### The Chelsie Storybook

**Summary**

A series of unconnected one shots about our favourite Butler and Housekeeper.
We Built This Love

Chapter Summary

6 lyrics from 6 different songs creating one story

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

1 - We found strength in each other’s arms

They never made it a regular thing. Both believed this would make it easier to keep their feelings hidden. But in a world where relationships between servants was discouraged, both were willing to take what little comfort they could get. Especially at times of grief when these instances were most common.

This time it had been Lord Grantham coming down to the servants hall to bring them all the news that Matthew Crawley had been killed in a car accident. After the news had been broken, everyone had tried and failed to go about their usual business. Once again death had come to Downton taking a new parent with it when it left. Charles had found Elsie stood in the middle of her sitting room, tears pooling in the corner of her eyes. Without warning, Charles found memories of the night Lady Sybil died at the forefront of his mind’s eye and recalled how they had comforted each other. In a few short steps, he had crossed the distance between them and pulled her into his arms. After a moment or two, he felt her arms slide around him, as she held him tighter and let the tears fall. Charles didn’t mention it when he felt her tears seep through to his shirt. Elsie didn’t say anything when she felt his lips brush briefly across the top of her head.

It had been years since they’d actually been like this. Not since the day War had been announced had they held each other. Even when they’d lost Lady Sybil, the brief touch of hands had been enough to get them through that first night, and then the following days. This time though, they knew they would need this closeness in the coming days. The house had once again lost its heir, and both Charles and Elsie knew they would need the strength the other could give. They needed to be strong to lead the staff and to be there for the family.

2 - You knew what it was, he is in love

It had been a tiring day. After several weeks in London, the family had returned to Yorkshire, and all the staff had spent most of the day readjusting to the differences between the houses. It didn’t help that they had all been up since half past five to make sure that everything was ready for them to catch the ten am train. Thankfully after several months of parties, the family had decided an early night was in order, so they’d all been able to get to bed fairly early.

As she exited her sitting room, Elsie noticed that the backdoor was slightly ajar. She made her way over to it and looked out into the servants courtyard. She saw Charles sat on the bench looking up at the night sky.

“Whatsoever are you doing out here?” Elsie asked as she moved to sit down beside him.
“Look up,” he replied.

As she did so, she saw what it was that had enthralled him. The sky was full of stars, certainly more than you could see while in London.

“It’s always nice to see a sight like this after months in London,” he explained “you don’t get sight likes this there.”

“I thought you enjoyed London,” Elsie commented, noting a hint of wistfulness in his tone

“I do,” Charles nodded.

“You’ll probably enjoy it more when Mrs Bute’s back.”

“I wouldn’t say that Mrs Hughes,” he smiled down at her, with a look she couldn’t quite describe.

Later that night, Elsie lay in bed, looking up at the ceiling. Even though she was tired, she just couldn’t seem to get to sleep. Her mind kept replaying her conversation with Charles out in the courtyard, and the look on his face. She was fairly sure she hadn’t seen that look on his face before. At least she didn’t think she had. A few moments later, it came to Elsie in a moment of clarity. She had seen that look at least once before. The day at the beach. Elsie had seen that same look on his face when they’d shared a glass of wine when they’d returned and the staff had gone up to bed. The look coupled with what he’d said outside led her to one simple conclusion. Just like she was with him, Charles Carson was in love with her.

3- I’ve got pins and needles on my tongue/Anticipating what’s to come

The guests had gone, the family had gone to bed, as had the staff. Mr Bates had returned to Downton, and he and Anna had headed back to their cottage. The only people left up were Charles and Elsie. Both were stood in her sitting room, the remnants of the punch had been drunk leaving empty glasses on table. Neither spoke a word, just stood looking at each other. Both seeing love reflected in the other’s eyes. It left them in no doubt that this just wasn’t for convenience sake or just because Charles didn’t feel like changing his plans of them buying a cottage together. They weren’t entering into this next stage of their life lightly, but with the knowledge that every moment of their friendship had ultimately been heading towards this.

Somewhere in the distance, they heard a clock chime midnight. Both jumped a little, as they hadn’t realised it had gotten so late.

“I think that’s telling us it’s time to go up,” Elsie commented, finally breaking the silence.

“I think you’re right,” he replied, “long day tomorrow.”

“It’s always a long day,” she smiled as she looked down at their entwined hands.

Together, they exited her sitting room and walked towards the sleeping quarters hand in hand. Normally, they would have walked up the separate staircases to their respective halves of the corridors. Tonight however, they couldn’t bare to separate just yet. They came to a stop at the door in the middle of the corridor.

“Goodnight Mrs Hughes.”

“Goodnight Mr Carson.”
Despite saying goodnight, neither made a move to actually go to their respective rooms. After several moments of silence, Charles placed a hand on her cheek and moved his face a little closer.

“May I?” he asked, his intent clear.

“Yes,” she breathed as his face moved a little closer to hers and their lips met.

It only lasted a brief moment, both Charles and Elsie were very much aware of where they were. That anyone could disturb them, or that one snap of willpower and they’d be in one of their bedrooms. Almost as if to illustrate the point, there was a creak from the female side of the corridor. Elsie smiled apologetically and quickly closed the door with a hurried goodnight, lest anyone see the two by the open door at midnight.

Sometime later, both lay awake in their respective beds, as they reflected on the nights events. Both could feel the others lips against their own, and both couldn’t help but wonder what was to come.

4- And with this ring/For all eternity

Charles sat silently in the front pew of the church. This was it. This was the day when he and Elsie would be joined in holy matrimony. If he was honest with himself, he had been waiting for this day, for many years. He couldn’t be sure, but he felt it stemmed all the way back to their first meeting, almost as though a seed of something had been planted and had put down roots. Little by little, Elsie had chipped away at him, gotten him to reveal more and more about himself. She had never judged him, just asked to see the man beneath the livery. To see what had made Charles Carson the man he was.

As he heard the low hum of the many villagers that were in attendance, Charles felt the nerves begin to set in again. He had avoided them for the most part, completely aware of the fact that there was nothing that could stop Elsie from marrying him. He pulled out the simple gold band from his pocket and rolled it between his fingers. For the past few weeks, it had been his talisman. His proof that this was reality and not just a dream.

As he looked around the room, Charles noticed that the Crawley family had arrived. He had known that Ladies Mary and Edith would be in attendance as would Lord and Lady Grantham. However, he hadn’t been aware that both the Dowager and Mrs Crawley would be attending. Before he had time to feel nervous though, he caught sight of Beryl hurrying to her seat. He took a breath and moved to stand at the front of the church. As he did so, he caught sight of Elsie out of the corner of his eye. She was stood in the vestibule waiting for her cue, and Charles felt all of his nerves dissipate.

“Need to feel steady?” Elsie teased lightly, as she felt him grip her hand a little tighter than he usually did when she finally reached him.

“Always,” he replied with the smile he saved just for her.

5 - Your touch got me looking so crazy right now

It really wasn’t fair Elsie mused, as she sipped her tea, trying to keep the raging thoughts at bay.

Up until now, Elsie had always had the odd moment where she wondered how her life would have turned out if she’d married when she was younger. Those moments had normally come after a particularly long or trying day. She never regretted one moment of her life in service though. Not when it had led her to Charles Carson, the man she now called her husband. However, at this exact
moment in time, she was glad she hadn’t married young. Not when one touch was enough to drive her crazy.

A simple brief touch of hands as they’d passed in the corridor, made her want him to pin her against the wall and take her right there. Their fingers touched briefly when he handed her a cup of tea in the servants hall, and Elsie wanted to drag him up to their room by his tie.

“Everything alright?” Charles asked touching her arm briefly to get her attention as he noticed she seemed a little distracted.

“Just fine,” she replied. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she watched him turn his attention back to the list for the annual cricket match, a small smirk playing on the corner of his mouth. It left Elsie in no doubt that he knew exactly what it was his touch did to her.

Elsie later discovered that it not only did his touch drive her crazy, but she could do exactly the same to him. She noticed it when Charles’s eyes would close briefly as she brushed his jacket before he went up to serve. Or the small groan he’d emit when her hand subtly grazed his thigh as she picked up a napkin from her lap at mealtimes. In those moments, Elsie allowed herself a smile of victory. Maybe it wasn’t so unfair that he could make her come undone with just one touch.

6 - There’s no hurry anymore

The hazy morning sunshine shone through a gap in the thin curtains casting the room in a light golden glow. As the sun rose higher, it moved across the floor, and eventually landed on the sleeping couple. Elsie slowly opened her eyes, and turned her head slightly to see what the time was. She allowed herself a smile when she saw that it was half past eight. Mindful not to wake her slumbering husband, Elsie carefully extracted herself from his embrace and stretched out. Yesterday they had retired. Left their life of structure and routine. Swapped it for a life of leisure, one where they decided what they did and when. Today was the first day of the rest of their lives. At the end of the week, they would be taking a long overdue trip to Lytham Saint Anne’s to visit Becky. But for the next few days, they had decided to close the door to any visitors. To just enjoy the peace and quiet. Especially as they’d no longer have to listen to Thomas’s gripes or Molesley’s jokes falling flat.

“What are you thinking about?” Charles asked in a thick, sleep filled voice, his eyes trained solely on his wife.

“Nothing really,” Elsie replied as she turned to face him, “just what we have to get used to,” she added, as she moved her head to rest on his chest, “if we were up at the Abbey, we’d have already been up for several hours.”

“And not had a moment’s peace,” Charles commented, “unlike now,” he added as he titled her head up and kissed her lightly.

“Very true,” she smiled “and we’ve no one to interrupt us,” she finished with a smirk, before she reached up and kissed him again.

As the outside world began its day, Charles and Elsie Carson, lost themselves in the moment and each other. Both agreed it was the best way to start their retired life. One they’d make sure to repeat every morning for the rest of their lives.

Chapter End Notes
Lyrics used:
1 - Empire by Ella Henderson
2 - You Are In Love by Taylor Swift
3 - Heartbeat Song - Kelly Clarkson
4 - All of Me - Blake
5 - Crazy In Love (Beyonce cover) by Sofia Karlberg
6 - When All Is Said And Done by Pierce Brosnan and Meryl Streep
Chapter Notes

The song referenced is the old folk song Lavender's Blue

1903

As he watched the last of the carriage’s drive away, Charles Carson allowed himself a slight nod. Once again, the preparation and execution of the family's decampment to Duneagle for the Grouse had gone successfully. In fact he noted, that if possible, it had been more seamless than most years, something he attributed to the new housekeeper Elsie Hughes who had only held the position for six months since Mrs Hill had retired. He closed the front doors, and did a quick sweep of the rooms to check that everything was as it should be.

As he headed downstairs, he noted that it was fairly quiet, which didn’t surprise him, as the staff that had stayed behind had headed into the village where a fair had been set up. Only a few hall boys, and kitchen maids had stayed at the house. As it was a nice day, and there was nothing pressing that he had to do, Charles decided that he would head outside and sit in the gardens for a while.

He opened the back door, the first thing he heard was a voice singing softly. It was then that he noticed the voice belonged to the housekeeper. She was sat on the bench with her legs tucked into her chest, her head resting on her knees. Charles recognised the song, he could recall a young Lady Mary regaling her mother with it in the nursery, but he wasn’t aware that Mrs Hughes was aware of the old English nursery rhyme.

Lavender's blue, dilly, dilly, lavender's green,
When I am king, dilly, dilly, You shall be queen.
Who told you so, dilly, dilly, who told you so?
’Twas my own heart, dilly, dilly, that told me so.
Call up your men, dilly, dilly, set them to work
Some to the plough, dilly, dilly, some to the fork,
Some to make hay, dilly, dilly, some to cut corn,
While you and I, dilly, dilly, keep ourselves warm.

It was then he noticed there was a small tear resting on cheek. Charles briefly thought about going back inside to give her some privacy. However, they had become friends in the past six months, and he wanted to help her if she needed someone to talk to.

As she heard someone approach her, Elsie immediately stopped singing and looked up, wiping her eyes in the process.
“Was there something you wanted Mr Carson?” she asked when she saw who it was.

“No,” he replied “I was about to take a turn in the gardens. Would you like to accompany me?” he asked issuing an unspoken invitation that he would listen if she wanted to talk.

“Some other time,” Elsie replied, “I have a letter to write,” she added as she stood up and headed back inside.

1924

As he made his way along the gallery, as he often did during the course of his afternoon rounds, Charles Carson was deep in thought. He pulled his pocket watch out and looked at the time. It had been sixteen hours - not that he was keeping count - since his plans had took a setback.

This time yesterday, he’d been full of hope. Hope that he would soon, be the very lucky man that got to call Elsie Hughes his wife. He had initially planned to have them run the guest house, and move them into more romantic territory, then when the time came for them to retire, he would ask her to marry him. Now, with Elsie’s revelation from the previous night about how every spare penny she had was used to care for her sister, his plans now seemed to fall by the wayside. Charles found he couldn’t be the least bit annoyed with her for keeping it secret. In fact, he found that he admired her even more, since she’d told him she’d given up any hope of any sort of retirement so her sister could remain in the home that she loved.

As he neared the Arundel bedroom, he heard Elsie’s soft lilting voice, once again singing the same nursery rhyme he’d heard all those years ago. Charles stood just outside the doorway and watched as she made up the bed, ready for Lady Edith when the family returned the following day. As he listened to her sing, he allowed himself to imagine her singing the words in a little garden at the back of their own little house.

Lavender's green, dilly, dilly, Lavender's blue,
If you love me, dilly, dilly, I will love you.
Let the birds sing, dilly, dilly, And the lambs play;
We shall be safe, dilly, dilly, out of harm's way.
I love to dance, dilly, dilly, I love to sing;
When I am queen, dilly, dilly, You'll be my king.
Who told me so, dilly, dilly, Who told me so?
I told myself, dilly, dilly, I told me so.

Charles was so caught up in her thoughts, that he didn’t hear her singing stop, or see her finish making up the bed.

“Was there something you wanted Mr Carson?” Elsie asked as she exited the bedroom and saw him stood outside the door.

“No,” he replied quickly, as he attempted to distract himself from his thoughts. “I heard singing and wondered who it was.” he added as they started to walk towards the servants door “I heard you sing that song once before. Not long after you’d became housekeeper.”
“I remember,” she nodded.

“You seemed sad singing it, why?” he asked, wondering if now she would open up to him about it.

“It’s a favourite of Becky’s,” Elsie replied simply, she had no reason to keep the truth from him anymore, “I used to sing it to her when we were younger. Whenever I get the chance to visit her, she always makes me sing it,” she added, “it’s also a favourite of mine, I sing it when I’m feeling low,” she finished, as she followed him through the door.

As they walked towards their respective rooms in silence, Elsie kept her remaining thoughts to herself. She knew it would do him no good to know that while enjoying their little dream, she had imagined singing it in a little garden, behind their own little house.
1925

It had been ten months, since Elsie thought their dream had died, eight months since Charles had asked her to marry him causing their dream to be reignited. It had been four months since they had stood at the front of the church and the housekeeper at Downton Abbey had changed from Mrs Hughes to Mrs Carson. Elsie opened the back door and walked into the servants hall. She’d been in the village visiting Anna who was fretting about the arrival of the baby in just three short months. Normally, Elsie would’ve gone up to their room to change back into her black dress, but she wanted to go and find to Charles to tell him all about what she’d seen on her way back from the Bates’ cottage.

As she neared his pantry, she could see him polishing the silver, Elsie could also hear that he was singing. She smiled as she recalled the last time she’d found him singing when she’d returned from the village. Even if the memory of her health scare and keeping it from her, still caused her some lingering heartache. Her breath caught, as she heard just what it was he was singing. She’d told him once that it was her favourite song and she wasn’t surprised that Charles had remembered it. This was a man who could remember exactly what she’d been doing when he had realised he loved her in minute detail.

*Lavender's blue, dilly, dilly, lavender's green,*

*When I am king, dilly, dilly, You shall be queen.*

*Who told you so, dilly, dilly, who told you so?*

*'Twas my own heart, dilly, dilly, that told me so.*

*Call up your men, dilly, dilly, set them to work*

*Some to the plough, dilly, dilly, some to the fork,*

*Some to make hay, dilly, dilly, some to cut corn,*

*While you and I, dilly, dilly, keep ourselves warm.*

Elsie quietly walked into the pantry and just watched as he polished the silver, wondering how she’d been fortunate enough to love this man and have him love her back. Elsie coughed lightly to get his attention and smiled as he almost dropped the platter he’d been polishing.

“Singing while polishing silver, whatever would the footmen think?” she asked as she headed over to him.

“That I’d finally gone mad.” Charles replied with a smile as he put the platter onto the small table, before he kissed her lightly, “however that was a one time performance. I never sing while...
polishing the silver.”

“Is that so?” Elsie smiled “because I seem to recall you singing once before.”

“You heard that then?” he asked knowing exactly what she was referring to, he’d only have sung while polishing the silver twice. This had been the second time.

“I did,” Elsie replied “and it’s a memory I cherish dearly, its not every day I have a man singing in celebration of my good health.” she added “and today, you made me love a favourite song even more.”

1928

“What flower is this Mrs Elsie?” Sophie asked, as she looked at the flowers in the garden. Try as they might, Anna and John had failed to get Sophie to call her Mrs Carson, but Elsie didn’t mind. Sophie was the closest she and Charles would ever get to a grandchild. Plus, Elsie got a kick out of Sophie referring to Charles as Mr Charlie (a name he himself had encouraged).

“That is a lavender,” she replied, watching as Sophie bent down to smell it. Sophie Jane Bates had been born on a stormy October night almost three years ago and after her parents, Elsie had been one of the first to hold her. She’d thought it then, and she felt it even more now, that Sophie was a miniature version of her mother.

“It smells pretty,” Sophie smiled “like mummy.”

“Shall we pick her some?” she asked.

“Will Mr Charlie mind?” Sophie asked, the last time she’d picked flowers from someone’s garden, she’d been told off by the old women it belonged too.

“No he won’t,” Elsie smiled as she sat down beside the young girl. It would play havoc with her lower back, but she had no doubt Charles would see to that once Sophie had gone back home. “As a child I used to sing a song about Lavender’s. Would you like to hear it?” she asked, gaining a nod in return.

Charles walked up the front path, wanting nothing more than to spend a quiet afternoon, in the back garden with his wife. However, he knew that he couldn’t have that just yet, if only because they were looking after Sophie, while Anna and John spent the afternoon in Thirsk. As he neared the front door, he heard singing coming from the back garden. One time, Charles would have frowned when he heard the song being sung as Elsie had once told him she sung it when she was feeling low. However, since their retirement, she’d taken to singing it while she was in the garden. It had been for that reason, that they had, had a little patch of lavender put into the garden.

Instead of opening the front door, Charles changed route and headed towards the path that led to the back garden. As he turned the corner, he saw both Sophie and Elsie sat on a blanket on the grass, picking out a few sprigs of Lavender and arranging them with some other flowers. Judging by the high pitched not mature voice that accompanied it, Charles guessed that she had spent part of the afternoon teaching Sophie the song.

Lavender's green, dilly, dilly, Lavender's blue,

If you love me, dilly, dilly, I will love you.

Let the birds sing, dilly, dilly, And the lambs play;
We shall be safe, dilly, dilly, out of harm's way.

I love to dance, dilly, dilly, I love to sing;

When I am queen, dilly, dilly, You'll be my king.

Who told me so, dilly, dilly, Who told me so?

I told myself, dilly, dilly, I told me so.

Almost as if she could sense his eyes on her back, Elsie turned her head slightly and smiled at him over her shoulder. It was the same smile she’d given him countless times over the past three years, it let Charles know that she was completely and utterly happy.
January 1901

*She sways in the moonlight*

Charles Carson headed back downstairs after completing his final checks for the night. It had been a hectic day and he would be glad to get to bed. Yesterday, Mrs Hill had received an urgent telegram from her brother and had headed off to visit him. This had left the head housemaid Elsie, to assume the position of temporary housekeeper in her absence. As the servants ball was the following day, everyone had been rushing around trying to make sure everything was ready.

As he reached the bottom step he heard a soft humming coming from the servant’s hall. Charles frowned slightly as he wondered who it was. All the other servants had gone to bed almost an hour and a half ago, and Elsie had headed up just as he was going off to do his final rounds. Charles moved quickly and quietly to the doorway, ready to tear into whoever was still up when he found his voice stuck in this throat. At the far end of the hall, Charles could see Elsie dancing with an invisible partner. He frowned in confusion. It wasn’t as though she needed the practice as from what he could remember of last years ball, she was a good dancer. In later years, he would come to realise it was because she was nervous about having to dance the opening dance with Lord Grantham. Had he known then, he would have interrupted her and offered to help, but he daren’t for fear of embarrassing her. It was only the start of her second year at Downton after all.

Charles stood watching for a moment longer, the sliver of moonlight from the window casting her shadow across the floor and walls. A small sigh echoed throughout the quiet hall, and Charles quickly hurried towards his pantry for fear of being seen.

The following night, as he danced with Lady Grantham, Charles stole a look over at Elsie as she circled past in Lord Grantham's arms. There was no way anyone would know that she had practiced by herself in the servants hall or the nerves that were lurking below the surface. Charles couldn’t help but get a vision of the future, the two of them running Downton side by side. Not that he was wishing retirement upon Mrs Hill. Its just it seemed right with him and Elsie as the heads of staff.

He shook the thoughts out of his head, as the dance came to an end and he inclined his head in Lady Grantham’s direction before he moved to the edge of the room to watch the remaining festivities.
January 1912

The melody’s making her cry

Once again, Charles found himself watching Elsie from the corner of the room. Since the ball back in 1901, he had always found his eyes straying to Elsie when she was dancing with someone. He wasn’t sure why, but he always felt a knot in his stomach when he saw her dancing with someone, anyone really. Once or twice he had thought about asking her to dance, but in their position as the butler and housekeeper, it wouldn’t do. He didn’t want there to be any gossip between the staff about any impropriety. Though Charles had to admit, he had heard those murmurs before usually accompanied by the maids laughing and wondering if Mrs Patmore was secretly involved with the butcher as he always gave them extra cuts of meat every now and again.

As she circled past him, in the arms of Patrick Crawley, he raised a small smile at her and saw it was returned with a watery one. It was then that he noticed that Elsie had traces of tears on her cheeks. Charles’ first thought was that the young heir had upset her in someway. He then realised that while it was a gentle piece of music, there was a deep melancholy edge to it, and a hint of wistfulness to. So that’s what got to her, he thought as his eyes scanned the crowd before they landed on Elsie once more. Charles saw that she was walking across the saloon towards the door that led to the servants hall.

“Is everything alright?” he asked as he caught up to her.

“It is,” Elsie nodded as she turned to look at him, “it’s just sometimes…oh don’t mind me Mr Carson, I just need a moment,” she added as she headed towards her sitting room.

Charles watched as she walked away and frowned slightly. Something was on her mind, and it confused him that she hadn’t confided in him, like she normally did. It wouldn’t be until several months later when she would ask him if he ever wished he’d gone another way that he’d realise what had been on Elsie’s mind.

January 1924

A waltz for the chance I should take/But how will I know where to start?

As he stood in the corner of the room, watching over the crowd, Charles found his eyes straying towards the housekeeper, waltzing with Mr Branson. He was the first to admit, he hadn’t been Mr Branson’s biggest fan when he had first returned to Downton following his marriage to Lady Sybil. However, now Charles had to concede the fact that Mr Branson had coped admirably, and had begun to steer Downton Abbey to steadier ground.

Since the day at the beach, Charles had found himself thinking about Elsie more often. Actually if he was honest with himself, he had been thinking about her in less platonic ways since the business of Charlie Grigg’s return, and how she’d stitched up the wound left behind by Alice’s betrayal. It had occurred to Charles, on they way back to London from Brighton, after they’d waded into the sea together, hand in hand, that somewhere throughout the twenty something years, he had worked alongside her, that he’d fallen in love with her. Initially the thought had shocked him, after the business with Alice, he had never expected to love anyone again. However, the more he thought on it, the more he realised that if he was ever to fall in love again, it couldn’t have been with anyone but her. The only problem was, Charles didn’t know if she felt the same as him, or even where to begin taking that next step, that particular chance with her.

Once again, Charles thought about asking her to dance. Times had changed. No one would think
anything of it, if the two heads of staff, shared one dance at the servants ball. However, he quickly changed his mind. He wanted his first dance with her, to be one that meant something to both of them. One where he wouldn’t have to attempt to hide anything from her. *Maybe next year,* he sighed.

**January 1925**

*We’ve got the floor/And you’re in my arms/How could I ask for more?*

*This was the year,* Charles thought to himself. This was going to be the year that he finally danced with Elsie at the servants ball.

Unlike the previous year, when he had talked himself out of asking her to dance. Too afraid of the unknown. This year Charles knew exactly how Elsie felt about him. Knew that it would mean something to the both of them. He also knew no one would talk if they were to dance together. Since New Year’s Day, their engagement had been public knowledge. The majority of the household had been shocked at the news. Charles had been bewildered by that reaction, was it really that shocking that he should ask her to marry him. However, Elsie had set him straight, and explained they had only been shocked, because they had all thought it would never happen.

Charles watched as she laughed with Mrs Patmore about something and smiled. Last year, he could only imagine what it might feel like to have Elsie return his love. But know he knew, and it was far better than he could ever have imagined. To him it felt like his entire world had shifted, nothing and no one would mean more to him, could ever mean more to him than she did.

As the current piece of music came to an end, Charles straightened his tie, and walked over to where Elsie was stood.

“Would you like to dance?” he asked, and inwardly smirked at her shocked reaction.

“Of course she would,” Beryl replied answering for Elsie, who shot her friend a sharp glare, “she’s only been hoping you would ask her for the past twenty years,” she added, and Charles wasn’t entirely sure, Beryl was talking about dancing.

“I can speak for myself,” Elsie commented, “but she is right, Mr Carson,” she added, “I would like to dance with you. You only ever had to ask,” she smiled as she took the hand he held out and let him lead her to stand amongst the other dancing couples. As they began to move in unison, both knew that this was to be the first dance of many.
It's Time

Chapter Summary

A royal visit to Downton, leads to a conversation between husband and wife.

Chapter Notes

I don't remember the exact date that I posted this over on fanfiction.net. But going by the content, I'm willing to bet it was before season 6 aired. So at that point I didn't know how the show would end. Looking at the subject matter it's remarkable how the visit to Downton seems to be along similar lines to the movie that's due to come out this autumn.

The house party had been a great success. It had come as a shock to all of the house when a letter from the secretary to the Prince of Wales had wrote, saying that the Prince, the Duke and Duchess of York would be heading North for the grouse and would like to spend some time at Downton before continuing on their journey to Balmoral. Once the dates were confirmed, everything went crazy. Mrs Patmore and Mrs Carson had been meeting daily with Lady Grantham to check, and double check what guests would be staying, what food should be served, what rooms were best suited, did any of them need redecorating. Mary and Edith had worked together on planning entertainments and the flowers. Mr Carson had spent hours drilling Andy, Molesley and Thomas on the correct way to act and behave in front of their royal guests. Lord Grantham had taken to sitting on in the meetings about menus alongside Carson so that they could all be singing from the same hymn sheet when it came to wines to match the courses. Nothing was to be left to chance.

Charles couldn’t help but glance at the grandfather clock in the saloon as he walked towards the green baize door. As he suspected it was almost half past twelve and he would have to be up in roughly five and a half hours. The Prince of Wales and Lord Grantham had finally retired for the night, ten minutes ago and he had just finished locking up. He rubbed a hand warily over his face, as he opened the door and walked down the stairs. Not for the first time, he wondered if he was getting too old for this. Especially when he had his lovely wife waiting for him in their room.

Charles smiled as he recalled that day two months ago when he and Elsie had become husband and wife. They had married on a Wednesday and Lady Mary, with the full support of both her parents, had insisted that they have a few days to themselves. They had spent three full days in the cottage that Charles had brought for them both, and had enjoyed every moment of it. Just to be able to shut the door on the world and not have their day dictated by the sound of bells.

On reaching the servant’s hall, Charles quickly checked everything was locked up before heading up to bed. As he walked up the servant’s stairs, Charles thought about the routine that had dictated practically every moment of his working life. Every morning he would awake just before six, he would serve breakfast at eight, luncheon at one, tea at five, and then dinner at eight. In between that he’d be polishing silver, checking the wine lists, ordering new ones. The only real breaks he got were the tea breaks he shared with Elsie and there would always be something that interrupted
Rather than head towards the men’s corridor as he used to, Charles now headed in the direction of the unused rooms around the corner from the servant’s corridor that had been made up as their room. Though the Grantham’s had offered them a small cottage on the estate not a two minute walk from the house, they had elected to take rooms near the servants corridor so that they could be on hand should an emergency arise in the middle of the night.

He pushed open the door to the room and found Elsie sat up in bed reading the letter she had received from Becky in the evening post. On seeing him enter, she smiled brightly and folded Becky’s letter back up, and set it on the bedside table.

“I was wondering when you were going to come to bed,” she commented.

“And I’m wondering why you are not asleep, you’ve been up since five am.”

“And whose fault was that?” Elsie smirked as she recalled their activities that morning.

Charles gave her an answering smirk as he went about his night-time routine, before he climbed in beside her.

“Is everything alright?” Elsie asked as she noticed, the odd look on his face.

“It is,” he nodded, “I think this house party has been a success. But I don’t know if Downton will see something like this again,” he continued, “or if it does I don’t know that we’ll be here to see it.”

At this, Elsie turned to face him, scrutinising her husband carefully. This was the first time he’d talked about them not being at Downton. They’d agreed to table the discussion of retirement for at least eight months following their wedding and it had only been two.

“What on Earth has brought this on?” she asked

“Tonight,” he replied simply, “I was stood there watching His Royal Highness and Lord Grantham talking and I just found myself wondering if we were getting too old for this,” he added, “not you of course, you could never be old,” he added hastily on seeing the look Elsie had on her face.

“Are you saying…”

“That maybe it is time for us to retire?” Charles clarified, “I am,” he nodded, “well?”

“I think,” Elsie began after a pause, “that maybe it is time for us,” she added, “however, I think we should discuss this more in the morning,” she finished as she led down and turned to face him.

Charles nodded in agreement, and settled down beside her. He smiled as almost immediately Elsie curled up against his side, resting her head on his chest. Both found themselves lost in thoughts of retirement, and the many things they would have time to do.
Modern AU: The night before her wedding, Elsie realises she's making a big mistake.

Elsie sat on the edge of her bed and stared at the white garment bag hanging on the wardrobe door. This event had been months in the planning and now, in just twelve hours it would be time. Not for the first time, she had questioned why on Earth she was marrying Joe. He was everything her father and stepmother could hope for, for her. And on paper, everything Elsie had thought she wanted. He was funny, smart, successful, completely adored her. But there was just something lacking. Something Elsie knew she would find wrapped up in one Charles Carson sized package. He held all the same qualities that Joe did, but Elsie had felt more in six months of working with Charles than she had in the three years she’d been with Joe.

Elsie smiled as her thoughts turned to the first time she had met Charles. It had been the day she moved to the small town of Downton following her father’s marriage. Elsie had been fourteen at the time and annoyed at having to move several hundred miles away from her friends, remaining family, and the small church where her mother was buried. Charles had been the boy next door, and he had offered to show her around. Elsie had readily took the chance, eager to get away from her stepsister Katherine who she didn’t particularly get along with. As time went on they had become each other’s best friend. And whenever she had an argument with Katherine, Elsie would go and seek refuge in Charles’ house.

Even at school they had always been together. She laughed as she recalled the time they had been sent to the headmistress’s office for using the ink in their pens to have an ink fight at the back of their history lesson. Even now, Elsie was sure she could still hear the ringing in her ears that had followed the telling off they had received from Mrs Stevens.

Elsie sighed as she recalled those final years at the school, where everyone assumed that the two of them were dating or were going to end up dating. That had been purely because whenever there was a school dance she and Charles went together. However, they had never been anything more than friends, both too afraid to push the boundaries and see what would happen if they dared to be more than what they were.

They had gone their separate ways when it came to university, he had stayed local and gone to York, whereas she had gone back to Scotland and attended Edinburgh.

In the years that followed they had lost touch, and only saw each other sporadically. The last time had been before she took an internship in London the summer after she’d graduated. She had stayed there for five years, it’s where she had met Joe. Then when Crawley Publishing had head hunted her to be their new head of HR, Elsie had jumped at the chance. Joe had seen it as a sign that they should get married and start their married life in Yorkshire, an area he had grown up in.

In hindsight, Elsie realised that it was probably this decision that had started it all off. Within minutes of arriving at the headquarters of Crawley Publishing, she had seen him. He was stood talking to the receptionist and their eyes had met.

Elsie bit her lip as she recalled how one night they’d both been working late as she had been
helping Charles to recruit a new junior copywriter. Reminiscing about their school days and teachers had somehow led to a night in Charles’ bed.

Following that Elsie had avoided him as best she could and thrown herself into planning her wedding. Yet no matter how hard she tried, Elsie couldn’t stop herself from thinking about what might have been. She knew it was exactly the same for him. He had told her as much earlier that week, when he had asked her to run away and marry him instead. Initially, Elsie had said no, too afraid of doing something crazy for once in her life. But the idea kept ticking away in her subconscious and time was running out to actually make a decision.

As she looked over at the garment bag, Elsie knew exactly what her decision was. The fact that it was accompanied by a crash of thunder from the summer storm that had been brewing only heightened the feeling that she was doing the right thing.

Across town, Charles was sat looking out of the window as the storm raged on outside. The invite to the wedding sat on the coffee table beside him. In just twelve hours the woman he loved would be marrying someone else, and there was nothing he could do about it. He had asked her to run away with him, but she had declined and at that moment, Charles had resigned himself to the fact that he would never get to be with her again.

Many moments since then he had entertained the notion of actually going to the church, waiting for the right moment and then making his case for objection. However he had decided against it for two reasons; one - he wasn’t sure he would get the right reaction, and two - even if it was for the right reasons, he couldn’t bring himself to wreck Elsie’s wedding. Of course the devil on his shoulder was telling him to do it, he knew what her answer would be. Charles had seen the look in her eyes when he had asked her to run away and marry him instead. Charles supposed he could’ve imagined it, but for a moment he was sure that Elsie was going to take him up on the offer.

Charles was pulled out of his thoughts by a loud pounding on his front door. He groaned to himself, and headed towards the front door of his flat. He pulled it open, ready to yell at whoever was calling on him at midnight and found his words stuck in his throat when he saw who was stood there.

“Elsie?” he asked as he took in her mascara stained cheeks, bedraggled hair, and the way the rain was making her clothes cling to her, “did you run all the way here?”

“I figured I’d chicken out if I didn’t,” she shrugged, “are you going to let me in?”

Charles stood aside and gestured for her to go through to the living room before he hurried to get a towel to help her dry off.

“Why are you here?” he asked as he handed her the towel, “aren’t you supposed to be getting married tomorrow, well later today,” he added on seeing the time.

“I was,” Elsie replied not meeting his eyes, “but I can’t go through with it, I can’t marry him.”

“Why not?”

“Considering I showed up here in the middle of the night, I would’ve thought that would be obvious,” she replied as she stood up from the sofa, “it’s you Charles, it’s always been you. Since we were teenagers,” she added as she hooked her arms around his neck.

“Are you sure about this?” Charles asked, “you won’t wake up tomorrow morning and think you’ve made the wrong choice?”
“No,” Elsie replied with conviction, “I’m certain about this. Certain about you,” she added before she lightly pressed her lips against his, “and I should’ve told you the minute I walked back into your life six months ago.”

“Well, you can tell me now,” he laughed.

“I love you,” Elsie commented, “more than I ever thought I could love anyone.”

“And I love you too,” Charles said before he kissed her again, effectively silencing them both for a long time.
Nighttime Conversations

Chapter Summary

Set after the trip to the beach in the 2013 Christmas Special: The London Season

The house was silent. A rare feat in the London house, especially during the season when it wasn't uncommon for the servants to be going to bed in the early hours of the morning. But tonight, it was different. The family had retired shortly after returning from Rosamund's. The servants were all in bed and asleep. Too exhausted from a day of sun, sand and sea for even the briefest of hushed conversations between the occupants of the rooms. The only light anywhere in the house came from the butler's pantry. It spilled out from the open doorway and illuminated the deserted hallway.

If anyone saw the butler at that moment in time, they would be a little surprised. Mostly because his jacket was off, shirt sleeves were rolled up, his waistcoat undone and his head resting on interlocked fingers. For most of the evening, Charles had been reflecting on what had happened between him and Elsie – he always referred to her as Elsie in his head, he knew he had yet to earn the right to call her anything other than Mrs Hughes out loud – while they'd been stood hand in hand in the sea. In the quiet of his pantry he could still hear the gentle sound of the waves as they lapped around their ankles. Could still feel the softness of her hand in his as they'd stood in full view of everyone on the beach. He couldn't help but wonder why they had both been so bold, especially given some of the servants predilection for gossiping. Yet he hadn't heard the slightest hint of gossip from any of them. Not even Thomas (it would be several years before he learnt that Mrs Patmore had warned them off of gossiping, knowing how much it had taken for the two heads of staff to reach this point).

Of course most of those thoughts were dwarfed by his constant replaying of them holding hands and the undercurrent of something that he had felt in that moment. He had been most ashamed that, that feeling was what he had been pondering when he'd failed to hear – and – answer a question from his Lordship. Not long after that, Charles had had a moment of clarity and now knew that it had been love. Or at least the initial stages of it.

Rather than being shocked at the realisation, Charles had met it with a quiet acceptance. For a while now they had been moving towards this point, their friendship deepening and turning into something new altogether. He looked at the clock opposite and decided it was time to head up. He'd already had one night with very little sleep this past week, and he didn't feel young enough to actually do it again.

As he walked out of his pantry and closed the door behind him, he felt the hint of a summer breeze drift towards him. Charles walked towards the back door and frowned when he saw it. He could've sworn he'd locked it earlier. Rather than shut it again, he walked out into the night if only to ease his mind that Jimmy or one of the other footmen they'd hired for the week hadn't convinced a maid to join them in the garden.

Charles walked up the steps and into the garden. Any words of reprimand died on his tongue as he saw who was sat on the bench. The light breeze gently whipping a few wisps around her face. Elsie looked up as she heard footsteps and smiled when she saw who had found her.

“I thought you had gone up.”
“I was going to, but I felt like getting some air,” she smiled, “and I much prefer a night sky to a plain ceiling.”

“Do you mind if I join you?”

“No,” she replied as she moved over a little to make room for him.

Both sat in silence for a few moments, letting the sounds of London at night wash over them. They were both surprised to find that the silence wasn't as awkward as it had been after their little paddle or on the train back to London.

“I know I was a bit hesitant about a staff outing to the beach, but I think it was a success,” Charles commented a short while later.

“It was, Mr Carson,” she replied, “very much so. You've earned yourself a few days goodwill with them for that,” she added drawing a low chuckle from her companion.

“Considering we return to Downton in a couple of days, I believe that's a good thing,” he mused, “what were you and Lady Mary discussing in the library a few days ago?” he asked. The question had been on his mind for several days now, and he had finally worked up the courage to ask.

“Nothing of consequence,” Elsie replied off-handedly, “but I trust your Lady Mary to do the right thing,” she added with a smile, “do you think this season was a success?” she asked, wanting to move on from the Bates' and train tickets. She already felt bad enough keeping secrets from him.

“I do,” he replied, “probably the last one we'll see Mrs Hughes.”

“Not thinking of retirement are you?” she asked hoping to hear an answer in the negative.

“No,” he scoffed, “what I meant was Ladies Mary and Edith don't need the season anymore and after a ball like hers, I daresay Lady Rose will be married or engaged within the year,” he added with a sigh, “you know it seems like only yesterday we prepared for Lady Mary's debut, where does the time go?”

“I couldn't tell you,” Elsie replied with a sympathetic smile. In the distance, they heard Big Ben chime 11, “I guess that means its time we went up.”

Charles nodded in agreement and they both made their way back inside. She waited while he locked up before they made their way up to the servants quarters

"Mrs Hughes,” he said quietly, as they stood on the landing.

“Yes?”

“Never mind,” he replied with a shake of his head, cursing his inability to say how he felt, “goodnight Mrs Hughes.”

“Goodnight Mr Carson,” she smiled as she turned to walk towards her room.

‘Someday’ he thought to himself as he shut his bedroom door behind him, ‘someday I will actually tell her how I feel’. He just hoped it wouldn't be too long before he said anything.
Flowers

Chapter Summary

A sequel - of sorts - to 'It's Time' (chapter 5 in this collection)

Elsie felt her shoulders droop as she walked through the green baize door, following another meeting with Lady Grantham and Lady Mary about the dinner party this weekend. The dinner party would coincide with a visit from Lady Rose and Mr Aldridge as well as Charles Blake following his return from Poland. It would also be the first dinner party that Lady Mary and Henry Talbot would attend as a betrothed couple following the engagement announcement the previous week.

Normally Elsie hated wishing her time away, but today she longed for the month to be over so that she and Charles could finally retire. They had informed Lord and Lady Grantham of their intention to retire, several days after the house party that had seen them entertain the Prince of Wales as well the Duke and Duchess of York. They had initially been a little shocked, but had wished them well and asked to let them know when the date of departure had been chosen. Though both had been sad to lose the couple, both Charles and Elsie had noted a brief flicker of relief in Lord Grantham’s eyes, especially as he had been making the odd staff cutback here and there. Elsie had started the year with four housemaids, now she only had two. Even with a vacuum cleaner –which saved a bit of time- Elsie still found that she was having to do a large part of the cleaning as well. It was mostly linens and the odd bit of dusting, but it still added to her already great workload. She should have been training Miss Baxter as well, but as she was in bed with a cold, there wasn’t much she could do at the moment.

Elsie knew that Charles wasn’t faring any better in the staff stakes. He had a small handful of hall boys, and two footmen. Thomas had been torn between insolence and making himself indispensable since he had first heard of the cutbacks. When he had learnt that his superiors were soon to be retiring, Thomas had felt for sure the butler’s position was his, but had been most aggrieved to hear that Molesley was also being considered for the position due to his previous experience. So now he had taken to trying to subtly undermine Molesley which was keeping both her and Charles on their toes.

Elsie walked into the kitchen and exchanged a weary sigh with Beryl as she passed over the menu changes.

“Again?” Beryl huffed as she looked at the piece of paper that Elsie had just handed her, before passing it over to Daisy.

“Yes,” Elsie nodded, “let me know if I need to order anything extra,” she added.

“Well at least one of the deserts, and a main course are still the same,” Daisy commented as she compared the two menus, “so there shouldn’t be that much extra for the two of us to do,” she added causing Beryl to roll her eyes at her assistant cook. Mrs Patmore had also lost several members of kitchen staff and was attempting to prepare a grand dinner party (with a big luncheon the following day for those who were staying the night) with only herself, Daisy and one other kitchen maid.

“Have you seen Mr Carson anywhere?” Elsie asked, knowing that a small talk with her husband
would go a long way to clearing her mind.

“He was in your sitting room earlier,” Beryl replied “and then he said something about running an errand in the village.”

“Thank you,” she smiled before she left the kitchen and gave a small sigh ‘looks like I’ll have to wait until later for that talk’.

As she walked into her sitting room, the first thing that Elsie noticed was a small bouquet of wildflowers sitting in a small vase on her desk. She smiled as she knew exactly who would have placed the flowers there. Elsie’s smile widened as she saw a piece of paper, leaning against the vase and she recognised the writing. Elsie headed over to her desk and picked up the piece of paper. Elsie bit her lip to try and contain her smile as she read the words.

“You hopeless romantic,” she muttered under her breath, with a shake of her head.

“It’s only for you my darling,” came a deep voice from behind her.

Elsie turned around and smiled as she saw Charles stood just inside the doorway. She walked towards him, only for Charles to meet her half way. Years of working side by side, and several months of extremely up close studying, had led Charles to figure out exactly what Elsie was feeling at any given moment. In this instance he could sense that she was tired and wanted nothing more than their retirement to arrive sooner than it was. Charles could also sense that she wanted little more time with him than their small tea break would allow. Without saying a word, Charles wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, allowing her to rest her head against his chest.

“Three more weeks, Elsie my dear, just three more weeks,” he murmured against her hair, causing her to lift her head to look at him.

“I thought you weren’t going to call me Elsie at work?” she asked with a raised eyebrow. Charles didn’t have an answer for her. He merely smirked at her, and pulled her close once more, before brushing his lips across the top of her head.
Chapter Summary

Set sometime after 6x05

1925

It had been two weeks since Lord Grantham's incident at dinner and Downton was getting back to normal. While Charles still worried about the health of his Lordship, he was also worried about Elsie. She'd been a lot more quiet and reflective in the past couple of weeks. He had initially wondered if it was because she too was worried about Lord Grantham. He knew that her devotion to the family wasn't as great as his, but he knew that she was loyal to them and that she worried about individual members on occasion. He had thought that after Lord Grantham had come home from the hospital with an almost clean bill of health, Elsie would go back to her usual self. However, she still seemed far too quiet, and Charles was fairly sure that something was troubling her.

“Is Mrs Hughes alright Mr Carson?” Daisy asked as he walked into the kitchen.

“As far as I'm aware,” he replied as he turned to look at her, “why?”

“No reason,” Daisy commented, shrinking back a little under his gaze. Even after almost 15 years of working with him, he still scared her a little.

“See for yourself,” Mrs Patmore said as she placed a tray with two cups and a kettle on it front of him.

He picked up the tray and walked towards Elsie's sitting room. He paused by the door, as he noticed her sat at her desk. He could tell by the way that she was leaning forward slightly that her chin was resting on her clasped hands. Charles placed the tray on the small table, before he walked over to her. The blank sheet of paper in front of her, told him that she clearly hadn't done whatever it was she had planned to do this afternoon. He frowned a little as he noticed the lingering traces of tears on her cheek and he immediately thought back to see if he had done anything wrong. Or anything that he might have said to upset her, he knew he could be crabby a lot of the time. He cleared his throat to get her attention. When that didn't work, he placed a hand on her arm. She jumped slightly, and turned to face him.

“Sorry,” he said as he sat down on the chair opposite, “but you were miles away. Is something wrong?” he prompted.

“No,” Elsie replied, “just tired,” she added, the tone of her voice telling him not to question her further. She stood up and poured them both a cup of tea, before she passed him a cup.

Charles took the cup from her and watched as she sat back down. He would just have to find some other way of getting her to tell him what was on her mind. He set his cup down on the table and reached over, taking one of her hands in his. Elsie smiled softly at him, moments like this were hard to come by during the day, and so they had learned to take them where they could.
As he lay looking up at the ceiling of their bedroom, he wondered just when Elsie would confide in him. Charles had given her several chances throughout the day and on the walk home to confide in him but she was still keeping quiet. The last time she had been as quiet and not quite herself, had been several years back when they thought she might have cancer. He really hoped it wasn't that again. He had just watched his employer nearly die in front of him, he wasn't sure he'd be able to cope if he had to watch her die in front of him. As he shook his head to clear his mind of those thoughts and the images it had brought to mind, he realised that Elsie was still awake. Her breathing was completely different to what it usually was. He turned over so that he was on his side facing her.

“What's on your mind Elsie?” he asked, his voice reverberating in the stillness of the room.

“What do you mean?” she countered, her voice sharp despite the tired quality to it.

“We've worked together for thirty years. I know your silences. I know you. You're worrying about something.”

“You won't think me silly if I told you?”

“I could never think you silly,” he replied honestly, as he pulled her close to him, before moving to lay on his back, with her head against his chest. The beat of his heart soothing her troubled mind. “Your worries will go no further than this room. I would even make them my worries if you wish.”

Elsie tilted her head to smile up at him, before she found one of the buttons on his pyjama shirt fascinating. She rolled it between her fingers, before she took a deep breath and began to speak.

“The night his Lordship was rushed to the hospital, when Mr Molesley came running down those stairs. My first thought was that something had happened to you,” she said, as she felt Charles tighten his hold on her. “I had flashbacks to that night you collapsed during the War,” she added, “for a moment I thought I was going to lose you. And now, I can't seem to rid my mind of it.”

“Is that why you've been so worried?” Charles asked, finding his throat a little dry and slight wetness on his cheeks. He felt her nod against his chest. “You've been worried about me dying?”

“Yes,” she whispered quietly. The images once again coming to the front of her mind; him collapsed in the middle of the dining room, his lifeless body, a coffin lowered being to the ground, rooms once filled with love and laughter, now filled with quiet and sorrow in the corners.

“Well, I'm not planning on dying any time soon,” he commented, “but if it eases your mind, we'll take a visit to Doctor Clarkson tomorrow morning,” he added as he pressed a kiss to the top of her head, feeling her move that little bit closer to him.

Charles walked down the servants corridor as he looked for Thomas. He had cleared it with Lady Grantham that he and Elsie would be out that morning. He hadn't intended to tell her the reason, but when she had seen him speaking with Doctor Clarkson, she had asked him about it. After all that had happened in the past couple of weeks, she had completely understood Elsie's worries.

“Miss Baxter said you were looking for me, Mr Carson,” Thomas said as he came out of the servants hall.

“Yes, Mrs Hughes and myself have business in the village this morning,” he replied, “you'll be in
charge until we return. No one other than family is visiting so it should be straightforward.”

“Yes Mr Carson,” Thomas nodded as he turned on his heel and headed upstairs.

Charles watched as the young man walked away. He hoped that this time, Thomas would be a little bit kinder to the remaining staff and not give them reason to mutiny. He walked back down the corridor and – after a quick word with Mrs Patmore about keeping an eye on Thomas – he knocked on Elsie's open door. She smiled at him and finished what she was doing, before she put the book back on the shelf above her desk.

“Are you ready?” he asked as he picked up her coat and hat from the pegs behind the door.

“Yes,” she nodded as she stood up.

-x-

The walk to the village was a pleasant one. While it was overcast, the sun was trying to peek out from behind the clouds and the rain was keeping itself at bay. As they walked through the village they were greeted by various villagers with a polite ‘Mr and Mrs Carson' which always filled them both with happiness. It was rare for them to hear Elsie referred to as Mrs Carson, so it was always a treat for the both of them.

Half an hour later, Elsie was sat outside Doctor Clarkson's office, while she waited for him to finish with the doctor. She had sat in the doctor's office with Charles when they'd first arrived, but had left before the examination had started. They may be married now, but there were still some things they wanted privacy with. Plus Elsie had realised that if Charles did have any worries about his health, he may wish to speak to Clarkson about them first so as to not give her any more worry.

As she listened to the clock tick in the quiet of the corridor, Elsie toyed with a loose thread on her coat sleeve. She stopped before it came loose completely. She made a mental note to deal with it later and looked up as Doctor Clarkson opened the door.

“You can come in now, Mrs Carson.”

She walked into the office to see Charles pulling his jacket back on before he sat in one of the chairs in front of Doctor Clarkson's desk. She smiled at him as he placed his hand over the two that were folded in her lap. Both watched as he consulted the few notes he had made throughout the examination. While they appreciated the fact that was making sure of everything before speaking. The silence only served to be the very opposite of reassuring.

“Well,” he said after a few more moments of silence, “you'll both be pleased to hear that everything is as it should be,” he added with a smile. “There's nothing that gives me any concern. You're in perfect health, Mr Carson,” he finished. It wasn't his place to mention, something that Carson had told him. He trusted him to his wife in due course. Or at least when it got worse.

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“See, everything is fine,” Charles said as they exited the hospital. He neglected to tell her about the occasional tremor he had. It didn't affect his duties and it was nothing to worry about. Yet. “I'm not about to drop dead.”

“I never thought you would,” Elsie replied as she slipped her arm through his, “but it is a weight off of my mind, I won't deny it.”

“We stand a good chance of making thirty years then,” he commented, giving her a pointed look as
they both recalled a disagreement in the lead up to the wedding. “I thought we might have dinner at the cottage tonight.” he added. His thoughts turned to spending a lovely evening with his wife. He completely missed the slight grimace that had briefly crossed her face as Elsie wondered if it would be good enough for him this time.
At the sound of Lady Grantham's bell ringing, Miss Baxter left the servants hall and headed up towards the Mercia bedroom. She knocked lightly but firmly on the door before entering. As usual she found Lady Grantham sat at her dressing table. However, this time she appeared to be lost in thought.

“Milady?” she asked as she approached the dressing table.

“Have you ever regretted anything you've said Baxter?”

“When I was younger,” she replied, “but not recently milady,” she added, before a thought tickled the back of her mind, “is this about what happened earlier with Mrs Hughes?” she asked gently, fully expecting a reprimand.

“I'm afraid, I was rather awful to her,” Lady Grantham replied, “to all of them,” she added.

“I'm sure she understands your reasons.”

“Does she?” Lady Grantham asked, more to herself than her ladies maid, “Lady Mary chewed me out over it,” she added, “Baxter, can you get me that purple coat I wore when his Lordship and I dined with the Townsend's last month?” she asked. She knew it had been the one that they had been trying on earlier, and it did go with the dress Mrs Hughes had been wearing.

Miss Baxter nodded at her, before she walked out of the room. She returned a few minutes later carrying the coat over her arm.

“This one milady?” she asked as she held out a velvet coat with silk flowers, pearl beading and fur on the collar.

“Yes,” Lady Grantham smiled, “Baxter, do you think you could alter this to fit Mrs Hughes?” she asked.

“If Mrs Hughes agrees to it, I could,” she replied as she looked at the coat. Already beginning to mentally adjust the coat. It would probably take most of the night, but it would be worth it.

“You leave Mrs Hughes to me,” Lady Grantham commented as she took the coat off of its hanger and folded it before she exited the room.

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“I'm not sure when I'd wear it again,” Mrs Hughes commented as she looked down at the coat her employer had just handed her, “but you never know.”

“You never do,” Lady Grantham agreed with a smile as she turned to leave, “and I hope you know
I was sincere when I apologised.”

“I do milady,” she replied, as her hand lightly stroked the velvet, “and thank you.”

“You're welcome,” Lady Grantham replied as she opened the door, “I wish you all the best for tomorrow Mrs Hughes and I hope that you and Carson will be very happy together.” she added before she walked out and closed the door behind her. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight your Ladyship.”

“Well,” Mrs Patmore commented, “at least there won't be any lingering worries tomorrow, except about the obvious,” she added with a laugh.

Mrs Hughes smiled briefly at her friend before looking down at the coat again.

“I suppose I'll head up,” she said after a few moments.

“What about the coat?”

“Just send Miss Baxter up when she's finished with her Lady Grantham.”

“I best go warn Mr Carson,” Mrs Patmore replied, “what is it?” she asked as she caught sight of the look on her friends face.

“I wish I could break with tradition and speak to him,” she sighed, “if only to ease my mind over today's events.”

“Well why don't you?” Mrs Patmore suggested, “I could stand in the middle of you two and make sure neither of you looked at the other.”

“Its nice of you to offer,” Mrs Hughes replied, “but I think we both know how Mr Carson reacts to people breaking with tradition,” she added, before she indicated that Mrs Patmore should leave.

With a last glance over at the housekeeper, Mrs Patmore walked out of the room and down to the next door. She knocked on the door and on hearing Mr Carson tell her to come in, she opened the door, and signalled Mrs Hughes to tell her it was alright to go.

“Ah, Mrs Patmore what can I do for you?” he asked as he saw her walk in.

“Just wanted to let you know that Mrs Hughes was going up to bed,” she replied.

“Is everything alright?” he asked, “after...” he tailed off unsure of how to describe what had transpired between Mrs Hughes and Lady Grantham earlier.

“Its all sorted,” she smiled, “her Ladyship came downstairs and the matter is all settled. What's that?” she asked noticing an envelope on his desk with no name or address.

“Its a letter for Els...Mrs Hughes,” he replied, hoping she hadn't noticed his slip. They may be friends, but under the roof of the Abbey, societal norms had to be observed. To his mind anyway. “I wanted to speak to her, but decided not to risk any bad luck. Can you give it to her for me?”

“Of course,” she replied as she picked up the envelope and put it into the pocket of her apron, “thank you Daisy,” she called in response to a knock on the door, “it means the coast is clear,” she added in response to the questioning look Mr Carson had given her.
Anna walked out of the kitchen after speaking to Daisy and Mrs Patmore. She had wanted to check in on Mrs Hughes to see how she was doing, especially considering Lady Grantham had come downstairs about half an hour ago. However she had learnt that the housekeeper had already gone upstairs.

“Oh, Miss Baxter there you are,” Anna said as she caught sight of the ladies maid walking down the stairs, “I'm glad I caught you.”

“Are you feeling alright?” she asked, noticing Anna looked a little bit pale.

“I'm fine,” she replied, “I was just wondering if tomorrow we should help Mrs Hughes get ready, as a wedding present of sorts.”

“I think we should,” she replied “won't her Ladyship and Lady Mary mind?”

“I shouldn't think so,” Anna commented, “I can't see them begrudging her a little bit of luxury on her own wedding day,” she smiled as she saw Mr Bates coming down the stairs.

“Are you ready?” he asked as he approached her.

“I am,” Anna nodded, “Goodnight Miss Baxter,” she said as she walked towards the back door.

“Goodnight Anna, Mr Bates,” she replied as she walked into the servants hall.

“What were you two whispering about?” Mr Bates asked as he helped Anna on with her coat.

“Just a little something for Mrs Hughes tomorrow,” Anna replied with a smile, “come on it's a big day tomorrow.”

Mrs Hughes closed her bedroom door and led the coat out on her bed. As she looked at it, she knew instantly the fur would have to go, it made her feel as though she was putting on airs and graces. She put the coat on and looked at it. Considering the difference in height between the two of them, she couldn't help but marvel at how very little needed to be altered. It was mostly the hem and the sleeves that needed some adjustment.

“Come in.” she called at the sound of a knock on the door. The door opened and Miss Baxter walked in with her sewing box.

“Mrs Patmore had you'd gone up,” she smiled.

“You are very kind to do this,” Mrs Hughes commented as the ladies maid drew near, “I hope you won't be up too long tonight.”

“Its no trouble Mrs Hughes,” she replied “Do you have any requests about the coat?”

“Just remove the fur, and adjust the length, I think.”

Miss Baxter nodded her agreement, and began to mark and pin where she needed to make her adjustments. Normally, she would have tried to keep a conversation going between the two, however, she sensed that Mrs Hughes was more than likely feeling a little nervous and would appreciate the quiet.

“I think that's everything,” she said as she stood up after she had finished with the hem, “I'll bring it to you tomorrow morning,” she added with a smile as Mrs Hughes slipped off the coat and handed
it over, “it looks really lovely on you. Mr Carson is very lucky indeed,” she finished as she walked out of the room.

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As she walked back into her room after completing her nightly routine, she noticed that someone had been in there. For a brief moment Mrs Hughes wondered if it had been Mr Carson. She soon dismissed that particular thought though as she knew he would never risk being caught on the women's side of the corridor and definitely not at night. As she sat down on the bed, she caught sight of a white envelope sitting on the night stand. As she saw the writing, she realised who had written the letter and who must have put it there.

My dearest Elsie,

I have so much to say to you, that I am afraid I shall tell you nothing. However, one thing I can definitely say is that I love you. I have been remiss in not saying more often, but know that I shall endeavour to say it more often in the future.

Much like you never thought I would ask you to marry me, I did wonder if we would ever get to this moment. Especially our brief misunderstandings over the nature of our marriage and where we would hold the reception. We have always been a pair, me clinging to the past and tradition while you take everything as it comes. Yet tonight, I longed to throw off tradition and seek you out for a few moments. If only to reassure you that whatever happens with Lady Grantham after today, I am on your side.

This time tomorrow, we shall be husband and wife. I cannot begin to express how much happiness those words fill me with.

Until tomorrow my love,

Charles

She smiled as she finished reading the letter. With several strokes of his pen he had written the words I am on your side. The simple effect of those five words had managed to cut to the heart of her insecurities following the incident earlier. He had said it to her before, but to tell her before he knew what would happen as a result, meant more to her than anything. She folded up the letter and placed it on the night stand. She would have to remember to put it somewhere safe so she wouldn't lose it when the few objects that she owned were taken to whichever cottage they would live in when they returned from Scarborough.

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As she sat sewing away, Miss Baxter couldn't help but think about the butler and housekeeper. When she had first arrived at Downton, she had noticed a certain hint of something between the two of them. She couldn't recall ever working in a place where the two heads of staff were so in sync and even if they disagreed about anything, it was never obvious to the others. She smiled as she recalled Mrs Patmore telling her how it hadn't always been like that. When Mrs Hughes had first become housekeeper, the disagreements between her and Mr Carson were always known from the minute they started.

She turned her head slightly at the sound of someone walking down the corridor. Despite a brief shiver, Miss Baxter dismissed any notion of ghosts paying no stock to the stories she used to hear Jimmy telling the younger staff members. She smiled as she saw Mr Molesley walk into the servants hall, a book in his hands.
“I thought you had gone to bed” she commented as he sat down in one of the chairs beside the fire.

“I couldn't sleep,” he replied, “and it was a little draughty in the attics, so I thought I would come down here, and read a bit,” he added, “you don't mind do you?” he asked as he started the fire in the grate and sat down in one of the chairs beside it.

“Not at all,” she replied, before she turned her attention back to one of the silk flowers on the coat.

The ladies maid and footman both sat in silence as the hours ticked away. When she eventually finished her work, and went upstairs to catch a couple of hours sleep, she had a funny feeling that Mr Molesley would also head up to his room. She couldn't help the smile that rose at that thought. She highly doubted the warmth she felt inside as she drifted off to sleep had anything to do with her mother's handmade blanket that she kept at the end of her bed.
Dancing In The Dark

Chapter Summary

A little moment of peace, inspired by the song 'Perfect' by Ed Sheeran

*Baby, I'm dancing in the dark
With you between my arms

~ Perfect by Ed Sheeran

~X~

The setting sun cast an orange glow around the garden of the small cottage as Charles Carson surveyed the grounds in front of him. Since he had become semi-retired, he had found he quite enjoyed gardening and had taken to toiling in their small garden. Sometimes he would be joined by his wife, but more often than not he was by himself. It didn't bother him though, he liked the time alone with his thoughts, plus it gave him more to talk about with Elsie over their evening meal. One other bonus that he had found was that it often relaxed him and while it didn't completely get rid of the tremors, it certainly made them a fraction easier to control. Which in turn, meant he spent less time worrying about them.

He smiled slightly as he caught sight of the top of the Abbey in the distance. Things had changed a fair bit there in the past few months and he knew that Elsie was considering retirement in some form and passing the reins onto Miss Baxter. Anna and Mr Bates were looking at properties on the coast, Daisy had moved to Mr Mason's farm and was courting Andrew. Mrs Patmore had also been spending a fair bit of her free time at the farm too, and he and Elsie were just waiting for the moment that the two would make it official. Thomas was finally showing the side of him, that only a few had seen before and was rewarding Charles and Lord Grantham's faith in him being a worthy replacement as butler of Downton Abbey. Both were confident that the Abbey was in the right hands.

His previous smile widened as he heard a gentle melody begin to drift out of the open windows. Earlier that year, Lord Grantham – on the orders of Lady Mary, who had decided the Carson's should have something special to mark their first year of marriage – had gifted them with their own wireless. After some initial hesitation and bluster, they had taken to listening to it for an hour in the evenings. Sometimes they danced a little but for the most part, they sat curled up to each other and just enjoyed the small moments of togetherness. Especially if it had been a long day for Elsie.

“You coming inside Charlie?”

Charles turned around and saw Elsie stood in the doorway, the light spilling out behind her. As she so often did when she returned from the Abbey, she had unpinned her hair and just had the braid hanging loose.

“In a minute,” he replied. As he watched her turn to walk back inside, Charles reached out and took her hand.

“What?”
“Dance with me.”

“In the garden?”

“Why not?”

“Who are you and what have you done with Charles Carson?” Elsie laughed as she let him pull her close to him and into his arms. Charles merely smiled in response and proceeded to move them around the small garden in something resembling a waltz.

Elsie didn't mind that she was still wearing her apron or had a dishcloth in her hands. She'd first seen the spontaneous side of her husband on their honeymoon. In the early days of their marriage while they were still finding their feet and with Charles's exacting high standards it hadn't been seen that much. But once they'd managed to balance their butler and housekeeper persona's with being newly-weds, that side of him had started to rear its head once more and it was always a treat when it did show up.

As they slowed to a mere sway, the sky gradually darkened and the stars began to appear, all while the music continued to play. Charles placed a light kiss to the top of her head. Elsie hummed softly in response, before reaching up a little and kissing his cheek.

“I think its time we headed inside.” Charles said as the warmth of the evening gave way to the slight chill of an early summer night and the music came to an end.

“In a minute, its a nice night,” she replied. “It reminds me of our last night in Scarborough.”

Charles smiled as he recalled the night in question. After a small meal at one of the restaurants they had walked along the seafront with the sound of the waves lapping against the wall to accompany them. The night had been just like this too. They had made plans to return in the near future, and Charles was hoping to recreate that night when the family visited Brancaster Castle later in the summer. They also had many plans for the near future, including a trip to Lytham St. Anne's to see Becky. Sometime soon, they'd both retire and they would have time for all of them. But for now, all they were really thinking about was this moment, the person who was in their arms and how perfect it all was.

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