a matter of fact, now that Thomas had his life back and was beginning to rebuild a future, he wanted to write to as many men as he pleased. He wanted to do more than write, he suddenly realized. He wanted to flirt. To be young and gay (quite literally). He wanted to dance with men, to drink with men, to dine with men, to dine on men… and if there was any time left over, to be dined on himself.

“No,” Thomas lied. He refused to face his family, instead carefully tucking away his new silk bow tie back into a drawer where it might stay fresh and un creased. “It’s terribly dangerous.”
But terribly fun, he admitted. Internally, he could not help but picture Jack Whittaker with his clothes off, and how his sleek muscles might glide effortlessly into that place he loved best. That place where only men like he were permitted to go… that most dangerous and delightful of lands.

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It was oddly easy for Thomas to settle into Crawley House compared to Downton Abbey. Able to adjust to his role away from the familiar haunt of his servant days, Thomas slowly became more comfortable sleeping in an upstairs bed and eating from an upstairs plate. He was hardly yearning for company; Edith came and went on errands for her magazine, but Mary stayed resolutely by his side. After the hubbub with Sir Workman, Mary had seemingly made it her sole mission in life to ensure that Thomas was constantly guarded from ill-meaning members of the peerage. Cora was much the same, although she often paid calls to friends she hadn’t seen in a while. Robert worked in the library, which was smaller but cozier compared to Downton’s; Thomas often flitted in and out of his rooms to see if he wanted tea or a walk about town.

All of this, however, came to a screeching halt when a letter arrived for Thomas three days after the family’s arrival in London. He opened it over breakfast, only to discover it was a notice that he would soon be keeping company with five tutors who had been hired out by the Dowager. They wanted to meet Thomas, and the rest of the family, and to begin his studies in becoming a ‘gentleman’.

Thomas was less than enthused.

So it was that Thomas sat in the parlor room of Crawley House, wearing his new gray suit, twiddling his thumbs while Mary and Cora kept him company. The tutors were due to arrive literally any minute, and so Thomas found he could not relax on the couch without feeling antsy.

“This is going to go horribly,” Thomas muttered. “I can’t even do maths well!”

“You’ll learn!” Cora assured him. “Everyone has to learn, Thomas. You’re not born knowing how to read and write, but you learned that, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but I got caned nearly every day at school,” Thomas warned.

“Well they can’t cane you now,” Cora said.
The door to the entrance hall opened to reveal Carson, who was stiff in his spats. “The tutors have arrived, M’lady.”

Cora looked about, gesturing for Carson with an elegant wave of the hand, “Send them in at once.”

Carson left without another word, closing the door swiftly behind him. Thomas was beginning to itch at the throat and pulled at his knotted tie until Cora stopped him.

“Don’t,” She warned, petting his hand until he laid it back in his lap. She carefully re-knotted his tie so that it didn’t look askew. “You’re making yourself nervous, Thomas. Relax. They won’t eat you alive.”

“Sit up straight,” Mary added. “Don’t slouch.” Thomas did so at once, though he felt like jiggling his leg now.

“This is it,” Thomas complained. “I’m about to be grilled like a poor man’s panini.”

Before Cora could tell him to hush, the door re-opened to reveal Carson once more. This time, however, he was in the company of five older men (three of whom carried briefcases). Cora rose up to her feet at once, and so Thomas and Mary followed suit.

They were each pepper haired and slightly exhausted by nature, though two had blonde hair and a third had red. In truth, Thomas was having a hard time soaking them in because he was so afraid of their judgmental gaze. They weren’t entirely unpleasant, but they certainly had the air of a teacher about them. Thomas wondered if any of them were carrying canes in their briefcases, or if they were just going to make him write lines.

He grimaced, nervous at the prospects of the future.

“Oh my god, I’m going to die,” He muttered under his breath. His mother shot him a reproachful look.

“Thomas,” She whispered. She turned back to the tutors, giving them a generous and charming smile. “Welcome to Crawley House, gentlemen.”
“We are well met, Lady Grantham—” The first tutor stepped forward to kiss her hand; he had a full beard and a compassionate smile. The men stepped forward one after another, each of them taking Cora’s hand in their own to thank her for graciously hosting them. Thomas, on the other hand, was still hiding in the corner with Mary as his shield.

Cora noticed all of this and was most displeased. “Thomas, do you want to come and meet your teachers, or are you going to continue to sulk in the corner?”

“Sulk in the corner,” Thomas quipped. Cora raised her eyebrow, a silent but dominating warning for him to behave.

Cora turned to Carson, who was still watching from the doorway, “Carson, we’ll take tea please.”

“Certainly, M’lady,” Carson turned at left, but not before giving Thomas a wary ‘I’m watching you’ expression.

A tutor near the back stepped around his fellows to size Thomas up with a wary eye. He was lithe and spry, with red hair in a fine coif and a rather feminine air. “I can see my work is cut out for me especially.”

“Indeed?” Thomas sneered, not in the mood to be judged like a racehorse.

But instead of insulting or belittling Thomas, the youthful tutor stepped forward as if to get a better look at Thomas up close. “You have a strong profile, and an intense stare. But you’re not aware of it, are you? Becoming aware of yourself is a great battle, Lord Downton.”

“…And what are you going to do about that?” Thomas asked.

“I’m going to do the best I can,” Was the tutors quip of a reply. At least he had a sense of humor to match that fiery red hair of his.

The tutor seemed to sense he was on the verge of crossing an unspoken line. He tried again, this time with a gentler voice. ‘I forget myself, Sutton?’ the tutor turned back to stare at the first man, who was watching their interaction with an amused expression.
“Lord Downton… Lady Grantham—The man gestured to Mary with a kind smile.

“Lady Mary,” Mary replied, “Lord Downton’s twin sister.”

“Ah!” The tutor beamed. “My lord and ladies we are well met. I am Mr. Charles Sutton.” At this, Sutton turned to address the three men behind him. “These are my colleagues, Mr. Greyson Cunningham, Mr. Arthur Moss, Mr. Douglas Fisher…” Sutton turned, gesturing to the red-headed tutor, “And Mr. Kingsley Berry. We five met on the train here.”

So at least Thomas knew their names now. That was a start.

“Your grandmother, the Dowager Countess, made it quite clear in her letter to me that you were in desperate need of tutoring in several subjects. She explained your situation in great detail,” Mr. Sutton said.

“We read the papers, so that helps too,” Mr. Cunningham added. Like Mr. Berry, he had a slight sense of humor that went miles for easing tension.

“We had an opportunity to turn down the position,” Mr. Sutton added, “But we’re here to help, and we’re not put off by your unusual circumstances.”

“I personally love a challenge,” Mr. Moss added with a cheery smile.

“I just like eating regularly,” Mr. Fisher joked. The others chuckled at that.

Cora took her seat back on the sofa and gestured for the other men to do the same. They took up positions about the room, with Mr. Sutton, Mr. Cunningham, and Mr. Moss taking the couch across from Cora and Mary while Mr. Berry and Mr. Fisher had to resign themselves to visiting chairs.

“What subjects do you gentlemen tutor in?” Cora asked. “The Dowager didn’t tell me what tutors she’d requested for Lord Downton. She rather dominated the transition.”

Mr. Sutton barely held back a laugh. “English Politics and History,” He said.
“Business and Economics,” Mr. Cunningham took his cue.

“Foreign Languages,” Mr. Moss said.

“Dancing and Dining,” Mr. Fisher said from his chair.

Mr. Berry just gave Thomas a gentle smile. “Manners and Gentry.”

“A well-rounded education!” Cora praised. She looked to Thomas for support. “Don’t you think so dear?”

“… I think I’m fucked,” Thomas cursed with a bitter smile. Cora did a double take at his language.

From his chair, Mr. Berry just looked delighted.

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Despite initially thinking that Mr. Sutton and his gang of merry men were going to murder him, Thomas’ tutoring started off on a pleasant note and stayed that way. For one, Thomas did not have a superiority complex like most young lords, and he was quick to take instruction. For another, the tutors were offered room and board in Crawley House, so they didn’t have to strain themselves just to teach. Thomas’ schedule was divided into quarters, with each tutor taking up a separate space; the only man who did not apply himself to this room was Mr. Berry, who hung at Thomas’ elbow and hen pecked him (for lack of a better word). Thomas knew how to keep a servant’s blank and act calm under pressure, but his mouth often got him in trouble and he reacted to situations as a servant would instead of a lord. Berry was constantly reminding him to think first, speak second, and to never ask for anything.

“A lord does not ask,” Berry would remind him time and time again. “He receives.”

The only thing Thomas was receiving, however, was the grilling of a life time.
A week passed, and Thomas was finding himself increasingly frustrated over his lack of progress. He could listen to politics all day, but he couldn’t form an opinion. He had absolutely no tact when it came to money and economics and was shite at maths. Foreign Languages were a joke, and when it came to things like dancing and manners…?

Oh… Thomas wanted to die.

Worst of all, news of the Barrow Abduction (as it was being referred to) had reached the papers, and every rag in England was covering the salacious story. It was everything a public reader wanted: upper class gossip, lower class crimes, and an occult themed murder all rolled into one. It was like a stopper had been pulled, sucking all the vile pond scum out of Southport to spill over onto any paper that would listen. Before, Thomas hadn’t been able to move the townsfolk an inch (save for the barman and doctor). Now, every Stockpot native wanted to spill dirt on the Carneys, and there were inquisitions spreading out to discover just where this awful family had come from. Were they witches? Were they murderers? Was there really a mummy in the Carney family basement?

Everyone wanted to talk to Thomas, to write to Thomas, to hear what he had to say and get more juicy gossip.

Thomas, as a result, couldn’t leave Crawley House, and hid behind the marble walls of his ancestral home like it were a prison.

It was a quiet, rainy gray day, and Thomas was in the middle of a foreign language lesson with Moss. The language in question was Latin… which was as dull as paint and half as important in Thomas’ eyes. Berry was, as usual, hanging about and waiting for Thomas to slip up on manners.

“Man?” Moss asked.

“…Vir…” Thomas replied, slow and unsure of his answers.

“Woman?”

“Muller?”
“Mulier” Moss corrected. “What about boy?”

But Thomas just shook his head. Poor? Pooka?

Thomas groaned, letting his head fall back. “Kill me, I’m useless.”

“Dramatics are only for actors,” Berry warned from his corner, not even looking up from his book on Ancient Roman Sexual Proclivities.

“No, you’re not,” Moss soothed. “Just tell me what comes to mind.”

“Pooka,” Thomas sneered.

“I’m serious-“

“So am I!”

But before Moss could revel in the horror of Thomas thinking ‘pooka’ was a latin word, the door to the library was opened to reveal Carson who was wearing a sly smile.

“Lord Downton, a visitor to see you,” Mr. Carson said.

“Please don’t call me that Mr. Carson- “Thomas begged.

“A Lord does not ask- “Berry began to say once again.

“Berry, I’m going to kill you,” Thomas snapped like a live wire popping on water.

“No you won’t,” Berry didn’t even miss a beat, flicking a page in his book. “I’ll put up too much of a fight.”
“Good heavens, I see there is already descent amongst the ranks.”

Thomas gave a start, nearly falling out of his chair at the sound of the Dowager in the doorway. Sure enough, Thomas turned around to see that his grandmother had somehow managed to appear in Crawley House, though it was a hundred miles away from Downton and surely too much of a journey for her to make at her age. She looked slightly woe-be-gone, in a steel gray traveling cloak with a hat decked in quail feathers. She observed him bickering with his tutors in great distaste.

“Your ladyship!” Thomas hardly knew what to say. When had she arrived, and why? What on earth could have inspired her to come all this way, short of a disaster?

“Oh dear…” The Dowager tilted her head. “I see Mr. Berry has quite a lot to work on.”

Mr. Moss watched the display agog; after all, it was the Dowager who had summoned the tutors in the first place. Perhaps they looked to her as their employer instead of Robert.

“I…” Thomas waffled about for the right word. What did one call their grandmother when their grandmother was the Dowager Countess of Grantham and a stickler for tradition? “Granny? Gran?”

“Grand mama will be quite enough, thank you very much,” His grandmother cut him off before he could continue on.

“But…” Thomas hardly knew where to start, “How did you get here? I would have thought this far too much of a stretch for you to take!”

“At my age, traveling is akin to puttering around in your coffin, but I made the journey specifically to set a few things in motion for you,” The Dowager explained, stepping grandly into the room to lean in and give Thomas the most delicate kiss upon the cheek. He emulated it back, unsure of what else to do.

“And I also wanted to chastise your father,” her favorite pastime, “But I hear he is out, so I will be patient and wait. Carson, may we have tea?”

“Certainly, your ladyship,” Was Carson’s smooth reply. He left without another word, closing the door curtly behind him.
The Dowager turned about to take in Mr. Moss, who was watching her with a polite if puzzled smile. “And you must be one of my dear grandson’s tutors… We have of course corresponded.”

“Mr. Arthur Moss, your ladyship,” Mr. Moss took up the Dowager’s hand to kiss it in a form of greeting. “I tutor Lord Downton in foreign languages.”

“And what language are we working on today?” The Dowager asked, gesturing to Thomas’ many work books spread about the study table.

“Latin, your ladyship,” Moss explained.

“Might I bother you for a break with my grandson?” The Dowager asked. “Surely he deserves a moment of rest.”

“Of course, your ladyship,” Moss was quick to acquiesce, gathering up their workbooks to make room at the sitting table. “Lord Downton, shall we resume tomorrow?”

“Do we have to?” Thomas groaned. Honestly Latin was a goddamn travesty.

“Lord Downton has such a humorous edge,” The Dowager made peace. “By your leave, Mr. Moss.”

“Your Ladyship,” Moss left without another word, taking his briefcase with him. At this, The Dowager turned to Berry who was still watching in the corner with a small smile.

“Mr. Berry, how good to see you again,” The Dowager held out her hand; Berry took it to place a delicate kiss upon her wrinkled knuckles.

“Your ladyship,” Berry greeted her. “London is lovelier for having you in it.”

“And how is my grandson in your studies?” The Dowager asked.
“Oh he’s hopeless,” Berry teased. Thomas gave him a reproachful look, bitter to be called a failure by his teacher. “But that’s why I like him. He’s so much fun to nag.”

“Truly your greatest skill,” The Dowager said. “Might we have a bit of privacy?”

“Certainly,” Berry was off without another word, only to pause at the doorway so that he might say, “I’ll be back in a while, Lord Downton.”

“Take your time,” Thomas sneered as Berry shut the door. He flopped back into his seat, raking his face with his hands. “Oh god help me…”

“Don’t fuss, don’t fuss-” The Dowager sat across from him on a purple fainting couch, though she was as stiff backed as a board. “Your father wasn’t much of a student either, and he turned out alright. Mr. Berry and Mr. Fisher are the ones you must look to the most; they’ll help you blend in with the others.”

“I want to die,” Thomas moaned. “I want to jump off the roof of this house-“

“I shan’t allow it, I’ve already spent far too much money on your education. I’ve made investments in you and I want to see them through,” The Dowager said. Suddenly, Thomas felt like a bull being waged over at the stocks.

“Now, Thomas,” The Dowager was frank when she wanted to get to the point, but not unkind. “I wanted to speak to you about a couple of things while it was just the two of us. I know that things have been terribly difficult as of late, and I’m not blaming you. You’ve been put through a horrible position, and you barely triumphed at that. But you’ve committed a social faux pas that I must address you on.”

At this moment, Carson returned with a full tea service. As he set up a fine china display upon the table between Thomas and the Dowager, Thomas replied, “A faux pas?”

“Yes,” The Dowager said. “You have allowed our family to become a topic of gossip.”

No prizes to be won for guessing why, “The newspapers?”
“The family must never be a subject of gossip,” The Dowager warned. “Whether at home or abroad. Allowing word to get out about the Barrows in the papers, not paying off the journalists to be quiet… it was all terribly low class of you.”

Thomas spluttered for an answer. How on earth was he to have done all of that? He could hardly leave the house!

“Not to worry-!” The Dowager cut across him before he could spew. “I know for a fact who is responsible for all of this, and I intend to have it out with him just as soon as he returns home.” The Dowager leaned in and began to prepare her own teacup with pride. It seemed that Robert was in for a scolding, and he didn’t even know his mother was in town yet. Thomas had to wonder how his father would handle it all.

“Your father likes to think that he is clever. The fact of the matter is, he isn’t. Rosamunde is clever, but only just. Neither of my children inherited my brains… they went directly to Mary. And I’m hoping to you too.” The Dowager set her teaspoon aside and took a delicate sip.

“But…” Thomas still couldn’t work it out. Even if Robert was in trouble, what could his father have done to stop the papers. “How was I supposed to stop Workman from thinking I was a money-grubbing bastard?”

“Patience child,” The Dowager shushed him with a hand, setting her teacup aside. “Workman was always going to think you a tick in the ear of the gentry. That was never going to change. But by allowing the papers to get a hold of the story, you gave Workman what he inevitably wanted. Gossip.” The Dowager paused at this, looking about to Carson who was standing stony faced by the door. “Carson-! When will Lord Grantham be home?”

“At half past, your ladyship.” Mr. Carson replied. “Shall I tell Mrs. Hughes to make up a room, or will you be staying with Lady Rosamunde.”

The Dowager laughed at the very notion. “Oh Heavens, I could never stay with Rosamunde. Her house is so gloomy and drafty. Have them put me in the Daffodil room. It has the best view of the gardens.”

“Certainly, your ladyship.” Once again, Carson was off like a shot. Thomas knew from experience he would be running to Mrs. Hughes, begging her for help to get a room ready at top speed. Everything looked so calm on the surface, but Thomas knew there was chaos just underneath.
Once again, Thomas could not help but put his head in his hands. He wished he could hide forever, that he could wrap up somewhere warm and dark and not be disturbed by societal expectations. “I’m making all the wrong moves.”

But his grandmother wasn’t one to be put off with minor inconveniences. She took it in her stride to say, “You’re not skilled at this dance; not yet. But I intend to help you through it as best as I can. You’re a Crawley where it counts, you were merely raised in a barn. But I’m not here to talk about your tutoring. I want to speak to you privately while your parents are out about other more important matters. If you’ll sit up straight for me?”

Thomas did so, relaxing back into the arm of his chair. His grandmother offered him a cup of tea, which Thomas accepted to stir in lemon and honey.

“Thomas, do you know our family motto?” His grandmother asked.

“What we do, we do for our children,” Thomas said.

“Precisely,” she preened at this, obviously proud. “I see Robert has schooled you well in that subject at least.”

“He gave me my grandfather’s cufflinks,” Thomas said. The Dowager paused, her wrinkled fingers tucked around a Madeline biscuit as she considered Thomas’ words. Every so often in conversations about the past, she would drift off and be recaptured by the memories of things she inevitably longed for. Thomas could not help but wonder what she would have looked like when he was an infant. Would she have had auburn hair like Edith, or black hair like Mary and Robert? Would she have been just as coy and cattish, or would she have been gentler?

“Your grandfather passed before your birth, but he spoke to me incessantly of plans for you,” The Dowager said. “Which is why I’m here.”

Just then, Carson came back with slightly tinged cheeks. He looked as if he’d ever been running or snogging Mrs. Hughes senseless. Possibly both.

“Carson, are you well?” The Dowager asked. “You look fevered.”
“Quite well, your ladyship,” Mr. Carson coughed, taking slow and steadying breathes. Thomas had to wonder just what on earth he’d been up to.

Actually, no. He didn’t want to think about it at all, particularly if it involved Mrs. Hughes.

“No, Thomas,” The Dowager turned back to him, setting her teacup aside so that she could give him her undivided attention. “Our family motto is very important, and it states the obvious truth. Our line cannot exist without children. I understand that in your prior life, you were a man of certain convictions. But now you’re home and that has to change.”

Suddenly, Thomas wished he were anywhere but sitting on the couch. There was nothing that he could say that would explain away his nature, nor satisfy his grandmother. As a result, Thomas simply fell silent and wished for the scene to end. Maybe if he faded into the background or slipped between the cracks of the chair on which he sat, he might finally be left alone on this one terrible subject.

This one sin that haunted him no matter where he went.

“Your lack of objection is slightly disturbing,” His grandmother muttered. She seemed unsure what to make of his silent treatment.

“I don’t know what to say.” He was likewise disturbingly aware of Carson at the door, listening intently to every word that Thomas said. He could not imagine whose judgement was worse, in that moment.

“Well, say the truth,” The Dowager demanded. “I’m your grandmother, not a stranger.”

But the truth was multi-layered, each in varying shades of sin, avarice, and sorrow. The more Thomas thought about the truth regarding his sexuality, the more he realized there was no set truth. The only facts he knew came from the bible and other men of sin like him. Hardly a balancing voice.

“I don’t think it will be possible for me to be a normal man,” Thomas admitted. “I’ve tried in the past and failed.”

“How did you fail?” His grandmother asked.
Had they been alone, Thomas might have answered straight away. Unfortunately, Carson was five feet behind Thomas, guarding the door and their tea set. Carson had always been staunch in his opposition to Thomas’ sexuality, a domineering and terrifying force when Thomas had been on staff.

He did not like the idea of Carson knowing his shame.

“… I don’t wish to say,” Thomas said. The Dowager’s bagged eyes narrowed as she looked from Thomas to Carson.

“Thomas, you can always trust your butler to hold your secrets,” the Dowager promised. “Carson is a proverbial tomb of Crawley sins. Aren’t you Carson?"

“I shall take them to my grave, M’lady,” Carson grumbled. This wasn’t far from the truth, as during his time on staff Thomas had constantly watched Carson defend the Crawley honor. He’d despised the staff being nosy about the Crawley family affairs, and every time someone had dared besmirch the family’s honor, Carson had come down with the proverbial hammer.

So, Thomas supposed, there wasn’t really any harm in Carson knowing one final sin.

“… There was this add in the paper…” Thomas began. The Dowager listened with keen interest, though she didn’t let her excitement show upon her aged face. She was instead calm and patient, her weathered hands wrapped tight around the head of her ivory cane.

“Back when I was a servant,” Thomas added with a sigh. “A … Choose Your Own Path, it was called.”

“Go on,” The Dowager said.

“They said they could change me,” Thomas explained, “Make me different. But in the end, all they did was hurt me. They drugged me…” Oh what a horrid dream it was, to speak of the things long dead. Thomas wished he could forget the pain of being electrocuted. “They electrocuted me. They forced me to get violently ill while I looked at pictures of men…”
He could still taste the bile in the back of his throat, his eyes burning as he remembered the images of men engaging in sodomy. His erection had been the damning evidence of his nature, and he’d been shocked over and over again while strapped to that aged rickety chair.

He’d screamed for mercy but found his torturers deaf.

“… It didn’t work,” Thomas mumbled. “It was never meant to work. They took me for a mug and got their jollies off at the sight of me in pain. Dr. Clarkson had to heal a wound on my hip when it got infected. He told me I should try and accept the burden I had been given… but in the end I just tried to kill myself and got caught.”

He gave a weak little laugh, though none of this was even remotely funny. “I guess…” He looked down at his lap, twiddling his thumbs. “I guess I was always meant to be revolting-“

“Stop,” The Dowager snapped. Thomas fell silent, his teeth clicking from the force of him shutting up.

He looked up to find the Dowager seething in her chair. But why was she so infuriated?

“The nerve of them,” She hissed. “The absolute, shameful nerve, to take someone who is looking for help and to harm them so. Oh- “she rubbed at her temple. “I would have thought being this old meant I understood the evils of the world, and yet still some men surprise me.”

Thomas was touched. Was she truly angry for all that he’d endured?

“Well…” He didn’t know what to say. He was oddly chuffed. “It is what it is-“

“It is wrong!” The Dowager corrected him. “It is wrong, and un-English to treat a man so uncivilly. It’s practically American.”

Thomas didn’t know what to say to that either, so he tried to shift the subject away from English sensibilities. “Would it be so horrid to have a grandson who was different?”

The Dowager waved the notion off like it was an irksome fly. “Certainly not, and you wouldn’t be
the first Crawley man to be different. Why, the late Lord Grantham’s younger brother was a different sort. He passed away when Robert was ten, but he was always a cheery sort. Slightly bothersome, though… he was always kissing the footmen.”

Carson’s eye twitched; he was pale but holding fast.

“No, I’m only bothered because you’re already enough of a flummox in the public eye,” The Dowager explained with a sigh. She then said, “I want you to have as smooth a life as you’re able, so that the gossip may die down quickly. The best way to do that would be for you to be wed, and preferably to someone who could turn the other cheek. Why, it could be a friendship more than a romance, and she would be able to benefit from it as much as you. What would you say to that?”

The idea terrified him; nauseated him. He could not stand the idea. At the same time, however, Thomas found himself fantasizing about the idea of having a best friend he could promenade with on his arm. A beautiful, charming woman who’d be nothing more than a close confidant… he could pretend to be normal, but would it be worth it? Would it be even possible?

“I don’t know what to say…” Thomas whispered. He twiddled his thumbs, considering all the things he’d been putting off; he hadn’t even met Rosamunde yet, though he’d been in London for over a week. He’d been putting off the dinner, nervous of being seen as unworthy after the disaster with Workman. “I’m too afraid to even meet my aunt; I can’t talk about things like marriage…”

The Dowager reached out and patted Thomas’ hand sympathetically, “I will ask Rosamunde to dine tonight, and we will conquer your fears.”

“But what if she hates me?”

“Rosamunde hates and is hated by everyone. It’s part of her charm.”

~*~

Mary returned home from a day full of shopping only to find granny waiting in the parlor and dinner with Aunt Rosamunde scheduled for seven that night. It was a shocking if delightful surprise, and one that she dressed the part for as Anna dressed her in a sparkling dress of lilac. She felt young and gay, and looked forward to dining with her full family for the first time.
“Mr. Carson says that Lord Downton is butting heads with his tutors” Anna mused as she brushed Mary’s hair. Mary caught her eyes in the mirror; Anna’s mouth was quirked in the tiniest grin. “Apparently he told Mr. Berry he was going to kill him.”

“Heavens,” Mary was tickled. “That’s hardly the way to make top grades.”

“See if you can’t sweeten Lord Downton up,” Anna offered. “He’s under enough stress as it is, and apparently he’s worried about Lady Rosamunde.”

“Why?” Mary asked.

“Something about her not liking him, Mr. Carson said,” Anna explained. “There-!” She stepped back, pleased by her handiwork. “You’re ready to dine with a king, M’lady.”

“Anna, you’re a saint,” Mary declared. She rose up from her boudoir and left her room to head downstairs. Unlike dining at Downton Abbey, the family preferred to meet in the main parlor room instead of a private sitting room. This was merely for lack of room, but it did not dampen the mood. Mary found a room packed, with Edith, Granny, Mama, Papa, Thomas, and his tutor Mr. Berry all talking amongst themselves. Thomas looked forlorn and was hiding in the corner while his tutor constantly tried to get him to sit up straight and be a gentleman. Thomas might have been wearing a fine dinner tux, but he still looked slightly out of place. He was too emotional, too honest and raw to smoothly blend in with the upper classes just yet.

Mary approached him at once, waiting patiently as Carson offered Thomas a pre-dinner cocktail that he declined.

“Never raise your hand more than your wrist when declining a drink,” Berry muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

Thomas’ eye twitched aggressively.

“Rosamunde’s still not here yet,” Thomas muttered.

“Honestly,” Mary took up a cocktail from Carson, who eyed them like they were snakes. “You act
like Aunt Rosamunde is going to bite.”

Carson passed the plate off to Andrew, who took over while Carson returned to the door. Thomas eyed them both warily.

“She might,” Thomas said.

“She won’t,” Mary wouldn’t hear a word of it, “Not in front of me, at least.”

The fact of the matter was, Rosamunde was capable of biting anybody that got without reach of her teeth. She was a sharp, critically eyed woman, and for that Mary loved her. But she was almost endearing and warm to her family members; Thomas had never seen this up close, so of course he feared her. But Mary knew better, and was willing to fill him in. Thomas, however, had something else on his mind.

“Mary,” Thomas pulled a bit at his bowtie, suddenly looking quite nervous. “There’s something I want to talk to you about. Before you came home-“

“The Lady Rosamunde Painswick.” Carson declared from the door.

Everyone looked about, setting drinks aside in order to properly greet their guest.

Aunt Rosamunde had a gleaming, feral look in her eye that might have been slightly unnerving had it not been for the affectionate smile upon her thin lips. She sought Thomas out above all others, and found him at Mary’s side. She took several steps forward, clearly making a beeline, but was cut off as Granny got to her first and kissed her fondly upon the cheek. In a dark orange dress with black beading, Rosamunde looked slightly like a voracious if lovely witch.

“Rosamunde, darling,” Granny greeted.

“Mama,” Rosamunde all but pushed her mother aside for the chance to see Thomas up close. Thomas shrunk back a little, hiding behind Mary’s shoulder till Mr. Barry silently commanded him to stop.

“This is an exciting day for our family!” Rosamunde declared, looking to her brother and sister-in-law. “I just got finished reading everything in the paper for the tenth time, and I’m still absolutely
shocked. This isn’t all some trick?” Rosamunde asked Cora.

“Certainly not,” Cora said with a smile. “Dr. Clarkson and Mr. Murray confirmed it.”

“As did a whole team of phlebotomists,” Robert added.

Rosamunde looked back to Thomas, delighted. “Then it is a miracle,” She declared.

She stepped around Mary, all but pushing her aside in order to look upon Thomas without interruption. Thomas was sweating underneath her gaze.

“We’ve met many times before, but not in circumstances such as these,” Rosamunde said. “But now, you are known to me as my nephew, and I am your aunt. So we must put our pasts behind us, and embrace a new relationship.”

Thomas gave a tight smile. “Thank you. I…” but whatever he meant to say, he simply couldn’t find the courage for. After a week of intense studying, Thomas’ brain seemed to be more fried than a dish of chips and fish. “Thank you,” he merely repeated.

“Lady Painswick, I am Mr. Kingsley Berry,” Berry kissed Rosamunde’s hand in greeting. “I am Lord Downton’s tutor in manners and have requested to come to dinner this evening in order to coach Lord Downton on site. I hope you will not find this too offensive?”

“Not at all,” Rosamunde praised. “My governess did much the same until I learned to behave.”

Thomas pursed his lips, clearly not liking the concept that he was ill-behaved at the tender age of thirty-six.

“Lord Downton, keep your chin parallel to the floor,” Berry reminded him once again; Thomas was slouching, trying to hide in a shadow. “You are a man of title and peerage, you cannot hide in the corner of the room.”

“I hate you so much,” Thomas ground out through gritted teeth.
“Hate me all you like, but stand up straight and be aware of your body.”

Thomas took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. Instead, all it served to do was make him look more tense. Rosamunde observed all of this in her own cunning way, dark eyes flickering from Robert to Granny in an attempt to decipher what exactly was going on. As Rosamunde went to greet her brother more intimately, Mary stepped back up to whisper in Thomas’ ear.

“Thomas, are you alright?” Mary asked. “You seem terribly tense. What was it you were going to tell me?”

“…Nothin’,” Thomas mumbled, watching Rosamunde walking away. “Doesn’t matter now.”

But Mary wasn’t so convinced.

Dinner that evening was a luxurious affair. Red and white roses littered the dining hall in fine crystal vases while a tablecloth of spindled Chinese silk served as their base. The lamps were low, the candles were lit, and Mary was smitten by the display. The Crawley set of Wedgewood, so often used for formal events, had been pulled out and polished up to play host to their dinner. A ten-course meal had been laid out for the Crawleys to dine on, including a fine brown veal soup, cold turbot with lobster and lemon, chaudfroid of fowl, meat pie served in burgundy, lemon sorbet to cleanse the palate, and of course a sumptuous field fares with game chips.

Conversation was required to be kept light until this course, so as claret began to make its rounds about the dining room, things took a decidedly difficult turn for Thomas.

“Have you spoken with Murray?” Rosamunde asked. She sat directly across from Thomas, and so she directed her question instead to Robert who sat on her left.

“I have,” Robert said.
“Then is the great matter settled once more?”

“It is,” Robert was most satisfied to report it as so. “I took care of it as soon as I arrived.”

“Excellent,” Rosamunde paused, glancing at Mary who sat on Thomas’ right. “Of course, you must be disappointed Mary. But I shouldn’t think this a great upset. Even if George is not the direct heir, he is still in line and has his own titles.”

Of course, Mary knew what Rosamunde did not… that Thomas did not want to be heir, and was fighting tooth and nail to keep George as the direct descendant.

Barry caught Thomas’ eye from his corner of the table, gesturing silently to Edith who sat on Thomas’ other side. Thomas was confused and raised an eyebrow unsure of how to proceed.

Berry gave a dramatic sigh, gesturing with his knife and fork in tiny jabbing movements. “You are ignoring your dinner partner, Lord Downton. Your mother as the hostess has not turned her head to indicate a shift in conversation, so you must delight Lady Edith with conversation. Delight her, please.”

Thomas slowly turned about to Edith, who was snickering around the rim of her claret glass. She grinned, setting her drink down to dab delicately at her lips with a silk napkin.

“Hi,” Thomas said. “You come here often or just when the clarets cold?”

Edith laughed again, “Thomas…”

As much as Mary would have liked to add in her own witty comment, she unfortunately had to address her aunt first.

“Actually, Thomas wants to abdicate his place in line,” Mary explained.

“He wants it to stay with George,” Cora added.
“But…” Rosamunde could not believe such a thing. “Surely now, the Downton line must fall to you?” She addressed Thomas directly at this, though he was still making Edith laugh. Thomas looked to Berry, unsure of how to proceed without being rude.

“But you’re the son of the current Earl,” Rosamunde couldn’t comprehend Thomas’ logic. “That puts you above George, rank wise. As much as I love him, and want him to have everything in life, it goes against tradition to have anyone take precedence over the direct descendant.”

But Thomas was having trouble getting the words out. Every time he opened his mouth, he seemed to rethink what he was going to say. Why was he so nervous? Surely he wasn’t afraid of Rosamunde?

“I… it has to stay with George for the line to continue,” Thomas took a hasty sip of claret as if hoping that would make Rosamunde desist.

It didn’t.

“But you’re the son of the current Earl,” Rosamunde couldn’t comprehend Thomas’ logic. “That puts you above George, rank wise. As much as I love him, and want him to have everything in life, it goes against tradition to have anyone take precedence over the direct descendant.”

But now that Mary thought about it, what would Rosamunde think of Thomas’ inversion? Would she
be disgusted, or would she simply not care?

“Thomas isn’t married,” Mary tried to excuse, “And he doesn’t have any children.”

“Oh!” Rosamunde laughed at this, put at ease. “Well, that’s a problem easily fixed. Women his age are lining up to be wed. I can think of five girls off the top of my head who’d be interested.”

But Thomas just shook his head. Rosamunde caught sight of him and frowned, pausing mid cut of her knife.

“Thomas, just because you have had a difficult start doesn’t meant that you should be deprived of happiness!” Rosamunde assured him.

“Rosamunde,” Cora spoke up, slightly tense at her persistent badgering. “Thomas doesn’t want to get married. He wants the lineage to stay with George so that way he doesn’t have to produce an heir to himself. Now please, let’s change the topic of conversation?”

“But what kind of man doesn’t want to get married?” Rosamunde wondered. “Marriage is a wonderful thing. Everyone benefits from it.”

Thomas bowed his head, putting his hands in his lap. He hadn’t even touched his field fowl.

“Lord Downton, keep your chin parallel to the floor,” Berry advised from across the table. Thomas glared at the man, silently commanding him to keep silent. Rosamunde was taken aback.

“Rosamunde,” Granny spoke up, glaring witheringly at her daughter. “Kindly stop pestering your nephew in front of his tutor.”

“But I’m confused, mama. I’ve never met someone who did not wish to be wed.”

“I’m…” Thomas started, only to fall silent again. Suddenly the whole table was tense, each member of the family looking to Thomas to see what he might say. “Not… inclined… to look… for such… things.”
“Things?” Rosamunde needed more clarification.

Thomas chewed on his tongue for a swollen half-minute, everyone waiting with baited breath. “Women.”

For a beat, Rosamunde was still confused. Then, clarity dawned upon her face so that she suddenly put both her fork and knife down.

“Oh….” She whispered, her mouth forming the perfect ‘o’ shape. “Oh I see.” She put her hands in her lap, thinking Thomas’ words over. “Oh dear.”

She wasn’t the only one to be hit with the bombshell. Across the table from Thomas, Mr. Berry looked oddly touched. Mary couldn’t understand why, until she considered Berry’s face, and how gentle he appeared. How oddly charming he was with Thomas, with a most unprofessional tone of voice. Did their camaraderie have something to do with their likenesses? Was Berry much the same as Thomas?

But even as Mary stared at the tutor, she could tell that Berry was sexually inverted. There was kindness in Berry’s eyes, clear and obvious empathy.

Thomas looked up to Berry, his eyes slightly wet. “If you want to stop teaching me I’ll understand.” He whispered.

Berry blinked, then said once again, “Keep your chin parallel to the floor.”

Thomas almost smiled, slightly charmed by Berry’s show of loyalty and understanding. Could it be that Thomas did not know Berry was like him?

“Deep breath,” Berry added, pausing to take a sip of claret. “Remember when you were a footman, you always had to have a servant’s blank. Do so now, see how it makes you feel.”

Thomas straightened up a bit in his chair, slowly allowing his face to slip into an expression of benign acceptance that Mary had seen him wear nearly all her life. It mirrored Carson’s face, and was one of schooled boredom.
“Keep that expression, when you’re nervous,” Berry advised. “Let it be your safe point. Now address your aunt’s concerns.”

“…The title must stay with George.” Thomas said, as calmly as you please.

“Well-“ Rosamunde shifted uncomfortably in her chair, thinking over the conundrum. “Not necessarily. WE can always have that little problem fixed.”

Thomas closed his eyes and let out the tiniest groan; only Edith and Mary could hear it.

“Rosamunde, enough,” Robert warned. His tone boded nothing but ill should she continue.

“I’m serious, Robert!” Rosamunde did not like being talked down to by her little brother. “You read about it in the paper all the time.”

“Leave Thomas alone-“

“But I saw something in the paper only this afternoon-“

“Rosamunde,” Granny snapped, “Thomas and I have discussed this matter in private.”

“What?” Cora was agog, “When?”

“When you were out shopping,” Granny shrugged.

“Mama!” Robert couldn’t keep a hold on one woman in his family without another running amuck on him. “I told you not to bother him! He’s meant to be studying.”

“Given that I am the one paying for his studies, I do believe I have the right to intrude when I see fit,” Granny said. Robert waffled for an answer but couldn’t find one forthcoming. “Thomas and I spoke about the idea of him getting married and he told me he didn’t want to answer me then, but
perhaps we can discuss it now as a family and find some sort of solution.”

“See, mama thinks I’m right!” Rosamunde was proud of her position and held staunchly to it. “We could find him a nice, bright young girl to help him begin life afresh.”

Cora let out an exhasperated sigh, raising her eyes to the ceiling as if asking God for help. “Why do I endure this?” she wondered aloud.

“If we can set Thomas up with a woman who needs status, who does not care for a relationship but will simply hold the title of his wife, we can help him to not only avoid scandal but wipe away news of the Barrow trial,” Granny explained.

Mary was watching Thomas avidly, noting that his hand was tight around his claret glass. His knuckles were white-

“I don’t understand what you’re saying-” Cora wouldn’t hear a word of it.

“Imagine,” Rosamunde protested. “The news of his difficult start, swallowed up by the news of a joyous wedding! Perhaps with an old family to boot! We could strengthen our line-“

A muscle in Thomas’ jaw was jumping.

“And who knows, as the years passed, it would probably turn into a proper marriage anyw-“

_Crack!_

Mary jumped in her chair, shocked as Thomas broke the claret glass in his hand. Wine exploded in his grip, staining the front of his dinner tux with flecks of crystal, alcohol, and blood. His palm was now a bright pink, tinged at the core from where shards of glass had bit into tender flesh. The shattered stem of his claret glass dropped unceremoniously onto his lap, the upper lip now divided into several part and scattering upon his arm and the table. One piece even fell onto his plate to late with a tiny _clinking_ noise.

The table fell silent, open mouths and wide eyes taking in Thomas’ silent expression of rage and
But Thomas was not silent. He jerked back from the table, staggering out of his chair to observe his bloody palm. He let out a weak, nervous laugh.

Mary stood up with him, trying to offer her napkin so that she might soothe his hand, but Thomas jerked back from her.

“I can’t do this-“ Thomas was on the verge of hyperventilating, his skin ashen white, his pupils round and black.

Edith rose up, as did Robert, and Cora.

“Thomas, your hand!” Edith cried out.

“I can’t do this, I can’t do this-“ Thomas just repeating the phrase over and over again, unable to get a hold of himself.

Berry slowly rose from his chair, a hand outstretched to try and soothe Thomas from across the table.

“Thomas, breath,” Berry commanded. “Just breath. This is fixable. Everything is fix-“

“You can’t fix me!” Thomas shouted at the man. “None of you can!”

“For heaven’s sake!” Rosamunde wondered, staring at her nephew in fear. “Is marriage so horrifying-?”

“I’ve failed you-“ It was difficult to say whom Thomas spoke to, but her parents were hot contenders. Cora’s expression crumpled at Thomas’ heartache. “I’m so sorry, I’ve failed you. I’ve failed all of you-“

Blood dripped onto the carpet and chair. Mary tried to bind it again with her napkin, but once again, Thomas pulled back.
“Don’t be ridiculous!” Robert begged. “You haven’t failed anybody.-“

“Thomas, listen to me,” Cora was quick with her words, surging them forward to try and stop Thomas’ misery as fast as she could. “You’re working yourself up because of someone else’s demands. Nothing else matters but what you want!“

“I can’t have what I want!” Thomas cried out, balling his bloodied fist to slam it atop the back of his chair. He broke in the moment, back bowed and head dipped as the tiniest bit of a sob slipped past his ruby lips.

In that moment, Mary’s heart broke for him.

“I can’t… I can’t have what I want. I can never have what I want because I’m a sinner and will rot in hell for eternity for even wanting it!” With every word, Thomas’ voice got louder and louder. By the time he finished, he was screaming.

It was horrible to witness and made Mary flinch.

“Thomas-“ She whispered, reaching out to try and bring him into her arms. But he pulled away from her to stagger towards the door.

He left, brushing right past Carson who tried to stop him.
A Lesson in Pleasure

Chapter Summary

Thomas finds out there are perks to being friends with Kingsley Berry, and faces one last challenge as the new Viscount of Downton.

Chapter Notes

This is the final chapter of The Devil's Child, and concludes this tale par the moment. There will be a sequel, but I'm unsure as of this moment what the title will be. I'm also thinking about doing another omegaverse fic with Thomas/Bates being the pairing. I'm unsure what will come first, but I think it will be the sequel to The Devil's Child just because this story has so much more to say.

It's been a pleasure writing this story. Keep your eyes peeled for the sequel, and everyone have a happy happy new year!

No one wanted to talk about it, but Thomas’ wounded hand was living proof of the awful dinner with Aunt Rosamunde. It stood out like a raw brand every time Thomas made to pick up a teacup or write a document. For many days after cutting his hand, it hurt terribly for Thomas to turn the page of a book, to wash his hands, or to even let water near his cut. Still, he refused aid and instead cared for the cut himself with what little medical skills he possessed from his time in Flanders. It was hard to say what the family mood was, regarding his forceful coming out. Cora was certainly outraged that Rosamunde would pester Thomas to the point of an emotional breakdown, but Granny was still adamant that a false marriage might be Thomas’ saving grace in the eyes of society. Robert was embarrassed for his sister, but unsure of where he stood either way. Edith just felt sorry for him, and Mary…

Well, Mary didn’t really have an opinion. She stuck by Thomas’ side and barred her teeth like a she-wolf anytime someone threatened his peace of mind.

The real oddity in all of this had been Mr. Kingsley Berry, who instead of being unnerved with Thomas’ company, decided to keep it more. There was hardly an hour of the day in which Berry did not accompany Thomas about the house or in his studies. From the hour that Thomas woke, Berry was there to help him navigate the pitfalls of being new to the gentry. When Thomas went to bed, Berry was the last face he saw, illuminated by firelight. There was something odd in the way that Berry looked at him. Something that bordered between empathy and understanding. But Berry was a normal man, so how could he ever understand the difficult life that Thomas lead?
At least, this had been Thomas’ line of thinking until a week after Thomas’ awful dinner. It had been a quiet evening, with the hour late and a gentle pattering of rain tapping upon the windowsill. Thomas sat at his personal writing desk, with Berry in his accompanying guest chair, the pair of them slowly working on Thomas’ penmanship. Thomas had never been particularly bad at writing legibly, but he’d also never learned cursive either. Berry had started making Thomas work on a writing journal and had slowly moved him from individual letters to full words. Now, Thomas was writing a mock letter to no one, with the fire burning low in his hearth and still peace about their room.

“…Have you ever been to the Cavour?” Berry asked.

“The what?” Thomas paused, pen still in hand.

“The Cavour,” Berry repeated.

Thomas shrugged. “No,” he went back to writing.

“…. Put down your pen, we’re going out for a drink.”

Thomas looked up again, wondering if he’d hallucinated Berry’s words. But the look on Berry’s youthful face made it adamantly clear that he was far from joking.

“…D…Drink?” Thomas repeated.

“Drink,” Berry said.

“Fuckin’ hell- “Thomas all but threw the pen away from him. “I’ll pay, let’s go!”

The night was late, and a deep mist rolled about London like a wave crashing on the shore. With Berry at his side, Thomas felt like he was walking more with a chum than with a tutor. They were bound for the west side of Leicester Square, traveling by cab till they reached the outer corners from which they walked on foot. The atmosphere was lively and gay here, with young people enjoying their time out on the town. A great deal of the people were upper class, though a few seemed to be
more in the entertainment business than not. It was, in a word, bohemian, and it made Thomas feel oddly at home.

Berry and Thomas had to pause as they were passed by two women on the street openly holding hands; one was dressed as a man, with a collar, tie, and short cropped hair. She smoked a cigarette, and adoringly gazed at the woman on her arm.

Thomas stopped dead, looking after the women as they passed. He glanced from them to Berry, who was wearing an oddly sulky smile.

“Oh yes,” Berry said. “You’ve been such a good student, I thought you deserved a treat.”

“… A treat?”

“Mhmm,” And without another word, Berry took him by the arm to pull him into a side ally that was well lit with old fashioned street lamps. Three steps up lead to a bar with cheery yellow window panes. Above it was a fine sign painted in white and black paint, “The Cavour”.

Outside of it was, oddly enough, a group of men who were obviously lookouts. Despite the fact that it was raining, they never moved and instead kept looking back and forth at crowds that passed. Though no policemen were in sight, it was obvious the men were waiting just in case.

They were wary of strangers. When Berry approached, however, the men relaxed and nodded their heads in greeting.

“Gentlemen,” Berry pulled Thomas inside.

Thomas stopped in the doorsill, taken aback.

The bar was covered in youths, each more effeminate and colorful than the last. Their hair was waved, their lips coated in rouge, and a few were in sparkling dresses. This might have been normal enough to the eye, had the youths not all been men.

One man, sans dress, leaned in to squeeze the other’s rear. He shrieked at being touched, turning
about and nearly spilling his glass of wine.

“Frank!” Screeched the boy in the dress. “You’re such a whore- “

“Ay but you love it- ” Frank leaned in and nibbled on the other’s ear.

Down at the other end of the bar, two young men in dresses were kissing a third on the ear, each on either side and caressing their captive like he was the entirety of their world.

“Who do you love more?” The one on the left asked. “Me or Jack?”

“Yes, which one?” Jack asked.

“Boys, boys- “The one in the middle was as suave as he was old, wrapping an arm around each of the youth’s shoulders. “How could I ever choose between such beauties?”

“Oh, Douglas you cad- “Jack beamed, kissing the third man square on the mouth. He ended up knocking Douglas’ top hat onto the floor, but Douglas didn’t seem to care. He was much too busy squeezing the arse of the youth on his other arm.

On the other side of the bar, clusters of tables scattered around a band playing soft jazz kept company with a fine smattering of people. Some were young, some were old, some were rich, some were entertainers, but all of them were undeniably…

… like…

“Let’s get a booth,” Berry said. He took Thomas by the hand, pulling him into the corner where booths lined the opposite wall of the war. They slid into the back, the pair of them now kept company by a small white candle and a single ceramic vase holding a green gardenia.

“…Berry, how did you know about this place?” Thomas asked. His eyes were roving the crowd, unable to soak it all in. Every man… every last one of them… they were like him, surely. They knew his sorrows, his pains, his joys.
He wanted to know them all. To have each of their names memorized by heart. To go to each of their houses, to dine at their tables, and be amongst their brethren.

He never wanted to leave this place. The Cavour… Had a more beautiful word ever come to surface?

“…This place…” Thomas could not imagine a word less worthy of describing The Cavour. It wasn’t a place. It was a sanctuary. A church. He had come to pray at the altar of men like him. Did it show on his face how much he adored his surroundings?

“Two things,” Berry signaled for a waiter who came over promptly, pouring them a glass of ice water. “Your eyes are watering, so dry them… and secondly, I know about this place because I am here often.”

“Often,” Thomas couldn’t summon what the word must mean. A tear fell down his cheek, and he chased it up at once.

“Evening- “Berry paused, turning to the waiter. “Get us a bottle of merlot, a good year if you have it, and an ashtray… what’s on the menu for appetizers today. Have those cheese olives come back?”

“Of course,” The waiter said. “Fan favorite, they are.”

“Get us some of those. And some bread and sauce,” Berry quirked a smile. “Who’s working the bar tonight, besides the girls?”

“Well, if you gentlemen are in the mood for a bit of company,” the waiter looked over his shoulder scanning the crowd. “I’ve a friend or two in the back that might enjoy the view.”

Berry drummed his elegant fingers on the table, eyes narrowing as he looked from Thomas to the bar. “We’ll move our table to the back. Thomas, you said you’d pay?”

“Y-yes- “Thomas stuttered, reaching into his coat pocket. His heart was pounding wildly in his chest, making it difficult to breath or think. Money- who needed money? Did those nice young men at the bar want money? Thomas would throw money at them all day long if they came over and kissed on
his ear for a change.

“Give the waiter a pound,” Berry said. “That’ll get us into the back room.”

Christ Thomas would give him his whole fucking wallet, if that was the case. He handed the note over at once, which the waiter took to pocket with a secretive smile.

“When I leave the table, wait five minutes, then follow me to the bathrooms. There will be a door that reads ‘broom closet’. Knock once, wait a beat, knock twice, then it will be unlocked.” The waiter said. Without another word, he left to refill water glasses at another table across the way.

One knock, two knocks, what the hell kind of a place was this? A speakeasy for sodomy? Christ, there was a market niche if ever Thomas had seen one! He needed to get in on this investment before all the money ran out.

As they waited, Thomas found himself staring at Kingsley Berry with newfound appreciation… his perfectly coifed hair, his elegant fingers, the way he looked oddly feminine but in a masculine way.

“…You’re…” It seemed like he was in a dream. Was this but a waking hallucination? Some kind of miserable temptation for his isolationism?

“I’m,” Berry smiled. “Had a feeling you were two, though that god-awful dinner confirmed it for me. S’why your grandmother called on my services. I’ve worked with others she knew before, but we go way back she and I. She knew what I was… mentioned it might help you feel more comfortable.”

Suddenly, the Dowager Countess was Thomas’ favorite person in the entire world.

“…My god,” Thomas whispered. “I never knew.”

“Yeah, you’re shit at picking us out,” Berry snorted. “I noticed that about you. You’ve been isolated for far too long. Be honest with me, when’s the last time a man had his way with you.”

Thomas rolled his eyes, thinking back to the Downton Police Station. “A while ago, I let a copper have his greens with me. I must have been mad. He was my father’s age.”
“Yeah well…” Berry tilted his head to the hallway that led to the loos. “Let’s see if we can change that, eh?”

He slid out of his seat, headed for the corner of the bar. Thomas followed, keen not to be left behind.

The hallway to the loo was relatively abandoned, save for a young man who was fastidiously adjusting the slip beneath his pink dress. As he passed by, Thomas caught the scent of jasmine and wondered if the boy was wearing perfume.

There, bold as brass, sat the broom closet. Berry smiled at Thomas, then performed the secret knock as prescribed by their understanding waiter.

A soft ‘click’ from beyond signaled the door being unlocked. It swung inward, revealing a staircase down lined with red velvet and soft brass lamps that offered a golden gloom.

As Thomas and Berry entered, the door closed behind them to reveal a large black man with heavy muscles and tattoos from his time in the navy. Thomas was amazed to see that the door to the broom closet was heavily bolted by iron rods; it would be an impenetrable fortress to break through, should a copper try.

They hit the bottom to find another smoky bar on their right along with a short hallway on their left. Berry gestured to the right, so Thomas followed suit into a cramped but cozy scene of-

Christ-!

A gentleman close to Robert Crawley’s line of luxury sat splayed legged on a dipping green velvet chair, a naked young man sprawled lazily upon his lap and a glass of wine in his hand. The boy seemed to be half-asleep, a long cigarette holder slipping from nimble fingers; the smell of opium was heavy in the air. The gentleman was reading a book, his free hand going back and forth between taking sips of wine and allowing his fingers to trail up and down his partner’s spin.

The boy sighed, contentedly.

Across the room, two men around Thomas’ age were in the middle of waging a war with their
tongues; neither was giving ground, the pair of them making out enthusiastically as they groped and grabbed at one another. When they did part, it was only to take breath before plunging in again.

“My darling- my darling- “Thomas heard one whisper, only to be silenced when his partner smashed their faces together again. Their own dinner was all but forgotten.

Thomas was stunned into silence at the displays of depravity. My god, how brave all these men were! How utterly secure in their surroundings, to show their love and not be afraid. Thomas could not imagine the depths of such courage.

Berry took Thomas by the hand, pulling him forcibly along to a couch in the corner which kept the company of several rosy throw pillows. He relaxed into the couch, gesturing for Thomas to take the opposite corner. Thomas did so, sitting down cautiously. Was this all some elaborate trap, or could he really trust Berry?

Thomas looked to the man, unsure, only to melt slightly as Berry’s kind smile.

“Relax,” Berry whispered. “You’re safe.”

Thomas couldn’t even fathom the meaning of the word.

Their waiter returned after a moment, carrying a tray with a bottle of wine, two glasses, a plate of fried olives, and an ashtray. He sat each before them on a mahogany coffee table, only to pour their wine when prompted. When he finished, the waiter looked to Berry and Thomas with an expectant smile.

“What can I pleasure you with?” The waiter asked.

“My friend here is new,” Berry explained. “He’s never seen the grand beauty of this place. We need something… simple, but sweet. Something endearing, but spicy to liven up the night. Do you have anything on your menu to our tastes?”

The waiter thought on it for a moment, only to snap his fingers and say, “I know just the one.”
“Much obliged,” Berry watched the man go with a smile, then immediately helped himself to the wine. Thomas, on the other hand, shakily struck up a cigarette to flick at it nervously.

“Christ, what is this place?” Thomas wondered.

“It’s a bar and brothel for homosexual men,” Berry explained. “Caters to folks like you and me. Now that you have money, you can afford to spend some time here. See that you do, it’ll loosen you up at dinner. Don’t want you breaking anymore glasses.”

Thomas palmed his cut hand cautiously. He tried a fried olive, only to be taken aback by how good they were. They were stuffed with pimento cheese, and downright delicious.

“You see, Thomas,” Berry turned to face Thomas, jaunting his wine glass upon right thigh as he spoke. “Your problem is that you’re too isolated. You’ve forgotten how to interact with your own kind. You’ve swallowed that stuff and nonsense about hell and damnation for so long, you think it’s true.”

“Isn’t it?” Thomas asked. “When it’s in the bible- “

“Fuck the bible,” Berry breezed. Thomas was taken aback.

“But it’s- “

“A book,” Berry sneered, rolling his eyes. “An’ it’s not the only book out there, mind you- “He paused to sample the cheesy olives himself. “Christ, these are good.”

“But what if they’re right?” Thomas asked.

“Is there anything that you can do about it?” Berry asked. “Can you change your fate from heaven to hell, or vice versa if you’re already damned?”

“…No,” Thomas said.
“Then you might as well have a little fun while you’re here,” Berry concluded. He paused to take a slurp of wine before licking his lips.

Now that Thomas thought about it, that was a rather smart way of thinking. Why had he kept from having fun in so long? Was it because he lived in North Yorkshire, or was it because he felt he didn’t deserve fun when it came along?

Or maybe it was a bit of both?

Just as Thomas opened his mouth to explain all of this, he was brought to a pause by a new arrival. A young man with wavy brown hair in a kimono of off-white silk entered the room, looking about only to pause when he spotted Berry and Thomas sitting upon the couch. It was obvious even from a distance that he was naked beneath the kimono; it gave him only the most meager strings of dignity if any.

“…Evening, gentlemen,” the young man had the audacity to sit between them on the couch. He caught Berry’s eye, grinned, and took Berry’s wine glass right from his hand to take a long sip. “Good year.”

“Good night,” Thomas swore aloud, eyes wide at the ravishing beauty before him. He’d died and gone to heaven-!

The youth turned, green eyes flashing dangerously at Thomas’ display. “And who is this? A handsome face like yours shouldn’t be without a name.”

“T…” Thomas couldn’t get out a word. What was his name? Tommy? Something like that? “Tom…”

“Thomas,” Berry laughed. “His name is Thomas, and he’s in your hands tonight. He’s new here… and he’s been having a rough week.”

“Aw…” The young man puttered, sticking out his bottom lip and flashing Thomas a doe-eyed look. “I’m sowwy.”
He reached forward, and with graceful hands undid Thomas’ tie to pull it free from his neck. “Maybe I can make it better?”

“Uh…” Thomas couldn’t come up with a response. “...I mean… you’re… well…”

The youth grinned. “I’m Louise, thanks for asking,” he trailed his fingers up and down the front of Thomas’ shirt, passing by Thomas’ wildly beating heart. “And you, Thomas… are very beautiful.”

“Fuck….” Thomas briefly wondered if he might have a heart attack from delight and arousal.

“See, Thomas hasn’t ever been to a place like this,” Berry explained, snacking on some olives as he spoke. “He’s been loaded up with all that smoke and brimstone. The other day at dinner, his family tried to set him up with marriage and he broke the glass he was holding. Screamed out that he was a sinner just for wanting what he couldn’t have.”

Louise was taken aback, pausing to stare at Thomas’ wounded hand.

Louise took it up in both his own, examining the cut and bandage up close.

“…. Is that so?” Louise whispered. He caught Thomas’ eye, and brought a finger up to his mouth.

Thomas’ jaw dropped as Louise opened his mouth to suck on Thomas’ middle finger; Louise never moved his gaze away, his warm, wet tongue lapping at the soft pad. Louise pulled back, only to place the tiniest kiss on the tip of Thomas’ offending finger.

“Do you know what I say, Thomas?” Louise whispered.

“Nuhuh,” Thomas shook his head.

“…I say, life’s short and death is sure… so suck as much dick as you can,” Louise grinned. “And enjoy the ride. I’d like to die with a cock in my mouth if I could.”

“That’s… very admirable,” Thomas squeaked.
“I long to be... admirable,” Louise said. He slid from the couch onto Thomas lap, lacing his arms around Thomas’ neck. “Won’t you help me?”

“...How?” Thomas asked.

“Well I’m a little hungry,” Louise explained.

“The olives are good- “ Thomas said. “Have as many as you- “

But Louise just laughed, placing a finger over Thomas’ mouth to keep him from talking.

“I’m hungry for your cock,” Louise explained. Thomas didn’t quite know what to say to that. “You wouldn’t let a pretty thing like me starve, would you?”

“I mean…” Jesus Christ, what was the adequate response to that? “… If it fits your dietary needs.”

“Oh, I live exclusively off cock, I can assure you,” Louise said with a dark grin. Thomas was slightly worried that Louise was missing out on several important food groups.

“Why don’t you and I... and your friend... go to my room... and finish our meal,” Louise offered.

Thomas glanced at Berry, who was eating olives and being most unhelpful.

“By all means,” Berry offered. “You might have to drag him along, he’s a little dumbfounded by this point.”

“Follow me, Thomas,” Louise slid off his lap, pulling him along by his loosened tie. Thomas went willingly, tripping over the carpet as he headed back out to the stairs and into the short hall. There were only so many rooms here, and each seemed to have been embedded into the rock foundation of the bar above. Louise took them to the second to last one, flashing a smile as he pulled a key from the pocket of his silk kimono. Berry brought up the group, the three of them entering into Louise’ private bedchambers; it stank of opium, once again, but the bed was tidy, and the dresser kept company with a pot of white gardenias. Louise locked the door after them, effectively sealing them in only to turn on them with a predatorial smile.
“…Do you mind if I get comfortable, gentlemen?” Louise asked.

“…Nuhuh,” Thomas said again.

Louise smiled, then relaxed his shoulders. As a result, his kimono fell to the floor, leaving him completely nude to the room.

Thomas’ jaw dropped for the third time that night.

Louise was lithe and young, his body supple and sweet though it was in serious need of a few extra pounds. What was more, he’d shaved off all his body hair (though Thomas couldn’t fathom why), all in all leaving him a ravishing (if feminine) image to behold.

Thomas could remember some dribble he’d said to Mary about liking men with chest hair; clearly, he didn’t have a clue what he enjoyed, because Louise was right up his ally and there was nothing burly about him.

“… Thomas…” Louise faked a shiver, biting his lip. “I’m terribly cold. Won’t you warm me up?”

He looked at Berry, and noted the man was grinning mischievously. If Thomas were the moral sort, the sort who had good character and firm standards, he might have plucked up Louise’s kimono from the floor and offered it back to him. He might have bid the young man ‘adieu’ and headed straight back home to fall asleep in his cold and lonely bed.

But Thomas was not a moral man. He was not even a good man. He was simply a man, period. Point blank, stop.

As such, he possessed a penis, and when it was aroused it made its presence damn well known to its owner. As of this moment, it was banging on the flap of his trousers like a landlord coming to collect late rent.

*Let me out of here, you rat bastard! His cock seemed to say. You won’t deny me this!*
“Yeah alright,” Thomas extended an arm, pulling Louise in like an angler catching a rare fish. Louise fit just so in the crook of his arm, wrapping his limbs about Thomas’ neck to press their noses together. His breath smelt like perfume and opium, his skin was oddly cool to the touch. But Thomas was a fiend, his hands sliding up and down Louise’ beautiful body even though Berry was in plain sight and Thomas didn’t even know Louise’ last name.

Christ, he had a feeling ‘Louise’ wasn’t even the lad’s real name.

But his body was real, supple, smooth, and round. It was perfect for groping, for pinching, for squeezing with tight fingers as Thomas pressed Louise tighter and tighter to his own body. In response, Louise caught Thomas’ eye, leaned in, and cautiously kissed him upon the lips.

It was like a stick of dynamite had been lit. Thomas pulled Louise straight off the floor, kissing the pants off of him while Berry looked on from Louise’ bedside. He seemed to have an odd voyeur edge and was enjoying the show with evident delight.

“Won’t you share me-?” Louise begged, pressing chaste kisses to the corner of Thomas’ mouth. “It’s un-lordly to leave your friend in the cold.”

“Who says I’m a lord-?” Thomas captured Louise’ mouth again, but Louise wrestled away to toy delightfully with Thomas’ slicked back hair.

“…Your waistcoat, and your pocket watch, and your tutor,” Louise beamed. “Aren’t a smart little Molly.”

“So very smart,” Thomas confirmed. “Whatever shall we do about this, Berry?”

“I say, let him earn his keep,” Berry offered. “We paid a shilling for it, we ought to get our money’s worth-“

“What say you, Louise?” Thomas asked, hoisting the man up higher in his arms so that the tips of Louise’ toes barely scraped the cold dirty ground. “Shall you show us a good time?”

“I endeavor to do so, sir,” Louise said.
Thomas grinned, and tossed Louise onto the bed so that he bounced with a gay giggle of mirth. At once, Berry leaned in and began to devour Louise at the neck, one hand parting Louise’ creamy pale thighs to keep them splayed obscenely open.

Thomas’ pupil’s dilatated in lust. He had not known the taste of another man’s flesh in many a year. He had thought the taste lost to him forever, though he’d once dabbled with a policeman and dreamed of Jimmy Kent often.

But now… now, on this beautiful whore ten feet beneath London’s cold musty ground, while his family slept and his old butler decanted port blissfully in his study… now, Thomas James Robert Crawley the twelfth would feast.

~*~

They did not return to the house till well after two in the morning, the pair of them sated on Louis’ flesh. Thomas had never known such hedonistic gazes. The candles had been burning low in their wicks, but the fire within Thomas had been endless. He’d had Louise every way he wanted, back to front, standing up and laying down.

By the time Berry had drug him home, Thomas had been walking on jelly legs and drunk on opium. He’d crawled into his bed with his shoes still on and had been found that way by Bates in the morning. Berry hadn’t been that much better; he’d passed out in Thomas’ visitor chair and had to pretend they’d spent the night working on calligraphy.

Bates hadn’t swallowed it.

Now it was the morning after (or rather, the noon after), and Thomas sat bleary eyed in the drawing room of Crawley House with the rest of his family. The skin around his prick felt chaffed, like he’d rubbed himself raw in his frantic fucking on London’s most beautiful molly. Across the room from him, Berry was casually reading a book on Roman history, though every so often he’d glance up to find Thomas staring at him. Berry winked, then returned to his studies to keep out of trouble.

Meanwhile, the Crawley clan were hard pressed to explain to Thomas a matter of some importance. Some blather of a great event or another… Thomas was having a hard time paying attention.

“Thomas-?”
Louise’s head was thrown back in ecstasy, his tempo quick and unrelenting as he impaled himself again and again on Thomas’ manhood. Behind Thomas, seated at the crux of their lovemaking, Berry plundered Thomas raw with his nimble fingers. He was muttering in Thomas’ ear even as Louise whimpered and whined before the pair of them.

“Thomas are you listening to me-?”

“You like that don’t you?” Berry had grunted in his ear, fucking Thomas hard with his hand. “D’you know how many times I’ve wanted to take you on your father’s desk? Have my wicked way with you right in front of the others? Christ you’re divine- “

“Thomas!”

Thomas gave a start, sucking in a breath he hadn’t known he’d been holding. Before him, his grandmother was staring at him concernedly.

“Thomas, have you been listening to a single word I’ve said?” She demanded impatiently. Next to her on the couch, his mother carefully worked on an embroidery design while Mary read the latest edition of Edith’s magazine.

His father was captivated by the argument between Thomas and his grandmother, listening intently as Thomas tried to re-steady himself and fight back.

“Sorry- “Thomas mumbled, rubbing at his eyes. He feigned tiredness. “Berry and I were studying late last night. The time got away from us. I’m afraid I haven’t had much sleep."

“Berry-?” The Dowager looked over her shoulder to where Berry was still reading his book. Berry closed it and looked up at the Dowager with a polite smile.

“M’lady.”

“You’re working Thomas too hard. He has to sleep sometime, yes?”

“Of course, your ladyship,” Berry set his book aside. “I’ll be more than happy to give Lord Downton...
some time to himself if that is your wish.”

“It is my wish for my grandchildren to listen to me when I talk,” The Dowager grumbled. “But I see now that this is a poor wish and not to be fulfilled.”

She turned back to Thomas, slightly irritable. “If you can stay awake long enough for me to finish my sentence, you will learn that I have made great plans for you.”

“Plans?”

“A ball, Thomas,” His Grandmother preened at the words, clutching the silver handle of her ivory cane tightly.

“…A what?” Thomas wasn’t entirely sure he’d understood.

“I’ve orchestrated a ball to be held in your honor at Teck Manor,” The Dowager explained. Cora snapped up with a gasp, her eyes filled with delight.

“Mama, you haven’t!” She said with joy.

“I have,” The Dowager said. “And every member of the gentry will be present to welcome you into our brood.”

But after the awful dinner with Rosamunde, Thomas wasn’t too sure he liked the idea of going to a ball. Who wasn’t to say that the whole thing wouldn’t come falling on his face like the last time? It was one thing to embarrass yourself in front of your aunt. It was another thing entirely to embarrass yourself in front of fifty members of the peerage.

He looked at Berry, and found the man watching him intensely. Thomas flushed, unable to hide from the memories of Berry fucking him while Louis took him into his mouth.

God, the depraved things they’d done. And no one in the room was even the wiser!
“…That would be a poor idea, granny,” Thomas said. “The dinner with Aunt Rosamunde-“

“Was not your fault,” Granny refused to budge an inch. “Your aunt has a way of getting on everyone’s nerves. It’s part of her charm. But you have Berry to guide you, as well as Fisher, and the pair of them are as thick as thieves I assure you. Never one without the other.”

Did that mean?

Thomas glanced at Berry, cocking an eyebrow, but Berry shook his head surreptitiously while the others weren’t looking.

So clearly, Fisher wasn’t like them.

“The ball will go off without a hitch, so long as you control yourself,” Granny explained. “As I’m sure Fisher and Berry have both been drilling into your head.”

But the only thing Berry had been drilling into his head was his cock in Thomas’ mouth last night. He’d face-fucked him to the point of making Thomas’ jaw ache, forcing him to take Berry’s manhood deep into his stinging throat. Louise had forced his arms behind his back, whispering the most filthy and depraved things in Thomas’ ear while he’d stroked Thomas off at the same time.

God… the things he’d said-!

But the Dowager knew none of these things. She was clueless to the fact that her only grandson had committed shocking acts of sodomy not even twelve hours ago. Instead, she wondered at his silence and took it for nerves.

“The most important rule for you to observe is that you handle your temper when you are faced with an opponent who has vexed you,” The Dowager said. “You, like Mary, have a temper. Even if the man you are speaking to is absolutely in the wrong, you must yield gracefully and decline further discussion. You cannot allow yourself to become angered.”

But Thomas could not find an answer to these helpful offers. What did it matter if he kept his temper when he couldn’t keep his cock to himself?
He was waging an internal war of pleasure and humiliation. He could not get the image of Louise out of his mind; how utterly lovely he’d been when he’d shrugged off his kimono.

“Lord Downton.”

Thomas gave a start, looking up to find Berry watching him from across the room. “The servant’s blank will be your saving grace, sir.”

How on earth could Berry hold a conversation with him, like this, in front of his entire family, when the entire night prior they’d been fucking like hedonistic animals?

How could he find it within him to act so suave? So in control? Was this part of learning how to be a gentleman? You flaunted your flagrant desires at night and wore a cool mask of purity during the day?

With glazed eyes, Thomas could do little more than nod.

“I ought to add,” Robert spoke up from the hearth. “You must retain a fixed political opinion. We’re conservative, as a family.”

But there was nothing conservative about Thomas. He didn’t care about unions, or the separation of the Irish Free State. The monarchy, empire, and tradition were mere words on a page to him. They slid by without pressure, like butter scooting around the rim of an overheated pan. Whatever impression they left on him, it was meaningless. Tariffs… taxes… All like wind blowing through his ear. Water slipping through cupped fingers.

“What if I want to form my own political opinion?” Thomas asked his father. “Isn’t that why I have a tutor in politics?”

“Tom is bad enough,” Robert scoffed. Imagine, an Irishman in the family. “You’re a Crawley. You are conservative. End of story.”

Mary, however, was less certain. “Just brush politics aside,” Mary shrugged. “It’s what I always do.”
“You are a woman, Mary,” the Dowager reminded her. “It is not your place to have a position on politics.”

“How good of you to remind me,” Mary scowled into her teacup. The Dowager arched a finely plucked eyebrow.

“Balls are simple things,” Robert stepped away from the hearth, coming around the sofa to take Thomas’ shoulders in hand. “Never finish someone else’s story. Allow them to speak till they’ve reached the crux of their topic—“

“Keep my mouth shut, essentially?” Thomas muttered.

“More or less,” Robert chuckled. Thomas found it less funny.

“But be mindful how you hold your silence!” The Dowager added. “Looking at your watch, flirting with the leaves of a book, any of that could be misconstrued as ill will towards whomever is talking to you. Best to just enjoy your drink, and nod. Nodding is always a safe territory.”

Just to show how asinine Thomas imagined the Dowager’s advice to be, he did nothing but nod in response. Robert seemed to find this funny and squeezed Thomas’ shoulders in appreciation.

The Dowager did not care. She was lost in the memory of balls long past and spoke in histrionics. “You must drift like a leaf upon the wind, never blustered about by a gale. Your conversation must be free of strife.”

She paused, noting her hand was held aloft as if stroke a velvet curtain in a distance mansion. She set her hand down, glaring frumpily at her son. “This may seem difficult to do at first but look at your father as encouragement. He’s an expert at being light.”

Robert was taken aback.

“… I think that was a compliment, but I can’t be sure,” He mused.

“You see?” The Dowager grinned. She paused to take tea, stirring milk casually into her earl gray.
“Now, there are a few other things you must bear in mind.”

Thomas sighed, exhausted by the diatribe. He didn’t want to talk about manners or balls. He wanted to be left alone, to be allowed to think over the night past and revel in the memory of Louise’ beautiful lithe body beneath him.

But Thomas’ sigh was a trigger to the Dowager. She gestured back and forth from Thomas to Berry, demanding a wrong be put right. “You see? Mr. Berry, fix this at once. Show him what to do.”

But taking advice from Berry now felt more like having a beau scold him than a tutor teach him. Thomas jaunt his leg over the opposite knee, crossing his arms over his chest so that he was folded up and safe from Berry’s scathing gaze.

But there was no heated stare to be frightened of. Instead, Berry offered him a tender smile. In a way, it felt more cutting than a glare ever could.

“You have a way of being catty,” Berry mused. “Eavesdropping, being overly ambitious… you have to watch that, Lord Downton. I’ve had my ears chatted off by the staff, they constantly talk about your past behavior when Carson isn’t around.”

By the tea tray, Carson gave a double take, shocked to find the staff were insubordinate when his back was turned. Berry gave an apologetic shrug.

“It’s a mark of the Barrows,” Cora decided. “But you’re our son now, and our children do not behave so horridly.”

Her words burned Thomas terribly, causing him to shrink upon the couch. What would she say if she knew that Thomas had spent the night being sodomized by the seedy underbelly of London? Would she weep for his sins? Would she disown him?

“You wouldn’t want people to see it as a mark on us, would you?” Cora murmured. “To think me a bad mother?”

“…No mum,” Thomas whispered. Cora smiled, and rubbed him sweetly upon the arm to try and help him un-tense. It didn’t do much good.
“Allow your parents to lead the conversation about your homecoming,” Berry advised. “When in doubt, just look to them.”

“That is find advice, Mr. Berry- “The Dowager cut across him, “But Lord Grantham has his own misgivings that Lord Downton must be aware of.”

“What misgivings are these?” Robert demanded at once.

“A gentleman never uses set phrases and quotations to express his opinions,” The Dowager said. “It’s tedious, and in bad taste.”

Robert spluttered, unable to defend himself from a sin he was so happy to commit. The fact of the matter was, Robert Crawley tended to quote a book at least once a day; twice a day if he was on a roll. Now, confronted by the fact that it lowered him in his mother’s ancient sights, Robert didn’t know what to do but revert to old habits once again.

“I’ve never quoted a man!” Robert declared. This, of course, was a bare faced lie and everyone in the room knew it. “Berry! Is it in poor taste to quote when it declares a point or educates your guest?”

Berry, stuck between a rock and a hard place, merely looked the opposite way to avoid being implicated. “I prefer not to say, M’lord.”

The Dowager smirked. “Berry agrees.”

Robert scowled, and let go of Thomas’ shoulders to storm over to the tea tray where Carson kept watch. To save himself from quoting a man again, Robert shoved a lemon meringue in his mouth.

“Look,” Berry rose up from his chair, crossing the room so that he and Thomas could speak more intimately. But this only served to make Thomas remember how Berry had appeared beneath his clothing; how feminine the angles of his body had been, and how his red hair had look against the backdrop of the firelight.

“All that you truly have to remember, beyond quoting or keeping a political opinion, is that gossip
and catty conversation are flat out. That’ll inspire talk, and talk can ruin a man of your standing.”

But without catty observations and gossip, Thomas had nothing to talk about. “Those are my only talking points. What do I converse about if I can’t gossip?”

The Dowager was the first to offer her advice, beating Berry to the punch by a mere second. “When I was abroad with your grandfather and newly married, I talked of nothing for an entire three months save the weather of Paris and the resulting blooms. Ask about the travels of others, they often like to dawdle over the topics. Enquire about the weather at home, and to their health. There-!” She was smug in her triumph. “Three solid topics.”

Thomas had never heard of more boring topics in his life. Weather, travel, and health? Christ, what else? The particulars of varnish?

“Hurray, I’m saved,” Thomas groaned.

“I detect some cattiness in your tone,” The Dowager warned.

Deciding to show his grandmother just how much of a ponce he could be, Thomas sat up straight on the sofa, and put on the primmest of accents in order to say, “I thank you kindly good madam for your excellent advice and shall endeavor to follow it.”

By the tea tray, Robert burst out laughing. He had to put a hand over his mouth to keep from spitting lemon meringue everywhere.

His grandmother was taken aback but covered her slip up by carefully touching the many layered curls of her hair while she absently studied the glowing hearth.

“Well, at least you can speak the part,” She muttered. “We have Berry to thank for that.”

Thomas slouched back onto the couch, glad to no longer have to put on an act. His performance seemed to have sated his mother as well, for she turned to both Mary and Edith to strike up a new conversation.
“In celebration for Thomas’ ball, I’ve decided to buy you both new frocks.”

“Bully for us,” Mary smirked.

“Mama, there’s no need.” Where Mary saw advantage, Edith only saw disaster. But Cora was quick to soothe her middle child’s fears.

“There’s every need!” Cora said. “I want it to be a special night for all my children.” She paused, turning to Robert who was still at the tea table stuffing his face with lemon meringues. He’d successfully eaten seven now and was working on his eighth.

“Speaking of which, we’ll need to make sure we get all the invitations back,” Cora said. “I want to know whose coming- “

“I’ve already taken care of it,” The Dowager said. A shocking surprise, to say the least; how did she manage to be in control of everything at the ripe age of 202? “We’ll have a full house to attend to, but the Tecks have been very generous.”

“Well, will we be seeing the Queen?” Cora wondered.

“Possibly, but I doubt it,” The Dowager waved a hand like Cora’s suggestion were an irksome fly. “She has written a very kind letter to me and has asked that Thomas be presented at court. The Marquess of Cambridge will be hosting our ball. From what I understand, his majesty has been very keen on the Barrow Abduction.”

It baffled Thomas to no end, to think that his name has crossed the lips of the King of England. It didn’t seem plausible that the king and Thomas existed in the same universe at the same time. Surely, they were too far apart, too undeniably different, to exist within a thousand miles of one another.

“I thought only ladies were presented before the king and queen,” Thomas said.

“They are,” Robert came back around the sofa, once again placing a comforting hand upon Thomas’ shoulder. “But gentlemen often speak with royalty during their youth. When I was at Eton, my entire class traveled to London to see the insides of parliament and dine at Buckingham palace. It’s a traditional trip.”
“Will I have to do that too?”

“Naturally,” Robert beamed with pride, squeezing Thomas’ shoulder endearingly. “I’ll take you myself.”

But Thomas could not imagine a more dangerous scenario. It was one thing to make a scene at a ball, it was another thing to slip up in front of the king himself. “Are you sure you can risk it?”

But Robert would not be put off. He reached out and, in a surprising display of affection, tucked a lock of hair behind Thomas’ ear. “I married an American. I’m a gambling man,” he joked.

~*~

The next week was spent in tense preparation for the ball at Teck Manor. Thomas already had his tux, thanks to Smithsby’s, but his schedule was suddenly taken over by Berry and Fisher so that he could be prepared to dance and dine with the gentry. Thomas was already a well-rehearsed dancer, but no one would be enjoying the Black Bottom at Teck Manor, so Thomas instead had to learn several dances more suitable for upscale company. Mary was his partner as he learned the polka, mazurka, and even the Schottische. Above all, Thomas had to be careful not to step with decorative flair, for they were considered improper among the upper class. Jazz was popular among the middle and lower class, but such wild dance moves would never stand in a Teck Manor ballroom.

It was the men who had to be active in the face of the ballroom, for a lady couldn’t even cross the floor without the company of a gentleman upon her arm. He could not refuse a lady’s request. He could not allow her to be neglected or unsought. If there was a woman without a dance partner at Teck Manor, it would be Thomas’ job to dance with her. What was more, Thomas technically couldn’t dance with any woman until they had been introduced by their hostess, the notorious Marquess of Cambridge. He wasn’t allowed to sway, but he couldn’t look too stiff either.

Thomas likewise had to be grilled on dining with upper class company. Mercifully, Thomas already knew the difference between a soup spoon and a bouillon spoon, but there were tiny things involved with eating that Thomas had never had to endure before. There was the matter of eating silently, so that there was no noise when the tip of his fork touched his porcelain plate. He had to sip from the side of a spoon, not the tip. He couldn’t ask for a second helping of soup either, save for clam chowder which was the queer exception to the rule. Not only was it normal to ask for a second helping of clam chowder, it was actually considered desired. When the hell had that come about, he wondered.
He couldn’t butter bread unless he’d cut the bread first, and even then, could only use his thumb and forefinger to bring the slice of bread to his mouth. He couldn’t blow on his soup to cool it, twirl his goblet, or even stir his tea if he wished to cool it. He couldn’t turn a spoon over in his mouth. Nothing could ever be bitten; instead, everything had to be brought to the mouth by a fork (even fruit). The only exception to this rule was asparagus.

Amid all of this insanity, calling cards were ordered for Thomas; they were an absolute must at any ball. They came by order of Calfford and Sons and were printed upon fine crisp paper in dark blue ink.

Thomas James Robert Crawley XII

Viscount Downton

The day of the ball found Thomas with cards in his pocket, a head crammed full of knowledge on dining and dancing, but also an undeniable fear of the future. In his fine tux, with white gloves upon his hands and a top hat on his head, Thomas was sweating bullets with Mary at his side. He rode with his family to Teck Manor, though they had to take two cars to incorporate their entire party. In a rare show of form, the Dowager was to go to the ball, and she wore an enchanting gown of deepest plum and gold in a show of festivities. Purple somehow had become the theme of the entire Crawley clan, with Mary, Cora, and Edith all wearing varying shades of lilac, mauve, and mulberry. Cora wore her countess set and sparkled with diamonds from head to toe beneath a white fox wrap of soft fur. Upon Thomas’ wrists sat his great grandfather’s cufflinks. He had never felt so fine, so lavishly provided for in all his life.

And yet, he was undeniably nervous as well.

“Weather, health, travel,” Thomas whispered to himself as they pulled into the gravel drive of Teck Manor. They were to arrive before any other party, given that this engagement was for Thomas’ benefit and the hostess was a Princess of Teck blood. In an hour, the rest of the guests would begin to trickle in like fine wine through the cloth of Carson’s decanter.

“Weather, health, travel,” Thomas swallowed, taking a deep breath in through his nose and out through his mouth. “No cattiness, no gossip. Calm… I am calm.”

Next to him, his grandmother reached out and gently patted his gloved hand.

“Patience,” She promised him. “I’m a steady sailor… and I won’t let them make a mockery of you.”
For the first time, Thomas was genuinely glad his grandmother was with him.

Teck Manor was a massive estate in The Elms, surrounded by formal gardens and parklands. It was encased and surrounded in every possible permutation of the gothic style, with turrets, pinnacles, arched windows, octagonal towers, and buttresses (both regular and flying). Ceremonial gardens covered the front, with a stretching rectangular pool serving as a go around in front of the house. An enormous fountain erupted from the middle, showing several Greek goddesses bathing semi-nude with a helper poured a pitcher of water over their heads. Out front, a long line of servants in their black and whites stood to greet their guests, along with a glittering family in a sparkling array of high fashion. As their motorcar came to a stop, Thomas trembled beside his grandmother wondering what to do. What had Berry said about exiting the car? Was it Thomas first, or someone else?

But the door was already opening. A footman in livery with a striped yellow and silver bib was opening the door to force Thomas to clamber out first. Or at least, he nearly did until his grandmother squeezed his hand tightly.

“Your father first,” She whispered. “Then you, then me.”

Robert moved quickly before Thomas could slip up, exiting the car to tip his hat warmly to their hosts. Thomas all but stumbled out of the car next, reaching with a shaky hand to help pull his grandmother out of the car. The second motorcar swung into the drive, with the door opening to reveal Edith, Mary, and Cora all of whom were delighted to see Teck Manor up close.

A lord with an enormous white walrus mustache stood watching, but his wife stepped forward first. About her waist was a sash of deep blue and white, a symbol of her royal claim, and she extended her hands warmly to the Dowager so that they might clasp as the others gathered around.

“My dear Violet!” The elderly woman proclaimed. “I’m so glad to see you well.”

They kissed fashionably upon the cheek before pulling back to admire one another.

“Margret,” his grandmother said. “It’s so good to see you again.”

“Such color in your cheeks!” Margret proclaimed. “I’m terribly envious.”

“Oh, well, I owe it all to the lovely English weather,” his grandmother tittered. “The blooms have
been so fragrant this year.”

She’s showing me how it’s done, Thomas wondered. Health, weather, and flowers all rolled into one.

“Now…” Margret cast her eyes upon the rest of the Crawley family. “Lord Grantham, how good it is to see you again. It has been far too long.” They clasped hands, with Robert carefully pressing a chaste kiss to her knuckles.

“Your grace, I must thank you whole heartedly for hosting my family tonight,” Robert said.

“Not at all!” Margret beamed. “And Lady Grantham… You must be so terribly happy.”

“Terribly,” Cora took Margret’s hands in her own. “I’m sure you remember my daughters, Edith and Mary… but this is the first time I’ve introduced Thomas to the public,” she gestured to Thomas with a sweet smile.

Thomas felt all the blood flee from his face as the Marchioness of Teck turned her eyes upon him. She wasn’t entirely wrathful or sharp, but there was an edge to her that upper class English women always possessed. She was watching for mistakes, but something told Thomas she might not be so cruel as to reveal them to his face.

“Lord Downton,” Margret offered her hand. Thomas took it in his own, and carefully kissed it just as his father had done. “My heart is filled with such joy to see you so well.”

Thomas swallowed, painfully aware that everyone from the staff to his grandmother was watching him to see how he’d react.

“…Your grace,” Thomas spoke with a raspy voice, too frightened to cough before her. “You’re most gracious to host my family in my time of need. However may I repay you for this kindness?”

Margret flashed him a pretty smile, though Thomas was certain her teeth were false. “You may tell me that my agapanthus is more beautiful than your dear grandmama’s.”
Unable to resist a quip, Thomas said, “That is akin to reason in our household, your grace… but as soon as my grandmother’s out of earshot, I will.”

The Dowager petted him carefully upon the arm. “Thomas is a good soldier, Margret, he knows when to barter a deal with the enemy.”

Margret tittered, turning to her family who were still waiting upon the steps of their ancestral home.

The Marques of Teck did not look happy to receive such odd company. He stepped forward before brusquely taking Robert’s hand in his own.


“Our grace,” Robert said. “I hope you’re well?”

“As well as can be expected,” The Marquess grumbled, looking warily at Thomas as if he expected Thomas to start foaming at the mouth.

Thomas could sense that the Marquess didn’t like him; that perhaps, he didn’t even trust him. Upon his proud breast, Thomas was shocked to see a smattering of titles including the Knight of the Grand Cross, the Order of the Red Eagle, the Order of the Iron Crown, and the Order of the Star. Thomas had to wonder how many of those awards the Marquess had earned, and how many of them had just been given to him because he was rich.

“Adolphus,” Margret gestured to Thomas. “Come meet dear Lord Downton?”

The Marquess stepped forward, his eyes narrowed and his walrus mustache twitching irritably.

“A viscount,” the Marquess mused. “I hear you were a footman for most of your life?”

An uneasy silence fell over the family as Thomas shifted and put on a steely mask akin to the servant’s blank.
“Yes, your grace.” Thomas said. “Thank you for allowing my family to be hosted despite my precarious upbringing. It was most civil of you, and honorable.”

The Marquess’ mustache twitched again. “Interesting.” He looked to his wife, seemingly annoyed to play the part of host when he clearly wasn’t an extrovert.

“You haven’t met my children, Thomas,” Margret reached out, taking him carefully by the arm and steering him over to a group of four men and three women. “Come let me introduce you.”

He stood before the lot of them, wondering at how they sneered. A few seemed less pompous, but the first was undeniably his father’s son. His eyes were just as narrowed, and there was something oily about him Thomas did not like.

“My eldest son, the Earl of Eltham, and his wife Lady Dorothy.”

“How do you do,” Thomas tipped his hat to each of them.

“Welcome to our home,” Lady Dorothy said. Lord Eltham, however, remained silent as his father.

Margret moved along, gesturing to a beautiful woman dripping in pearls. “My eldest daughter, the Duchess of Beaufort, and her husband the Duke of Beaufort.”

“Your grace,” Thomas took the Duchess’ hand to kiss it carefully. She gave him a gentle smile that was not shared by her husband.

“My youngest daughter, Lady Helena and her husband Colonel Gibbs.”

Lady Helena, unlike her siblings and their spouses, was more open and warmer than the rest. She took his hand in her own with a beaming smile that was oddly shared by Colonel Gibbs.

“Welcome to Teck Manor,” Colonel Gibbs said. “Hope it’s not put you off.”
“I’m a steady sailor,” Thomas quipped. “Thank you for having me.”

“Don’t worry, it gets easier,” Colonel Gibbs said. Clearly, he could sense the icy indifference rolling off of the Earl. Thomas had to wonder if he’d had his share of upper-class snobbery.

“And my youngest!” Margret took his hands in her own, clearly a show of affection as she presented him to Thomas. “Lord Cambridge.”

“Frederick,” Lord Cambridge added, shaking Thomas’ hand. “And you can be Thomas to me.”

Mercifully, Frederick was god-awful ugly and clearly not being flirtatious. Thomas was glad to have a friend in the house.

“Come meet our butler, Hartford,” Margret gestured to an aging man with slicked back hair and baggy eyes. He looked a bit like a toad, though he was hardly unpleasant. “He will of course be taking care of us tonight.”

“My lords, my ladies,” Hartford bowed his head dutifully to the lot of them. “You are most welcome to Teck Manor.”

“Thank you for hosting our family,” Cora said. “I do hope everything is prepared for this evening?”

“All is well, M’lady,” Hartford said. Thomas had a feeling ‘all is well’ was serving as a bandage for what was no doubt a poorly controlled circus downstairs. Had he still been on staff, and this sort of party been hosted at Downton Abbey, Carson would have been ready to have a stroke.

“Hartford is so good to us,” Margret praised. Hartford puffed out his chest with pride, his chin thrown back. “Most butlers are such tedious creatures, but not Hartford. He’s practically family.” At this, Margret looked to her butler. “Hartford, Lord Downton will be descending into the party shortly after it begins. We’ll put him in the China room to keep him comfortable.”

“Very good, your grace,” Hartford stepped aside, gesturing for the family to follow him through the
The gothic front doors of Teck Manor. As the family moved forward in one mass unit, the staff slipped out around the back. Thomas caught sight of two maids running like their lives depended on it, no doubt desperately trying to catch up with the work load.

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Thomas was welcomed into Teck Manor by only a few of the family, whereas the rest just looked eager to sit about the parlor sneering at his upbringing. He was brought upstairs by Hartford the butler and allowed to relax in a private drawing room so that he might freshen up for the party. He kept company only with himself, for the others were meant to stay downstairs and entertain guests as they walked through the door. As the sun slowly began to set, Thomas watched from the upstairs window as motorcar after motorcar pulled into the drive of Teck Manor. They began to make a polite little train around the house, with glittering company stepping out to be waltzed up the front steps. Hartford was running himself ragged, controlling a fleet of footman in yellow vests.

Thomas could not help but wonder how many people in the crowd would sneer at him when they met him. How many of them would declare him a fraud, or unfit, and then whisk away to never do business with the Crawley’s again…

What if this ball was an incredibly dangerous idea that would backfire in Thomas’ face? Why had his grandmother thought it so important?

Suddenly, Thomas could remember where he was only a few months ago, living in the attics of Downton Abbey and investigating the disappearance of Mary’s twin. Life had been so devoid of meaning then, with Thomas’ only interruption coming in all the dirt he uncovered about his own abduction.

Now that the hullabaloo had died down again, Thomas was once more feeling terribly left out. It was like life was passing him by, though he now wore a tux and a top hat. He thought the Marquess’ children, and how each of them besides Frederick had had a spouse. He thought of Mary, married to Matthew and sought after by half the men in London. He thought of Edith, so very nearly the marchioness of Hexam. He thought of Sybil, and how she’d loved Tom Branson right up until she took her very last breath.

And then, he thought of himself, and the string of pitiful lovers that he’d had. Some he’d known the names to, some he had not… But the last time Thomas had been in a true relationship, a true and honest loving relationship, it had been with Philip Prevette the Duke of Crowborrow. He’d been 19 years old… foolish. So very foolish.
When the door opened, Thomas did not look over his shoulder to see who it was. The resounding silence that followed, comfortable and calm, lead him to believe it could only be one person.

The one who knew him best.

“Thinking?” Mary asked, drawing near to wrap her arms about Thomas’ shoulders. She pressed her cheek to the planes of his back, sighing at the warmth of their contact.

“Wishing I could vanish into the wall,” Thomas grumbled.

“Why?” She asked. She turned him about, taking time to stroke at the lapels of his jacket.

“The Marquess, his sons… his daughters… I mean the younger ones were alright, but the Earl of Elthym was ready to eat me alive,” Thomas rolled his eyes.

“Never mind him!” Mary sneered. “Half our lot doesn’t have enough sense to fill up a teacup. All that matters is what our family thinks… and I think you’re perfect.”

Thomas could not help but smile at that. They embraced, with Thomas resting the top of his chin upon Mary’s forehead.

“It’s time to go downstairs,” Mary said. “Time to face the world, and the party. Papa told me to come collect you. Will you take my arm?”

“I’ll take more than that,” Thomas promised. Mary laced her arm in his, and they began their slow parade to the door. Whatever happened next, they faced it together as twins and as family. The world would be full of Marquesses and Earls, each of whom was more distrusting than the last. But the world was also full of whinging maids and patronizing valets so what did it matter? No matter where Thomas went, there would be those who disliked him. Those who disapproved with him. The only peace men like him could find where in rare moments such as these, when his loving twin sister upon his arm.

Moments like a night of sin with Louise.
But there was no sin in being with his family. No need to hide when Mary walked him to the top of the grand staircase and helped him to step down. No shame as the crowd smattered in applause and praised Thomas’ arrival while Robert boasted him as his son.

No sorrow as Thomas reached the bottom step to take his mother’s hand in his own.

“My son!” Robert Crawley beamed, clapping Thomas on the back and turning the crowd of his peers to declare his joy for all the world to hear.

“My son! This is my son!”

_To Be Continued_

End Notes

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to let me know

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