Not Like The Other

by dendriticgold

Summary

Thomas meets infuriating docker Janek on a visit to Liverpool with Lord Grantham. Thomas's life takes a turn to happiness with Janek, but only with Thomas's uncomfortable past left unaddressed. Violently differing perspectives on morality and duty force Thomas and Janek onto different paths after a man is lynched at the docks for his WWI 'blighty'. This leads both of them, separately, to find fame and a level of acceptance in the shifting and hypocritical world they inhabit. But even if the world can accept both men on their own merits, can Thomas and Janek be reconciled to one another? [From Chapter 67 onwards, a very different story to the original version.]
'Yes, my Lord.'

'I must meet him in person, you see.'

'Yes, my Lord.'

'Mr Goodrich must be prepared to receive me at 10am tomorrow.'

'Yes, m...'

'My schedule is very tight tomorrow.'

Thomas waited until he was sure Robert was finished before chiming in again.

'Yes, m...'

'And I want to see all the ships.' Robert piped up, speaking with an air of importance slightly
excessive given the man brushing his shoulders was his sole audience. 'I must inspect them. And the builder's yard.' Robert continued, smoothing down his own lapels (for a change), smiling to himself like a boy at Christmas in anticipation of the excitement of docks.

'Yes, my Lord.'

'I must ensure all is well with my investment!'

'Im not thick, my Lord.'

'What?'

Thomas smiled pleasantly as Robert turned to look over his shoulder.

'I'll be quick, my Lord.'

Robert nodded and faced forwards again, allowing Thomas to finish dressing him.

An hour or so later, having seen Robert safely to his afternoon appointment, Thomas stomped his way through the streets of Liverpool en route to the city docks. He was loathe to leave the comfort of the hotel, and even more so to be on the dirty streets. He had decided Liverpool was a poor substitute for London or even Manchester on the train ride in, and his opinion hadn't risen much since.

The stench of rot and industry met his nostrils as he neared the docks, leading him to darkly question why His Lordship couldn't have just invested in a department store chain, or similar, preferably anywhere other than the Mersey.

He judged the sight of the docks to be little better than the smell. Between the thick, damp mangled ropes, the blackened sweat-stained shirts of the workers (not a single suit-jacket to be seen), the scum of rubbish and sea-surf lapping at the side of the concrete bulwarks and the rusted chains swinging from machinery the height of two buildings, Thomas fancied he had stepped into a living version of his own personal hell.

His descent into the inferno was hastened by the realisation that behind the first large brick-building he had seen was another brick building, then another, then another. All were different; most with open sides at ground level to reveal the glint of metal works going on below, all with signs galore (but none stating 'Mr Goodrich and Co.'). And Thomas was left with the uncomfortable realisation that perhaps he ought to have paid a little more attention to His Lordship's instructions that morning, rather than assuming the task of locating Mr Goodrich would be simple upon arrival.

Everywhere he looked were scurrying, filthy workers. A strange mix of the skeletal and the robust, they all wore the same look of blank and grim determination on their faces. And their ruddy skin shone in tones of pink, tan and grease.

Thomas made no effort to keep the grimace off his face as he entered the first yard.

His attempts to stalk into the fray with an air of self-importance were frustrated by the need to walk between the railway tracks leading down to the loading bay to avoid the crush of men, forcing him to carefully pick his way between the rungs or risk wrecking his shoes on the oil slicked along their length.

He cast his eyes about, desperately hunting for anyone who looked like they might know what they were about.

At length (after being roughly jostled off the train tracks by a surly man who declared he was trying
to get himself killed) Thomas spied a man who looked like a likely prospect. The man tended more towards the robust than the famished, although with less about the middle and more at the shoulders than was strictly proportional. He had the same dirty shirt, braces, trousers, cap uniform of the men around him. His hair hung in straggly curtains about his face; over-long and under-styled, with its natural colour obscured by soot. But, Thomas observed with interest, the man was standing still, doing nothing, while all those around him were working. Therefore, Thomas concluded, the man must be management.

'Morning.' Said Thomas by way of ill humoured greeting. 'I'm after a Mr Goodrich.'

The man looked him up and down and gave absolutely no reaction to what he saw. He raised the cigarette dangling loosely from his hand to his lips, and took a big puff before responding.

'Aye.'

Thomas's mouth stretched into a dangerously thin smile.

'Could you take me...?' Thomas said through gritted teeth. '...to Mr Goodrich?'

The man unwaveringly met his gaze, his face expressionless save a touch of merriment in his pale green eyes.

'Aye.'

He didn't move.

'Can we go now?' Said Thomas in that special voice he usually reserved for incompetent footmen (and occasionally delivery boys when he was having a particularly bad day).

The man looked him up and down again, making little effort to conceal the little creases developing at the corners of his mouth at Thomas's increasingly flustered demeanour.

Then he went back to his cigarette.

Thomas waited, pre-emptively wincing, with his fingers curling into fists.

'Aye.'

Thomas's smile remained fixed to his face on principle alone.

'You're not going to help me.'

It wasn't a question, but the man chose to treat it as one for good measure.

'Aye.' He said with a smirk.

Thomas bristled and drew himself to full height; not that he really had any inches on the other man, but the manoeuvre served to emphasise the relative quality of his clothing and by inference (to a Thomas at least) his authority.

'I'll be telling Mr Goodrich about your...helpfulness.' Thomas said with a challenging raise if his chin.

The man laughed aloud at that, suddenly looking impossibly youthful despite the grime ingrained in every crease of his face.

'By all means...' He drawled, discarding his cigarette and thrusting his thumbs to hook at his
waistband. ’...tell Mr Goodrich one of the thousand blokes in shirt-sleeves upset your cart.’

Thomas took a sharp step forwards. To do what, he wasn't sure. But thankfully fate intervened before he was called upon to decide.

’Oit! Janek!’ Both men turned towards the gruff interloper. ’You ever going to be done with your bloody fag break?’

’Janek?’ Said Thomas, turning back to him. ’I'd willingly bet there's not a thousand of them...

The man in front of him blanched under the slick of dirt on his face.

’Now, look mister...Sir...I didn't mean any...

Thomas stalked off, leaving the stuttering man in his wake with a distinct sense of smugness.

It took a good twenty minutes or so before he finally located the elusive Mr Goodrich; and only then because a man (this one in a proper suit and carrying a clipboard) took pity on the well-dressed, red-faced outsider who had been circling the waterfront yards for near half an hour.

The resulting discussion took little over three minutes.

’...and of course we are ready to receive Lord Grantham tomorrow morning.' Said Mr Goodrich pleasantly and with a cheeriness that had Thomas wanting to launch him into the sludge beyond the bulwark. ’I rather wonder why you've taken the trip to come and see me today...'

’I've been wondering something similar myself.' Thomas muttered.

’What was that?’

’Nothing sir.’ Thomas said smoothly. ’If everything's settled, I'll take my leave.’

’Until tomorrow then.’ Said Goodrich, grasping Thomas's hand in an excessively vigorous hand-shake.

’Til tomorrow.’ Thomas concurred, mustering as much of a smile as circumstances allowed.

Mr Goodrich turned to go.

’Oh, actually, one more thing.’ Said Thomas, still smiling. ’I should like you to extend my personal thanks to one of your workers...Janek, I believe was the name...for his kind assistance today.’

Mr Goodrich stared at him as though he'd grown an extra head.

’It's very important to me.’ Thomas persisted. ’He was such a good help. Please do tell him in person.’

’Right...’ Said Mr Goodrich slowly.

Thomas walked back part-way to the exit before halting to take a seat on one of the stacked boxes by the loading bay.

A few minutes later he was treated to the sight of Janek bricking himself as Mr Goodrich approached, only for the latter to smile, take hold of his grubby hand, and gave it a good shake.

Thomas waited until Janek’s shell-shocked gaze found him across the yard.
He smiled sweetly back, then left.
Robert got off to bed early that evening, for which Thomas was eternally thankful. He was thankful also that his role as interim valet meant that his duties concluded the moment he got Robert into his pyjamas, as opposed to being pressed into late night conversation about how ‘utterly excited’ His Lordship was about the prospect of the docks. He imagined Cora, or even Bates, were they there, would have been in for a long night.

Thomas’s mood lightened immediately upon closing the door to his own modest lodgings in the hotel. The pig of a day finally at an end.

He debated bed, but quickly thought better of it. He wanted a drink. And due to Robert’s decision to keep the ‘nightcap’ bottle by his bedside, rather than letting Thomas take it with him (and drain the dregs), Thomas had been left high and dry. The annoyance of having to get out of his livery and into his suit for the second time paled in comparison to the prospect of going to bed sober after the day he’d had. Confusions with the train tickets, subsequent confusion with the train carriages, no car waiting for them at the station, confusions finding the hotel once they found a bloody car and then the god-awful (and pointless) trek to the docks…

As he slipped on his suit he smiled to himself at the memory of his one victory of the day. Getting one over on the gobsmacked docker had almost made up for having to take the pointless trip in the first place. Almost.

He stepped out the hotel, wincing at the gratingly robust accent of the doorman bidding him ‘Good Evening’ as he did. Ah yes, still in Liverpool, he thought darkly.

The nearby public houses (grand affairs; 'public' in name alone) were poor prospects for a drink. Trust Lord Grantham to select a hotel in a locale that had precisely sod all to offer the un-titled working man by way of entertainment.

The answer was simple; he would have to venture further afield.

But of course, Thomas has no idea of the lay of the land when it came to this particular city. He could have asked someone, or looked at the map in the hotel foyer, or looked at the local information pamphlet in his room...but deigning to learn anything about the city layout seemed to be somehow giving in to it. And that was completely inadmissible given all the other concessions to personal taste he had made that day. Chief among them being the trip to the godforsaken...

Docks, the docks, Thomas thought to himself with a distinct sense of loathing. If there was anywhere he could be sure of finding an uncomplicated (and much needed) pint in the city it would be in the direction of the docks.

Chin to his chest against the damp of the night, Thomas grudgingly set off.

The first establishment he tried looked a good prospect from the outside, but the moment he was through the door it became apparent that he would be in the queue to be served at the bar until at least the next millennium.

In true Goldilocks style, the second pub had the opposite problem; there was barely a soul in the small dank room, leaving Thomas to wonder (as he made a hasty retreat) if he had somehow misread the sign and wound up in someone’s living room.

The third one was not ‘just right’ by a long shot, but there were free tables and he could spy a
respectable choice of bottles lined up behind the bar in addition to the taps. He reasoned it would do.

He settled on going up to order straight from the bar, reasoning that the wait for table service was likely to be more than his nerves could bear.

He ordered what the barkeep recommended and began the traditional hunt in his deep coat pockets for his wallet.

He was halted by a loud exclamation from across the bar.

‘Well fuck me!’

Thomas winced in equal measure at the unwelcome familiarity of the voice, the obscenity coming off as *fook* rather than it’s more traditional pronunciation, and the titters of laughter that swiftly followed.

‘I’ll be needing another of these shortly.’ Thomas said to the barkeep, indicating his pint.

‘I’ll start a tab sir.’ Said the man neatly before bustling off to tend to another customer, leaving Thomas standing awkwardly at the bar with the eyes of a dozen dockers boring into the back of his neck.

Behind him Thomas heard the rapping of light footsteps approaching at an alarming speed.

‘This is the one!’

Thomas found himself unceremoniously yanked round by the shoulder, bringing him face to face with a disturbingly merry and slightly cleaner (bar the hair, which was now slicked back but still evidently full of soot) version of the docker he had met that afternoon.

‘This is the one I was telling you about!’

Thomas flinched away from the volume of Janek’s voice, calling back to a small group of men over in the far corner.

Thomas’s annoyance at being confronted with the man dulled his attention to the fact he was being shepherded over to the group, until he found himself absorbed into the small circle of half-standing, half-sitting, drunkards.

‘This is the one…’

Thomas silent swore to himself that if Janek uttered those words a fourth time he would stuff his pint glass down his throat.

‘Got me good and proper this one did.’ Janek laughed, releasing his hold on Thomas’s arm (Thomas made a mental note to check for stains) to pat him on the shoulder before, mercifully, lowering his hand to his side.

‘…good trick…’

‘…always…break to smoke…’

‘…Goodrich…that a goer…’

The men around them babbled incomprehensibly, speaking with sufficient speed (and under the influence of sufficient alcohol) that Thomas only caught every other phrase. Janek joined them in conversation while Thomas, seemingly forgotten by all despite being the subject of discussion, stood
in the middle of the group gulping down his pint and eyeing up the empty table across the room with eyes full of longing.

He noticed Janek bending low to whisper something in the ear of the man next to him. The man creased up with laughter then tapped the next man on the shoulder to pass on the message. The process was repeated several times.

Thomas was unsurprised to find the message didn’t make its way to him.

‘So anyway, I’ll be…um…’ Thomas began, wondering if he ought to bother to take his leave at all.

‘So soon? It’s been a pleasure.’ Janek grinned, suddenly upright and looking to Thomas with eyes that the latter felt were open a little too wide for comfort; not quite as unsettling as the overly-enthusiastic grin, but certainly adding to the overall sense of unease beginning to creep up Thomas’s back.

‘Wish I could say the same.’ Thomas said with a light smile and a tilt of his head, safe in the knowledge that the other men in the group were far too engrossed in their own conversations to hear him sassing their pseudo leader.

Janek’s grin remained firmly in place, but Thomas was intensely gratified by the man’s inability to summon a retort.

So much so that Thomas decided to push his luck once back at the bar by smugly raising his next pint glass in a merry toast to the group.

He wasn’t sure if he ought to be amused or annoyed by the fact that all the men, including Janek, returned the gesture with gusto before going back to whatever mindless topic of discussion they had moved on to.

Save for offending his ears with their occasional bawdy laughter the dockers largely faded into the background as he sat working his way through the second pint.

The solitude gave his mind the time to ponder important personal matters such as whether he should have gone for a something stronger than beer and if there was the slightest chance he could get out of having to accompany Robert to the docks the next day.

Every now and then his eye line drifted back across the bar, invariably coming to rest on the animated figure of Janek. The man was constantly on the move, barely taking a seat for more than a few minutes in what seemed to be a constant need to switch between conversations and games with different members of the group. He didn’t speak with his hands though, Thomas noted. Thomas had often found (and abhorred) that people with excess energy were prone to exaggerated arm swings when speaking.

Not so with Janek, not that Thomas was looking that closely. (But how could he help noticing when the man was a constantly moving blur out the corner of his eye?) He seemed to ‘talk’ with his body; moving his shoulders, and occasionally entire upper body this way and that depending on whose attention he was commanding at the time.

Thomas smirked to himself that perhaps Janek’s figure owed more to this personal quirk rather than the manual labour (whatever that might be) that he did at the docks. Thomas fancied that constantly bending at the middle must bring about a leanness in that area, and constantly having one’s shoulders tensed up to keep one’s arms by their sides must build up a bit of muscle over the years.

‘That’s stupid.’ Thomas said aloud to himself, wondering where that idea had come from.
He knew the latter to be completely false. It had to be. If holding posture meant big shoulders then every footman in the country would be the size of a car. That thought made him snort in pitiful merriment, drawing a strange look from the two men on the table next door.

Thomas glanced down at his drink, wondering if he ought to have taken the second pint a bit slower. He pushed the near empty glass away and cautioned himself to save the last couple of sips for a bit later in the evening.

He couldn’t quite get the issue of large shoulders out of his mind. Glancing across the room again (Janek’s fault, naturally, the man had taken it upon himself to practically fall into the lap of one of the other dockers and shout loudly in surprise at having done so) Thomas pondered what work the man did.

There were few clues to be had. Thomas felt secure in assuming fire came into it somehow due to what he presumed was soot in Janek’s hair and the strips and blotches of smooth flesh left by old burns across his bare forearms; revealed by his casually rolled shirtsleeves.

But anything more than that was pure conjecture.

Reaching any kind of satisfactory conclusion was frustrated by the fact that Thomas was in no position to name more than two or three of the dozens of types of tradesmen that metaphorically and literally greased the wheels of the docks on a daily basis.

And he realised he’d been staring. Properly staring this time.

Thankfully Janek noticing him doing so coincided neatly with the bustle of the dockers deciding to call it a night.

Janek waved over at him.

Thomas waved back, fighting the urge to restrict his gesture to a few choice fingers for the first time in almost twenty years.

‘See you soon!’ Called Janek.

Thomas didn’t reply.

The men began to gather up caps and jackets strewn hap-hazardly on stools and tables.

As he watched them filing slowly out the exit, with his own unfinished pint glass still in his line of vision, Thomas decided he’d best do the same.

He made his way over to the bar and enquired, as politely as possible, as to the financial damage.

‘That’ll be eighty four pence sir.’ Came the response.

‘What?’ Thomas’s hand paused half-way to his pocket. ‘But that’s…’ He paused for a moment to work it out. ‘…fourteen pints. I only had two, and barely two at that!’ He said.

‘The price includes the tab for your friends.’

‘But I don’t…’ Thomas turned around to spy Janek leaning lazily on the doorframe. He wasn’t grinning anymore, but there was a distinct glint of glee in his eyes.

‘But…’ Thomas said again, unaware his mouth was gaping in a most ungainly manner.
In the blink of an eye Janek was out the door, following his companions down past the pub windows and across the street.

‘Sir?’

Thomas turned his attention back to the barkeep.

‘Those…those weren’t my friends.’ He stuttered out.

‘Those men you shared a drink with, toasted with and bid a goodbye to?’ Said the barkeep loudly enough to draw the attention of several other men sitting at the bar.

‘I never met them before tonight…today, one of them…one of them I met today, but the others I only met tonight!’ Thomas insisted, trying desperately to keep his voice down and motioning for the barkeep to do the same.

The barkeep gave Thomas a look that wasn’t entirely devoid of sympathy but which also carried the unmistakable message that someone was going to have to pay for the drinks.

Sighing deeply, Thomas flopped his wallet out onto the bar with a defeated slap.

‘How much did you say it was again?’
Chapter 3

The next morning Thomas dressed Robert in the suit he knew would be easiest to clean and press come the evening. Damned if he was going to add spending all night scrubbing out soot and grease stains after spending all day surrounded by creatures that seemed to luxuriate in them.

Thomas’s mood remained solidly dull and miserable on the drive down to the docks. Robert however grinned the whole way and kept his face to the car window eager for sight of the place.

Mr Goodrich thankfully met them the moment they stepped out the car; enabling Thomas’s face to take a much needed break from feigning interest and enthusiasm each time Robert looked towards him.

Thomas happily (as much as it was possible to be so under the circumstances) fell into step behind the two men, walking between the masters and a small entourage of administrators who followed closely behind.

He had to hand it to Goodrich, the man was quite the impressive cross between a salesman and a showman. For their first stop on the tour he took the party up to the highest point of the sea wall. From there, Thomas noted wryly, the bad smells and noise of the harbour were diminished, and one could see the full stretch of the Mersey shipyards along the front. It allowed Lord Grantham to indulge in the fantasy that his investment had bought him an entire seafaring empire – as opposed to merely two large steamboats undergoing maintenance in the dry docks slightly out of view.

Yes, Goodrich knew how to make a good first impression.

Despite himself Thomas had to admit the view was a fine one. Squares and rectangles of concrete and water stretched out as far as the eye could see; quite an impressive undertaking of construction when viewed in their entirety. From a distance the huge brick buildings along the water front looked like the majestic edifices to optimism they had been intended to be (as opposed to looking like they were fit to crumble any minute). The water of the Mersey sparkled in the unseasonably bright sun, its surface disturbed by tug boats zipping out to guide large cargo vessels into harbour, with no hint at all of the stench of the scummy surf and sewer water that had offended Thomas’s nostrils so much the previous day. The crush of workers, when viewed from above, seemed attractive evidence of industry and progress.

As opposed to, Thomas mused to himself, a bloody nuisance.

Much as he might have wanted to, Goodrich couldn’t avoid taking them down into the shipyard. Robert’s enthusiasm to ‘see all’ refused to be satisfied by the long-distance viewing, so at length Goodrich was forced to guide them down the sloped loading ramp to enter the main yard.

There the masters paused to admire ‘Robert’s’ ships, made several gentlemanly jokes about the smell of the Mersey, studied the knot work on the thick ropes holding the ships at keel, shouted at the men at the hull to ‘carry on the good work’ and pressed onwards with the tour.

Thomas followed behind, more than happy to remain forgotten for the foreseeable.

With Robert otherwise occupied Thomas was free to cast his eyes about the crowds of men in the yard, searching for the yobs from the previous night. He was rather hoping not to recognise any of them.

Given that there was little he could do to save his dignity (he was hardly likely to be able to walk up
to one of the workers and shake him until pennies rattled from his pockets without Robert noticing), Thomas would have greatly preferred to make it through the day without the unwelcome presence of any familiar faces.

The thought of the laughing sods, should any of them recognise him, set Thomas’s teeth on edge.

His relief was infinite when Goodrich announced they had reached the final stop of their tour, the welding shops, before promising to take them all up to his office for a proper reception. A ‘proper reception’ invariably contained something nice to drink and a few biscuits, and for Thomas the vittles could not come soon enough.

But first there was the matter of the cavernous warehouse-like lower levels of the building Goodrich had just steered them into.

The air was dense, dark and dusty, with a strange medley of hissing and roaring sounds coming from the shadowy underbelly of the building.

Thomas near jumped out of his skin as Goodrich’s assistant stepped forwards to loudly call out for all persons in the building to halt work.

As they rounded a huge cylindrical piece of metal whose diameter stretched almost to the ceiling, Thomas spied a group of men in rectangular visors, their clothes and skin almost entirely blackened by their work, holding in their hands tools which still held a stark white-hot glow at their tips.

Thomas watched a molten seam along the side of a sheet of metal begin to cool and harden as Goodrich busied himself with talking Robert through the process of building and maintaining the boilers for their fleet of ships.

‘And here…’ Goodrich said, with an enthusiasm that betrayed his eagerness to be done with the tour. ‘…is one such team of welders. The men tasked with keeping power in our great ships.’

The visor-wearing group removed their headgear in a practiced show of respect and dipped a shallow bow.

A few polite smiles were exchanged. Then Goodrich made a move to usher Robert back out.

‘Wish we’d known you were coming…’ One of the welders suddenly quipped. ‘…would have tidied up the place a bit!’

Thomas’s eyes screwed themselves shut entirely of their own accord.

Janek. Of course.

It would have to be.

On the plus side, Thomas didn’t think Janek had seen him standing behind the group in the shadows. He could probably slink away with Janek none the wiser.

But then…

He opened his eyes, watching Janek burst into guffawing laughter his own joke; the man seemingly unaware that no one, not even his work-mates, had elected to laugh with him.

Thomas smiled.
He waited until Janek’s laughter had died, awkwardly, in the otherwise silent workshop.

He waited until Goodrich, looking somewhat panicked in Lord Grantham’s direction, began to stutter out a response.

‘Well, um…that’s…thank you…My Lord if you would…’

Thomas smoothly slid into view, neatly settling himself at Robert’s side and taking care that he was now in clear view of Janek.

‘You’ll have to forgive Janek’s attempts at jest My Lord…’ Thomas said, speaking quietly enough to pretend he didn’t intend Janek to hear while glancing over to make absolutely sure the man was listening. ‘…it’s only to be expected that he lacks the decorum, not to mention the intelligence and wit…’ Thomas knew he was laying it on thick. And he was loving it. ‘…to appropriately initiate a conversation with yourself.’

‘Yes, sorry…’ Goodrich began to stutter out on Janek’s behalf, assuming from Thomas’s speech that Robert must be sorely offended.

‘But of course…’ Thomas continued forcefully, eager to move the conversation on swiftly to conceal the fact that Robert was probably too preoccupied with the ships to care about the breach of etiquette. ‘…Janek was very kind to assist me with directions when I visited yesterday. For which I am eternally grateful…’

Thomas turned a sweet smile in Janek’s direction.

‘…I only hope that one day I might have the pleasure of telling him where to go.’

‘Right…yes…capital!’ Exclaimed Goodrich, attempting to sound cheerful despite the worry on his face. ‘There’s a good lad.’ He said, indicating in Janek’s direction.

Janek, for his part, was dumbstruck.

‘I see…’ Said Robert slowly, eyeing Thomas as though to silently question if he had missed something.

‘Well My Lord…’ Said Goodrich quickly. ‘…I think our tour is now concluded. Might I invite you to join me in my office for some refreshment while we go over the paperwork?’

‘I think that’s a marvellous idea.’ Said Robert warmly, indicating for Goodrich to lead the way.

Thomas turned towards the exit, resisting the temptation to glance over his shoulder. He did however allow himself to linger until he heard the tell-tale clang of a visor being thrown onto the floor. Satisfied that the man was sufficiently pissed, Thomas merrily followed the group of administrators out back into the sunshine; towards the promise of some much needed tipple.

‘Oi!’

Thomas’s head gave a slight tilt to one side then the other. Considering…

‘Oi!’ The voice was louder this time, though still quiet enough that only Thomas would hear.

He could have just ignored him. Could have just continued walking behind the administrators, onwards and upwards to Goodrich’s office.

But where was the fun in that?
‘Yes, Janek.’ Said Thomas, turning around with another sickly smile, squinting his eyes against the bright sunlight.

‘You…’ Janek stopped, panting to get his breath back after the brief chase. ‘…you…’ He tried again. ‘What was that?’ He eventually said, surprising Thomas with the seemingly earnest nature of the question. He didn’t sound angry, just curious.

‘What?’ Thomas queried simply, not willing to waste good words. He took a step back to put a little more distance between them on the off chance that Janek’s temper returned and somehow managed to overrule his senses.

‘What was that?’ Janek repeated, unhelpfully.

Thomas gave him a dull look.

Janek glanced awkwardly at the floor.

‘What did I do?’ He said eventually, avoiding Thomas’s gaze.

Something of a lightbulb went on in Thomas’s head. He recognised that lost look.

‘Ah, to annoy Lord Grantham?’ Said Thomas.

‘Yes.’

Thomas shrugged. ‘Spoke to him.’

‘What…really?’ Said Janek, meekness fleeing to be replaced by incredulity, his head snapping back up to its usual position.

‘Mmmm.’ Thomas said, doing his level best to look down his nose at the man. ‘Before being introduced.’ He made an exaggerated tutting noise.

Thomas watched Janek falter again, watched the cogs in the man’s head clunking together as he attempted to reconcile this information with prior knowledge, buried somewhere deep within his mind.

Thomas felt a little bad.

Truth be told Thomas thought it defeated the point of the upper classes sharing activities and visits with the working ones if they couldn’t speak as equals (within reason) in the process. And he knew Robert was one of the few who did stand by that philosophy, particularly when it came to cricket.

But Janek didn’t need to know that.

‘Don’t feel too badly.’ Thomas continued. ‘You haven’t spoiled your chances at an introduction… His Lordship wouldn’t have wanted to speak with you anyway.’

‘Why wouldn’t he want to speak with me?’ Said Janek, his wide eyes all the more starkly pale against the dirt on his face. His voice was low and measured, and he accompanied the question with a few steps forwards that had Thomas quickly taking a few more back.

Thomas recognised Janek’s intention. His intention was to press the question (that Janek, if he had half a brain, already knew the answer to) in order to push Thomas into balking from voicing the truth. The truth was cruel, and Janek clearly had designs on watching Thomas struggle away from it.
Of course, he hadn’t reckoned on Thomas himself.

‘Because you are poor, uneducated, badly dressed and in desperate desperate need of a bath.’

To Thomas’s disappointment Janek didn’t look nearly as crushed by the diatribe as he had hoped. In fact he almost seemed amused.

Thomas took another step back as Janek advanced forwards. The man was still a few good arm-lengths away but Thomas wasn’t taking any chances.

‘Say that last bit again.’ Janek said.

‘What?’ Said Thomas, sidestepping and taking another step back as Janek continued to come closer. ‘That you’re in desperate need of a…’

Thomas had no time to draw breath, let alone finish his sentence, as his feet stepped back into thin air; sending him off the wall and into the water.

A few seconds later and Thomas’s head breached the surface. Spitting out scum and twigs and all other manner of the Mersey’s filth, he stared up in shock and blazing anger at the man who had sent him there.

‘Oh, oh hey there…there sir!’ Called Janek in fake alarm. ‘Can you get to that ladder there sir? Careful there!’

The loud shouts drew an audience of dozens.

The calamity of the crowds drew back Goodrich and Robert.

Thomas promised himself that should he contract a disease from the putrid water he would make it his business to share it with each and every one of them.

Clenching his jaw shut tight against its sudden annoying desire to wobble, Thomas groped his way through the scummy water and over to the rungs of metal set directly into the wall by way of ladder.

Getting himself to the top was quite some undertaking. And he realised as soon as he did that his hat was still floating below in the water.

There was no power on the earth that would send him back down there to get it.

He flopped himself up onto the wall before climbing to his feet with intense difficulty.

He tried to avoid breathing, or at least to avoid doing so through his nose, and utterly refused to look down at himself. He could feel the slime of the harbour sliding down from his hair to his neck, and thenceforth under his collar. And that was quite enough trauma without seeing what filth had inserted itself between his coat and the lapels of his favourite suit.

He was deeply troubled to realise he could cry. Actually cry.

Precisely why, he wasn’t sure. But the titters of laughter from the gathered crowds didn’t help.

‘You two…’ Goodrich’s voice rang out. Thomas looked up to see him indicating towards two of the dockers. ‘…show Mr…’

‘Barrow.’ Thomas said softly.
‘…Mr Barrow to the stand pumps.’ He said. ‘I imagine he is eager to…wash up.’

Thomas felt too numb to retort, not even in the safety of his own head.

He followed the two men into an outdoor yard where a series of hand-operated pumps were free standing in the centre.

‘Do you need one of us to…?’ The man to his right began, indicating the handle of the nearest pump.

‘No.’ Thomas barked at him, so sharply that both men made a hasty retreat.

Thomas ripped off his coat, his shoes, his glove… He alternated between his need to get the slimy clothes off and his need to sluff off the filth in general. He pumped out gushing measures of icy water with one hand while sticking his head, shoulders and as much else of his body under it as possible. Then he ripped at his jacket. Then he stuck himself under the pump.

Then the waistcoat. He winced as he threw it down on the floor, certain he had just broken his watch (assuming it had survived his swan-dive).

His clothes squelched under his feet as he attempted to wrest some of the gunk out of the fabric while also frantically rinsing himself.

He got himself caught half in, half out, of his shirt in his desperation to keep one hand free to operate the pump.

He forced himself to stop.

Throwing the formerly white (now off-grey/brown) shirt viciously down onto the growing pile of ruined clothes he allowed himself a moment of rest, stretching out his hands to hold himself up against the pump he bowed his head. If tears were going to be allowed to come, it would be in that moment.

But at the sound of an exaggerated cough from across the yard the urge to cry rapidly fled – to be replaced by another urge entirely.
Chapter 4

The side of Thomas’s jaw twitched dangerously as he turned around to find Janek standing by the side of the yard.

‘You holding those rags for a reason?’ Said Thomas scathingly, indicating the sloppily folded clothes that Janek held in his outstretched arms.

Janek smiled. His face momentarily the very image of a cheeky twelve year old boy (assuming a demon or the devil had taken possession of said twelve year old). That smile was a disconcerting sight to see, especially perched atop the leanly-muscled bulk of the man.

But Thomas was far to pissed to care.

‘You know why. Else…’ Janek drawled. ‘…things are apt to get chilly for you.’ The smile still firmly in place, Janek’s gaze flicked down Thomas’s torso. His attention lingered on the prominent nub of a nipple visible in the wide V shape left by Thomas’s unbuttoned shirt. ‘Well…chillier.’ Janek concluded with a snort, sweeping his eyes back up to Thomas’s face.

Thomas resisted the urge to clamp his arms shut tight around his chest. He resisted the urge to turn away in embarrassment.

He also resisted the urge to pick up an item of sodden clothing from the floor and hurl it in Janek’s direction.

In the end he merely ripped off the dank shirt and added it to the pile of clothes at his feet, slapping it down onto the floor with gusto by way of defiance, leaving himself in only his trousers and undershirt.

‘Someone’s in a tizzy.’ Janek slowly sang out the words as he stepped closer, fresh clothes still held out in offer.

That was it.

Thomas lurched.

Head down, eyes forwards.

He stormed forwards.

Hair dripping wetness down his lowered face. Shoulders tense enough to crack stone. Fingers unclenched to gouge not punch. His feet planted too firmly to slip on the clothes or water beneath them.

And then, as rapidly as he had lurched, he halted. Whether drawn back by personal preference, good sense or years of reverse-conditioning; the effect was the same. He halted as swiftly as if the limits of an invisible chain had been reached; jerking him back towards the pump.

But not before Janek practically fell over his own feet in an effort to flee backwards from the charge-path of Thomas’s sudden and unexpectedly feral anger.

Thomas turned away. He forced his breathing to slow. He lowered his head and neck into the water stream under the pump.
His shoulders rose and fell steadily under Janek’s stunned gaze.

‘Well I…’ Janek began, trailing off into a nervous laugh. ‘I suppose…um…’ He tried again, evidently distracted by the hammering of his heart.

Thomas could tell that both Janek’s breathing and his pulse were still going a mile a minute but he took little pleasure from this. He was too busy working on calming himself down. And feeling intensely troubled that he had lost control, however briefly, in the first place.

That just wasn’t…*him*.

Never him.

Thomas was unsurprised to hear the sound of Janek’s footsteps slowly approaching. Of course the cretin would attempt to regain ground, literally, for the sake of pride.

Well he had pride too.

Thomas extracted his face from the streaming water and drew up to his full height.

He found himself practically nose to nose with Janek’s sharp features.

Thomas could only hope that the freezing temperature of the water that now clung to his skin and clothes was seeping into whatever body heat Janek had. It seemed only fitting that the man should share in his discomfort.

But only that specific type of discomfort.

Thomas could read Janek’s still thundering pulse in the trembling at his throat; a lingering alarm at the threat of physical violence.

Far from exciting him, the evidence of Janek’s fear sent Thomas’s anger to the wayside.

Thomas didn’t like that distressed quiver, and he didn’t like that he was the cause. Not one bit.

Unthinking, he reached out his hand to press against the distressed skin to soothe it.

So focused was he on this singular task that he missed the widening of the other man’s eyes; missed the look on his face entirely.

So much so that the lips that suddenly found his were a complete shock.

‘Bloody…FUCK!’ Thomas pulled away as though he were scalded not frozen. ‘Fuck, just…WHAT?’ He demanded, his eyes flashing fiercely.

‘Oh I…’ Said Janek, gaping at the floor. ‘I…nothing…’ He stepped back. ‘I…I’ll just…’ He turned, looking frantically about him for a flat surface and most definitely looking anywhere but Thomas. ‘…put these here.’ He set down the bundle of clothes with trembling hands.

In the blink of an eye, Janek was across the yard and out the door.

Thomas was left alone to stand and stare.

And to attempt to answer his own questions regarding ‘WHAT the bloody FUCK?’
Chapter 5

He was wearing someone else’s clothes.

And no underwear.

Thomas could recall precisely two occasions on which this had happened previously. First, during the great Downton laundry crisis of ’07. And second during the summer of ’09 when he and a distant nephew of the royals had been unexpectedly interrupted in flagrante during a London season.

In the case of the latter Thomas had to hastily borrow an outfit in order to pose as a wealthy something-or-other to give the illusion that his presence in the man’s private chambers could have had a potentially legitimate business purpose. He was never admitted to the man’s house again.

The small plus point was that Thomas got to keep the outfit.

But, Thomas thought, looking down darkly at the unfamiliar clothes, there was absolutely no plus point to be found in the present situation.

His ex-suit (he was nigh on sure there was no saving it) hung limply over the long wooden rail that ran along one side of the yard, likewise his coat and underthings. Logic told him to simply ball the lot of them up into a bundle ready to take back to the hotel, but a small (illogical) part of him hoped that somehow his clothes would magically dry (and clean themselves) while he waited for Robert – thus allowing him to walk away from the docks with at least the tiny bit of dignity that wearing one’s own clothes can afford.

Besides, he really didn’t want Lord Grantham to see him like this. Coarse brown trousers with thick suspenders that had been cack-handedly sewn directly into the fabric of the waistband and a creased tan coloured shirt that billowed and puffed out in all directions…He had a feeling Robert would find it funny and his lip curled at the thought.

Plus his hair was a disaster.

The front bangs were long and tickled at his eyes, dripping water on his cheeks. He had no pomade. And of course there was nothing he was likely to find nearby that would form (to him) an acceptable substitute. He hadn’t realised how much his vision relied upon a handful of grease. He blinked away the water droplets and flicked his hair back. A few errant strands fell instantly forwards again.

Thomas growled.

The way he saw it he had two choices.

He could either stay where he was, in the damp yard, cold, away from what little relief the sun could bring were he to venture out into the open dock area. Or he could step out and find somewhere to wait until Robert was finished, but run the risk of running into…well…anyone. And he really didn’t want to see ‘anyone’.

In the end the chill in his bones made his mind up for him.

Clutching the contents of his ex-pockets in his hands, he left his clothes hanging there as he made his way out of the shadowy yard.

He deliberately turned away from the noise and the bustle as he emerged onto the waterfront area.
and set off in search of solitude.

A short while of searching later and he’d found a safe haven on a series of concrete steps, in the sun but out of the way, and largely shielded by a building that jutted almost to the edge of the sea wall and hid him from the crush of dock workers beyond.

He sat down with more gusto than intended, his tail bone giving a brief gasp of pain.

Gingerly he laid out the items he had salvaged from his pockets on the stone step beside him. He noted grimly that the two most important items had fared badly. The watch…well he hadn’t managed to crack it while climbing out (or when throwing his waistcoat on the floor) but it had stopped, and his cigarettes were sodden.

Thomas wondered if he took one of the cigarettes carefully out of the pack and laid it in the sun it might dry out enough for him to smoke. He very much wanted a smoke. And he was definitely not going to ask a docker for one. No sir. Definitely bloody not.

In the end he just sat there, watching the light of the sun creeping slowly over the water and the bricks of the buildings.

He promised himself the luxury of suppressing the entire memory of the day upon reaching the safety of his hotel room.

Hell, he’d happily expunge his recollection of the entire trip once he got back to Downton.

He was having shit luck in a shit place…

Thomas picked up the packet of wrecked cigarettes and lobbed them the few yards over the concrete and into the water.

He rested his elbows on his knees and swayed a little, back and forth, muttering sourly to himself about the docks, about Liverpool, about the many deficiencies of the place that he had observed and imagined.

Godforsaken…

Thomas took a deep breath and occupied himself with watching the steady motion of the water that stretched out to the horizon beyond. It was still a sickly grey colour, but at least he was unable to smell it now – given that the essence of it was still lodged up his nostrils.

It was during this moment of odd tranquillity that a shadow fell briefly over the warmth of the sun. A lone man approached.

Thomas glanced dully in the direction of the interloper. Not that he needed to in order to identify him. The way his luck was going it could only be one of two people.

And he imagined Robert was most likely still chewing Goodrich’s ear off over drinks.

Thomas sighed, watching Janek’s cautious approach with distinct disinterest. He was too drained to do anything else.

Janek slowly lowered himself to sit beside him.

Thomas redirected his gaze forwards across the water.

‘It’s possible that I owe you an apology.’ Said Janek quietly.
Thomas snorted.

‘What you *owe* me is six pence a beer and a new suit.’ He retorted sharply, his eyes unwavering from the sea.
‘You won’t tell anyone, will you?’

‘Depends...’ Said Thomas, avoiding Janek’s amusingly pained gaze with all his might. ‘You going to pay for the suit?’

Janek huffed, strumming his fingers nervously against the stone step beneath him.

‘I meant about the other thing.’

Thomas clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth.

He stared out at the dancing water ahead, rubbing his palms together to satisfy the urge to fidget in the absence of a much needed smoke.

Of course he knew what Janek meant. And when it came to that he absolutely couldn’t, in good conscience, mess him about.

But that didn’t mean he couldn’t keep him squirming a good long while before responding.

‘I dunno...’ Thomas said, missing his personal lapse into poor grammar. He turned to Janek, unsurprised to find those increasingly familiar green eyes latch immediately onto his own, and gave a shrug. ‘...I figured you liked the taste of rancid water.’ He let his facial expression soften for the briefest moment. ‘That’s all.’

Janek let out a gasp so potent it sent his entire upper body doubling forward.

‘Oh...’ He said happily, caught somewhere between a laugh and a sigh.

Despite himself, the corners of Thomas’s lips gave a slight upwards quirk.

Janek’s intense and joyful gratitude was strangely infectious.

‘Oh...’ Janek said again, shaking his head in relief as he gave over to the half-formed chuckles. ‘Ahhh ...’ He wheezed as he settled himself down, briefly turning a startling smile in Thomas’s direction. ‘...Suppose you could say I like the taste of quite a few things I shouldn’t.’ He laughed, giving Thomas’s shoulder a gentle knock with his own, before leaning away to pluck something out of his trouser pocket.

Thomas was too distracted to note that Janek had pulled out a pouch of rolling tobacco.

In fact that last sentence briefly had him too distracted to remember his own name.

The smell of damp tobacco leaves being waved about under his nostrils brought him back to reality with a start.

‘Thank you.’ Thomas said automatically, accepting the offered pouch with an annoyingly unsteady hand.

‘Do you need me to…?’ Janek mimed rolling a cigarette with both thumbs.

‘No.’ Thomas replied, making it his business to roll the neatest cigarette of his life under Janek’s intense gaze.
Thomas found himself greatly appreciating the orange glow of the tip once it was lit.

He appreciated the taste of the smoke even more, breathing out the unfamiliar flavour towards the horizon with gusto. He only just about remembered to return the tobacco to Janek.

‘Thank you.’ He said again as he passed it back. His eyes couldn’t help but trace out the shine of the burn marks up the solid muscle of Janek’s outstretched arm as he did so.

‘No…’ Said Janek, immediately propping the pouch open on his lap to make his own cigarette. ‘…thank you! Believe me!’

‘Don’t change the fact you owe me a…’ Thomas looked round just in time to catch the deft lick Janek gave to the paper of his roll-up. ‘…a…a new…um…’

‘New suit?’ Janek chipped in, unknowingly saving him. ‘Eh, I didn’t push you and you know it.’ He said, neatly clicking his lighter and watching the flame for a moment before bringing it to the tip of his cigarette. ‘And there’s a hundred lads who know the same.’

Thomas gave a disdainful sniff. He looked away, his mood darkening considerably at the frustrating truth in Janek’s words.

‘Cheer up.’ Janek said merrily. Thomas couldn’t help but marvel at the speed with which the man had recovered his usual infuriating self. ‘It’s not just you.’ He leaned lazily back on his elbows, head tilted back to rest on the step behind, stretching his legs out in front of him. ‘That Lord Grantham fellow…’

That got Thomas’s attention.

‘What did you do?’

‘Sorry, that reminds me, Grantham headed home a half hour ago. Goodrich said to tell you if you go find the porter by the loading bay he’ll order a car for you too when you’re ready. Grantham probably didn’t fancy getting into a car with you in case you were still smelling of…’

‘Lord…’ Said Thomas sharply. ‘Lord Grantham.’

Janek gave him an amused sideways glance, deliberately declining to repeat the name following Thomas’s correction.

‘What did you do?’ Thomas repeated.

Got Liam to unscrew the bolts on the car step…’ Said Janek with a snort. ‘…sent the sod reeling sideways into a puddle when he tried to get into it!’

Thomas closed his eyes, a palm automatically coming up to connect with his forehead (thankfully not the hand carrying the lit cigarette).

‘What?’ Said Janek, halting mid laugh. ‘Oh come on…you have to admit it’s a funny thought.’

Thomas’s hand remained firmly fixed to his forehead.

Janek frowned.

‘You’re not laughing?’ He said, seemingly in genuine confusion.

‘Since I’m the poor sod who has to clean his suit…’ Thomas threw his half-finished cigarette down
the steps and into the water with vigour. ‘…No, I’m not laughing.’

‘Oh…’

‘Mmmmm.’

‘You clean his clothes?’ Said Janek.

‘What?’

‘His clothes. You clean them?’

‘Yes.’ Said Thomas. ‘And him if he’s feeling particularly lazy.’

‘That’s disgusting…’ Said Janek, his face momentarily contorting into an expression of intense discomfort. ‘…So…What are you, exactly?’

‘A pissed-off man wearing someone else’s clothes.’ Said Thomas, deciding that prematurely discarding his smoke for dramatic effect had been a mistake.

He went to pluck the tobacco pouch off Janek’s lap without waiting to be offered. Janek let him.

‘No, I’m serious.’ Said Janek, raising an eyebrow.

‘So am I.’ Said Thomas stubbornly, lowering his chin to glower at Janek through his lashes.

Janek’s eyebrow remained raised. Thomas’s chin remained lowered.

Thomas sighed. ‘I suppose you’d say I’m his…man servant.’ He said reluctantly. ‘At least for the purposes of this trip.’

‘My god.’ Janek said softly. ‘For you that seems very…odd.’

Thomas debated protesting that Janek didn’t actually know him well enough to make that statement. But, he reasoned, he couldn’t really deny a lack of subservience and an overabundance of self-importance based on their brief acquaintance. Still, his mind continued to ponder, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that Carson had a greater sense of pride and decorum than Robert at times…So really, his personal pride shouldn’t automatically preclude him from…

Thomas shook the thoughts away, silently cursing Janek’s ability to inspire introspection.

‘I have a varied role.’ Thomas said by way of explanation. ‘Some days running his bath, some days running his whole house.’

Janek nodded. ‘That does sound varied.’ He said with a touch of humor.

‘Serve food, greet guests, manage staff, order supplies, clean clothes…’ Thomas wasn’t sure why he felt the need to rattle off the list to Janek, but nevertheless the list continued to babble on for an uncomfortably long time. ‘…light lamps, load guns…’ The flapping cuff of the borrowed shirt caught the cigarette in his fingers, knocking hot ash onto his skin ‘…BOLLOCKS!’ He hissed in pain.

Janek gave a sympathetic hiss of his own.

‘Here…’ Said Janek, motioning for Thomas to slide closer. When Thomas failed to move, he moved himself, coming in very close. He took hold of the shirt cuff, rolling it up until Thomas’s forearm
was, like his own, exposed.

‘Is it hard work to stay this pale?’ Said Janek wryly, running a light finger down the skin of Thomas’s inner arm. Thomas was too preoccupied with deciding whether the smell of the man ranked as rancid or tantalising to his nostrils to respond.

The afternoon sun was beginning to fade and Thomas couldn’t help but notice the way the half-light darkened Janek’s eyes; intensifying his gaze as he looked intently down at the fabric as he worked on the second sleeve.

He also couldn’t help but note the strain of Janek’s shoulders against the fabric of his own shirt from this new vantage point.

So much so that he didn’t notice that Janek had completed his task and had kept hold of his left arm longer than necessary until it was too late to pull it back.

‘What’s this?’ Said Janek, moving his light grip down to Thomas’s hand to keep it in place. He stared intently at the gun-shot wound evident at both the front and back of Thomas’s hand. ‘You load his gun and he shoots you, is that it?’ He said with a hint of amusement.

‘He’s a bit eager to get going at the Grouse at times.’ Said Thomas, surprising himself at the ease with which the lie tripped off his tongue.

‘Christ.’ Said Janek, relinquishing his hold on Thomas’s hand. ‘Ooooh, I’d have killed him!’

Thomas withdrew his hand silently, eager to let that particular topic drop.

‘So, is it just ‘Mr Barrow’ or do you have another name?’

That question seemed oddly personal coming from Janek.

Still, Thomas complied.

‘It’s Thomas. But don’t call me that…Is it just ‘Janek’ or do you have another name?’ He added, by way of regaining ground.

‘Janek Biel.’

‘Right.’ Said Thomas.

‘It’s Polish, but I’m not. I’m English.’ Janek quickly added.

‘I hadn’t thought…’ Thomas began, blinking at the odd firmness of Janek’s assertion.

‘Well, I’m English.’

‘I didn’t say you weren’t.’

‘Good. Because I am.’

‘Alright.’

‘Exactly.’

‘So, what did you think my job was?’ Thomas said quickly, eager to segue out of that particular loop. ‘A clerk, a manager, a barrister…?’ He took great pains to appear nonchalant despite being
oddly invested in hearing Janek’s response.

‘Don’t know.’ Janek shrugged, leaning in to retrieve his tobacco.

Thomas was annoyed. And he was annoyed at his being annoyed. What did it matter what the man thought?

‘You owe me.’ He said sharply, reverting easily into the role of angry victim. ‘Those beers…my clothes…you owe me.’

Janek gave a dry laugh.

‘This isn’t funny.’ Thomas retorted.

‘It is a bit.’ Said Janek.

‘I don’t see how.’

‘I couldn’t cover the cost even if I wanted to.’ Said Janek in a blankly matter of fact tone. ‘And if you don’t return those…’ He indicated Thomas’s borrowed attire. ‘…when you’re done with them I’ll be in a far greater state of inconvenience than you are now.’

Thomas looked down at himself, feeling strangely numb at the revelation of the garments’ owner.

‘Thought skilled labourers got paid better than that.’ Said Thomas, deliberately keeping the comment vague to allow Janek the dignity of pretending it related to his debt rather than the pitiful state of his wardrobe.

‘I have a mother.’ Said Janek absently.

‘Right…’ Said Thomas slowly, waiting to see if further explanation was forthcoming.

It wasn’t.

‘Well, word to the wise…’ Thomas continued. ‘…I’d stop costing other people money if you’ve got none to spare for yourself.’

‘Aye, but that’s where the fun is, ain’t it?’ Said Janek, turning to him with a grin. The grin faded as he took in Thomas’s bleak expression. His eyes darted down to the bullet scar. ‘It’s just, you didn’t look like a serv…I mean, perhaps I shouldn’t have…assumed…’ He trailed off.

‘You shouldn’t have done anything.’ Said Thomas. ‘I just wanted to get in and out of here with as few breaths as possible.’ He added, his anger rising. ‘And you’re a pain in the damn arse.’

‘You give as good as you get.’ Janek said without missing a beat. Thomas heard the hint of warmth, even respect, in his voice but chose to categorically disregard it. However despite his best intentions he just couldn’t retort with as much venom as he would have liked.

‘Obviously not. Else I wouldn’t be sitting here with some weird-named, filth-coated twat.’

‘That’s a bit uncouth.’ Janek said wryly.

‘Well…’

They were looking at one another, really looking. And Thomas didn’t care for the way his breath quickened as they did so.
‘…I should go.’

He was on his feet in a matter of moments, only just remembering to gather his rescued belongings as an afterthought.

‘Course.’ Said Janek, getting to his feet as well. ‘Want me to tell the porter you want a car? You know, while you collect your clothes?’

‘Yes, you do that.’ Said Thomas. ‘And if the step comes off as I climb in I’ll ram the metal through your throat.’

‘Duly noted.’ Said Janek with a wink. ‘Will you bring these back tomorrow?’ He added, indicating the loaned clothes with a sweep of his hand.

‘I’ll…I’ll send a courier.’ Said Thomas curtly.

‘Very well.’ Said Janek, looking awkwardly at the floor. ‘You know…if I won’t see you again I feel a bit like I should…’ He looked up and extended his hand for Thomas to shake.

Thomas didn’t take it.

‘You sort the car, I’ll get my things.’ He said.

Janek gave a small nod.

The car step didn’t give way as Thomas used it.

He slipped inside the car and closed the door softly.

For the first time he looked over his shoulder at the dock buildings as they slipped out of sight; running his hands absently up and down the unfamiliar fabric on his thigh as he did so.
The small pile of coarse borrowed clothing became something of an unwelcome spectre throughout the next day. When Thomas woke, when he dressed, when he returned to his room for his coat or to give his hair a quick comb, there it was; a small pile of rubbish sitting atop an expensive chair.

Thomas resented it’s presence as a constant reminder of why his every spare moment that day was taken up with trying to exorcise filthy water and pavement dirt from his and Robert’s clothing.

Lord Grantham, of course, had managed to maintain his enthusiasm for the docks despite his accident.

This did nothing for Thomas’s mood, but on the plus side left Robert eager to accept the three visiting invitations he received that day (no doubt so he could brag about his acquisitions to a more rapt audience) which got him out of Thomas’s hair.

The thought of despoiling the clothes that Janek had leant occurred to Thomas multiple times during the day; all the more frequently so after a quick sniff of his newly washed suit still revealed a nauseating hint of Mersey.

He even planned how he would do it. There were multiple buckets and vats of unfortunate content down in the underbelly of the hotel, both by the washrooms and by the kitchen. And he had a good stout pair of scissors right there in his room. In fact he found his fingertips loosely clutching at them when he came out of his reverie.

But even in his intense annoyance he knew that wrecking the outfit would only be for his own benefit. Janek wouldn’t see the results. Vengeful though he may be feeling, Thomas knew with absolute certainty that he lacked the cruelty to return the clothes as damaged goods. If he wrecked them, he simply wouldn’t return them at all. Let Janek think what he will.

He eventually arrived at the conclusion that taking the time to destroy the clothes would be beneath him. He and Lord Grantham were done with the docks now and disposing of the clothing as quickly as possible would sever that last remaining irritating link. It wasn’t like he would ever have to see Janek again.

By the time Thomas returned to his room late that afternoon he was fully resolved to toss the clothes straight into the bin, or out the window, he wasn’t fussy.

But the pitiful look and feel of the shirt as he bunched it in his hand instantly crumbled his resolve.

It was a sad piece of clothing.

Thomas supposed the other one Janek owned must be similar, but had been rather too pre-occupied by the man in it to really give it much thought. Now, as he held the oversized, shapeless and age-discoloured fabric aloft he was put uncomfortably in mind of an ageing relative that his father and mothers had once taken him to visit back in Manchester.

Thomas could still remember the poor look of the room, and the person in it. They had worn a shirt not dissimilar to this under a raggedy red dressing gown. He could also still remember his father poking him in the back and hissing ‘say thank you, say thank you’ when the emaciated figure in the red dressing gown had presented he and his siblings with a single measly farthing to share between them. Thomas couldn’t remember if he had said thank you or not, but the memory made him shudder on several accounts.
He threw the shirt back down on top of the trousers and took himself away to the window.

He breathed in deep of the city air, not taking the time to hate it, and attempted to clear his head.

The clothes would have to go back. That was the annoying truth.

Thomas surprised himself with how easily he accepted that thought once it was fully formed.

But then, of course, there was the issue of how.

The sending of a courier would have a similar effect to consigning the clothes to the rubbish; namely that all ties to the docker and his docks would be neatly and immediately severed.

But there was something else. And Thomas realised he had raised his hand to press his fingers against his lips before he had gotten so far as to name it. He let his eyes loose themselves in the cityscape beyond the hotel window for a moment before returning his mind to the thing. To the kiss - if something so brief could be afforded the title.

Thomas’s fingers balled into a fist that he kept pressed to his mouth.

It was an offer. Plain and simple. The man had made an offer.

Thomas had to admit he found it problematic (not to mention irritating) to reconcile that with Janek’s earlier enthusiastic pursuit of making his time at the docks hell. And the man was undeniably an infuriating bastard, and proud of it.

But the kiss was somehow separate.

Unlike everything else Janek had done (including offering him spare clothes he knew he would find distasteful to wear) the kiss wasn’t done with malicious intent. Of that Thomas was absolutely certain.

And the combination of Janek’s horrified expression when he rejected it, and the lack of jeering spectators popping out the shadows that he had half expected, seemed quite solid confirmation of the same.

So, was he interested in Janek?

In an abstract sense he had to admit the answer was yes. If nothing else he craved the chance to test the yield of Janek’s shoulders to fingertips and teeth. Thomas’s abdomen gave a little contraction at the thought. Yes, there was an interest there.

And Thomas had always had a respect, or at the very least a grudging appreciation, for people who knew what they were about. And the mischievous trickster he’d found in Janek clearly had a capacity for free thinking and arrogance that almost surpassed his own.

He could imagine any mutual encounter between the two of them would be…interesting.

But still, it was a large leap (or downwards climb) to make in order to consider a man who spent his days coated in sweat and filth, and who hadn’t two pennies to rub together, as a potential bedfellow. Thomas supposed that the last part, about money, didn’t really come into it for what he was considering – it was just hard to break away from the fact that his previous liaisons had all been with men who had wallets equally as large as their egos.

But it had been a long time, longer than he cared to admit to himself, since any such liaison had been
He fought to quell the old adage of ‘beggars can’t be choosers’ from his mind as he considered the fact that he was long overdue for a bit of enjoyment. And, after all, he and Robert were only around for one more day.

No sooner had he set his mind on the possibility, a quick glance back at the pitiful clothing quelled it. He couldn’t have touched those clothes except in great need. So how on earth could he consider touching their owner?

In the end, the only thing he resolved upon was that he would take the clothes back to Janek himself.

His powers of decision making were unable to stretch further for the present.
Chapter 8

The early evening proved to be so confusing that the choice of whether or not to return the clothes was almost taken out of Thomas’s hands. Getting Lord Grantham prepared for a theatre trip, which was somehow commuted to a private residential soiree at the last moment, took so long that darkness was threateningly imminent by the time Thomas had seen him off.

Thomas didn’t have a clue of the working hours down at the docks. But logic dictated that if they hadn’t already done so, the workers would almost certainly be leaving at dusk. Which meant the chances of catching Janek still at the docks were getting slimmer by the minute.

Thomas bustled back into his room in a panic; the level of which his brain gruffly informed him was vastly disproportionate to the level of crisis.

So what if he didn’t take the clothes back to Janek tonight? Wouldn’t it do the man good to stew for a day and worry?

Still, Thomas didn’t even pause to change out of his Valet wear (merely throwing his still pungent coat over the top) before snatching up the clothes bundle and harrying back out the door.

Thomas hadn’t the foggiest idea on what the acceptable means to call a car was in Liverpool, but he soon found a sharp whistle and flailing of his hand did the trick.

It wasn’t until he was in the car that he realised what an inelegant spectacle he had made of himself. The thought made him cringe.

‘Can you drop me down at the bottom?’ Thomas called to the driver as they approached the loading area, eager not to waste the chance of travelling even twenty or so feet faster than he would by walking.

The driver did, and Thomas was out the door before the man could begin to turn the car about to park and ready for the return journey. Thomas practically threw payment at him and informed him ‘not to wait’ with a quick shout over his shoulder as he began to walk briskly through the throng of slightly bewildered men milling about the cranes.

Again, Thomas realised, he was probably making something of a show of himself.

And that was disregarding the fact that a number of the blokes had probably seen him take a swim the previous day.

He couldn’t hope to pass unnoticed through the crowds of workers, jet black and crisp white clothing in a sea of rusty brown saw to that, but he resolved to make it look a little less like he was in a desperate hurry in the cause of saving at least a little face.

For want of a better plan, Thomas made his way along the walkways or the dry docks and turned in the direction of the boiler workshop where he and the tour group had unexpectedly encountered Janek the previous day.

There were a large amount of men heading in the opposite direction to Thomas, so much so that he was having to pay very close attention to avoid another fall (and the lack of water in the dry docks was apt to make the landing even less pleasant than before).

It was clearly ‘quitting time’. 
Despite Thomas’s best effort, he couldn’t be sure of picking Janek out of the crowd if he was already on his way home.

Still, he pressed onwards towards the workshop and was eventually rewarded by the sight of a dozen or so men hanging about outside the door. The large glass bottles they were passing around occasionally caught a gleam off the lamp affixed to the adjacent wall, but otherwise the lamp did little in the dusky grey, leaving the figures largely in shadow.

Nevertheless he recognised Janek embarrassingly quickly despite his back being turned.

With a sigh caught somewhere between relief and pleasure, Thomas hastened the speed of his footsteps to approach.

The man to the right of Janek noticed him first. He turned about with a smile as though expecting to be joined by a friend only to reign himself in sharply and scowl suspiciously at the well-dressed stranger.

‘What?’ Came the sullen demand.

Thomas was too taken aback to be angry at the man’s rudeness. ‘I was just…’

‘Evening!’ Janek’s cheerful voice cut lightly into the thick air between the two of them. ‘Oh you brought them.’ He said, all but snatching the bundle of clothes out from Thomas’s arm. ‘Hey, you’re going back to the room aren’t you?’ He continued, addressing the ill-tempered man and all but ignoring Thomas, who stood by feeling rather redundant.

‘Before pub? Yes.’

‘Good.’ Janek tugged the bottle out of the man’s grip with one hand and thrust the clothes towards him with the other. ‘Toss them on my bed will you?’

Thomas could recognise the hint to leave, but he wasn’t sure if the sullen man was blessed with equivalent deductive skills.

Thankfully one of the other men chose that moment to pipe up.

‘Let’s be getting off, else we waste the night.’ The man declared, raising the cap in his hand like a banner as he marched off into the night.

With only minimal hesitation the others followed, almost all with infinitely more enthusiasm than the man who had been pressed into task as Janek’s courier.

‘Drink?’ Said Janek, startling Thomas out of staring at the retreating backs of the others.

Thomas glanced down to the bottle Janek was holding out to him.

‘No.’ He said. ‘Thank you.’ He added.

Janek shrugged and necked a large swig. ‘It’s good stuff.’ He said. ‘You sure?’

‘I’m sure.’ Thomas said, swallowing painfully with a mouth and throat as dry as the Sahara.

‘So?’ Said Janek, wiping away an excess of dribble of drink with the back of his hand.

‘You’re here.’ Janek stated, watching Thomas’s eyes closely as he did so.

‘Yes, I had to return your…’

‘Clothes. Which you’ve returned. Which aren’t here any more ‘cause Liam’s taking them back for me.’ Said Janek briskly. ‘So the clothes aren’t here. You are.’

Thomas was compelled to flick his eyes away from Janek’s intense scrutiny, realising too late that might have been precisely what Janek was watching for.

‘I’m…’ Thomas began, finding the dull silence that had settled on the surrounding docks uncomfortably eerie and craving some source of distraction.

‘You’re what?’ Said Janek softly, but abruptly enough that Thomas was compelled to take a step back and attempt another swallow down his parched throat by way of evasive manoeuvre.

‘I just came to…’ Thomas’s voice trailed off pitifully.

Janek took another large swig from the bottle, watching Thomas closely the entire time. He gave a large belch.

‘Sure you don’t want some?’ He said, rattling the contents of the bottle.

Thomas shook his head.

In the blink of an eye, Janek launched the bottle up in a wide arc through the air. Some distance away it met a wall or a hole and smashed.

Thomas flinched at the sound but noticed that Janek’s attention was no longer on him.

Janek stood stock still, listening.

The only answer was a light rush of wind about the buildings.

‘Good.’ Said Janek, turning his attention back to Thomas. ‘No one about.’

Thomas was ready to protest that spraying broken glass about someone’s place of work was probably not the only way of establishing that, but he was distracted by Janek’s sudden move towards the large metal doors of the workshop.

In a moment Janek had disappeared inside, leaving Thomas standing outside under the lamplight alone.

Thomas watched the door through which Janek had vanished, for a moment not sure if he was hoping to see it slam shut or remain open.

It remained open.

Thomas was only partially conscious of his hands coming up to loosen his suddenly painfully constricting tie as he pondered his options.

He would have preferred something by way of conversation, however veiled and innuendo laden, to establish just what it was that was on offer. As it was he was left solely with silence and uncertainty about what awaited the other side of the door.

But, Thomas reasoned, as the option of returning to his hotel room and quite possibly living through
another decade of celibacy ran through his mind, he did know *enough* about what was on offer.

His tie came away in his hand and he absently stuffed it in his coat pocket as he made for the door.

He glanced over his shoulder as he entered to check there was no one about and was consequently caught off guard by the strong grip that took hold of him from the side as he entered, sliding the door shut with a firm clang behind him.

Thomas struggled to get out of his coat, not just because of the lingering heat of the furnaces in the dark workshop, but because it seemed the thing to do.

Insistent hands helped him in achieving his end before pushing him to the wall.

And there they stood, almost nose to nose, Janek’s hands firmly at his chest, pinning him against the wall with his body, his breathing coming out in short sharp bursts directly against Thomas’s cheek.

The dying glow of the furnaces provided the only light. Not that Thomas’s eyes were open. He didn’t quite trust his eyes not to embarrass him at that particular moment.

That left his other senses free to explode.

He imagined he would have been overpowered by the small of Janek even without the heightening of his sense of smell in the dark. But potent though the scent of a day’s work was, somehow when coupled with Janek’s pressing proximity and the unashamedly excited sounds of his breath it took on a desperately appealing quality.

The space of the workshop around them may have been cavernous, but their world was, for the moment, very small indeed.

They stood there, pushed against one another at the wall, locked in a moment and a physical proximity that was electrifyingly enticing yet technically not beyond any bounds of propriety.

Janek was waiting, Thomas eventually realised, for some sign of partiality.

Thomas let out a puff of air, frustrated at realising he was the reason for the delay, and immediately turned his head just enough to allow the smallest suggestion of contact between their open mouths.

Lips touching with no pressure applied, they shared a breath before one of them (Thomas would later swear it had been him, though it could just as easily have been Janek) sent their mouths crashing together.

Janek’s lips felt thin to his own, but yielded as well as one might wish for when suckled or pressed. And enthusiasm was definitely the watchword of the encounter. The inelegant harshness in the movements of Janek’s lips proved precisely what was needed to shut Thomas’s busy mind right up.

Still backed up against the wall, eyes closed and Janek’s hands holding him firmly in place Thomas allowed himself to get lost in the kiss; leaving his own hands by his sides and letting his mouth be coaxed repeatedly open by Janek’s determined lips.

So pleasantly lost was he in the joys of having someone else unashamedly lead for a change, that he remained fully ignorant that that was what he was doing.

And any worry about what Janek’s clothes and skin might currently be smearing down his uniform (or what his coat might currently be lying in on the floor) remained firmly buried beneath his pleasure.
All too soon, it seemed to Thomas, Janek pulled away.

The hands swept down and away from Thomas’s chest and the pressure of Janek’s torso vanished.

Grudgingly Thomas opened his eyes, and found himself staring at empty air.

‘Oh…’ A quick glance downwards confirmed the location of his companion; kneeling on the floor. Only one side of his face was illuminated in the dim light, but Thomas could tell the man was amused by his confusion. ‘…Hello.’ Said Thomas softly.

‘Hello.’ Janek replied from the floor.

Thomas’s breathing took on a decidedly unsteady rhythm.

‘Going to make me go searching for it are you?’ Said Janek.

No, he most certainly was not.

Cursing the intricacies of his uniform, Thomas attended to the task of getting it open below the belt with a little more gusto than necessary.

So much so that that moment he had himself out of the top of the waistband of his underwear, the clips at the back of his trousers gave out in protest at having been unclipped at the front and sent his trousers down towards his knees.

Thomas growled in annoyance and went to pull them up.

Mid-way his hands met Janek’s, which were travelling in the opposite direction in the cause of sending Thomas’s underwear down to meet his trousers.

Despite his embarrassment Thomas was ready to laugh at the absurdity. But Janek evidently had no time for such frivolity.

Without fuss, Thomas’s length was greedily sucked into his mouth, easily nudging at the back of his throat.

Thomas was instantly taken on two accounts. Firstly that in his experience a man generally tried to flutter around with the lips and the tongue for as long as possible before deigning to take on the tricky task of swallowing whole. And secondly, that Janek really did seem to be swallowing him, or sucking him, rather; as opposed to just providing an impassive receptacle.

But he didn’t have long to ponder this unexpectedly salubrious turn of luck.

Janek’s throat undulated as his lips reached the base, and Thomas happily allowed all blood flow within his body to travel south in order to make the most of this blessed event.

A slip of skin as Janek tugged his head back while maintaining suction had Thomas pitching forwards at the waist, only for Janek to raise up a strong arm to press against his ribs to hold him back against the wall.

There was no part of Janek that Thomas could conveniently touch, save his head, so Thomas was left with no distraction from the knee-numbingly ravenous onslaught.

Janek sucked him down eagerly, never fully relinquishing him from his mouth, keeping as much contact between his tongue and mouth with Thomas’s shaft as possible.
The sensations were strong and alien, Janek’s dedication extraordinary; repeatedly gifting Thomas with filthy reminders, whether it be a wanton moan or his lips burying themselves in the hair at the base of his shaft, or exactly what he was doing to Thomas and what he was allowing Thomas to do to him.

Thomas was soon being vocal too; a first for him given the general need to avoid detection through the thin walls. And he found he rather enjoyed being able to shamelessly vent his erotic frustrations given that Janek was far too preoccupied with his penis to judge him.

When his throat tired of shouting he took to whispering.

He couldn’t….He was just…‘Stupefied’ didn’t begin to cover it.

Somehow he found the strength for a genuinely loud moan as he teetered towards the edge of completion.

But he didn’t quite make it there.

Instead the warm mouth retreated and slowed just enough to bring him back before swallowing him down again with a vengeance.

The second time it happened Thomas was beyond the ability to shout.

The third time Janek brought him to the brink Thomas was near crying with frustration.

But as he was simultaneously experiencing the most pleasurable feeling of his life, he was inclined to forgive the man kneeling before him with his mouth open.

But the fourth time. No. He wasn’t going to let it go again.

‘Come on now.’ He whispered. ‘Let me know.’

Still Janek showed signs of retreating.

A split second flash of madness or, looked at another way, inspiration had Thomas’s hand gripping firmly at the back of Janek’s retreating head.

Despite the depths of his arousal it was a manoeuvre that required permission, for decency’s sake. So he waited to see what the hand Janek had pressed against his ribs would do in response.

The moment Janek lowered it and used it to brace against the wall by the side of Thomas’s hip he knew he had his answer.

With firm thrusts of the hip and a tight hold of Janek’s hair Thomas took full advantage of Janek’s ability to take it, all of it, until he came. Still in him. With colours dancing about before his eyes.

Janek ensured not a drop was wasted, and pressed a kiss to his softened tip once he withdrew.

There were no words.

Thomas slid down the wall to the floor, sitting bare-assed with his trousers still halfway to his knees. He stared across the room with an expression of complete blankness, his chest heaving to keep him conscious, sweating profusely from every pore.

Janek, chuckling, maneuvered to sit down beside him.
‘Was that…?’ Thomas began to ask.

‘Fine.’ Said Janek. Thomas felt one of the tips of Janek’s fingers run down the side of his face. ‘Very fine.’

Thomas turned his head in time to see Janek sucking the taste of his sweat into his mouth.

The sight didn’t repulse him nearly as much as he thought it ought to.

‘Tomorrow?’ Said Thomas, unable to be more communicative.

‘Aye.’ Drawled Janek with a grin.

‘Yes?’ Said Thomas insistently.

‘Yes.’ Came the reply.
Chapter 9

Miracle of miracles, Thomas’s predicament as to the sorry state of his livery was solved with relative ease. Two of the porters caught sight of his dishevelled state on the way in and, recognising a fellow serviceman in need, quickly ushered him down to the laundry facilities where a few cheeky words in the ears of the attendant got Thomas’s clothes put on the top of the pile.

Thomas sat wrapped in a sheet watching the staff bustle about him. He couldn’t help but appreciate the sense of solidarity in their willingness to help him out of an awkward situation with his master, but at the same time he was growing tired of spending his time in Liverpool dirty and not wearing his own clothes.

On the plus side he was able to take the time out to smile not-so-secretly to himself over his very pleasurable evening. Those working on the piles of clothes sent down by the hotel guests and their staff couldn’t help but notice and whispered to one another about the lucky lass who’d managed to nab herself the black-haired handsome bit of dapper.

Robert was back, and sitting reading in the easy-chair beside his bed when a neatly attired Thomas was finally able to make his way safely back up to the rooms.

‘Ah there you are!’ Said Robert, engrossed enough in the paper he was reading to not sound too tetchy at having arrived back from the soiree to find Thomas absent.

‘Apologies for my absence, My Lord.’ Said Thomas smoothly. ‘I do hope you had a pleasant evening…’

Thomas spent precisely no time debating the issue of whether to return to the docks the following day when Robert suggested he take the afternoon off to have the chance to ‘experience the fine city’. Thomas had to work hard to keep the smirk of self-satisfied delight off his face until after he exited Robert’s rooms and was safely by himself.

Even with the time it took to get into his second suit (the one which didn’t still reek of Mersey) and take a leisurely stroll down to the waterfront, Thomas arrived well before quitting time and was greeted with the sight of industry in full swing.

He grimaced at the sight of all the bodies running about across the concrete and cobbles, not to mention the unpleasant sounds and smells that were all encompassing as he made his way along the walkways and down towards the boiler workshop. The thought of taking himself off elsewhere for a couple of hours until work halted at the docks honestly never occurred.

He could see the large doors of the workshop were fully open. From his vantage point he was able to marvel at the distant sight of a large, carefully trussed up, metal object being carefully maneuvered on rollers out of the building.

He easily spied Janek, bounding about at the forefront of the group of men helping to move the huge cylinder. His flat cap was askew on his head and his discoloured shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows. But, of course, in a sea of flat caps and rumpled shirts it was the broad shoulders and narrow waist that assisted Thomas in spying him in the crowd.

Thomas noticed one of the figures standing by the machinery was clad in a grey suit, not dissimilar to his own, and that the man was doing none of the lifting or pushing.

Management. Thomas smiled to himself.
As he drew closer he recognised the man as one of those who had accompanied the original tour he had taken with Lord Grantham around the docks.

That was good. It gave him an excuse for being there. Thomas began mumbling potential conversation starters under his breath as he walked; ready to thank the man, on behalf of Lord Grantham, for such exemplary hospitality during their visit, ahead of their leaving for Downton the following morning.

But the man clearly had other places to be and had begun to move away from the group already as Thomas approached.

Thomas halted in his tracks.

He still hadn’t been noticed by the workers, who were far too preoccupied with the task at hand, and wondered for the first time if he ought to slip away and find a later and less conspicuous time to make his presence known to Janek.

As he watched, he noticed Janek was on the move also. He was making his way after the man in the grey suit.

Thomas frowned, unable to avoid speculating thanks in part to the off-the-cuff recognition that the man was dressed similarly to how he was. His mind arrived quickly at wholly inappropriate and jealously inducing conclusions despite his heart of hearts wanting to gift Janek with more credit than to step away with such a weedy snivel of a man whatever the incentive.

In his peripheral vision he noticed that a man next to the main group had raised his arm. He recognised the man in a moment as the sullen man that Janek had asked to take his clothes back to his lodgings the day before. Liam, Thomas thought he recalled. But he wasn’t wholly sure.

Thomas watched as the man flung his arm forwards, releasing a small stone from his palm in the direction of the grey-suited man.

Thomas’s frown deepened, now accompanied by a confused twist of the head.

The thought hadn’t occurred before, but he now reasoned it was possible that Liam was in a similar position to himself as regards to Janek stalking off with the grey-suited man – though clearly a little less subtle at demonstrating his displeasure.

Thomas had no time to ponder where the assumption that Janek was having it away with every available man had come from before the stone hit the grey-suited man sharply on the back of his neck.

He heard the man give a shout as he clapped a hand to the back of his neck.

At that moment precisely, Janek caught up to him.

‘Oh gracious me!’ Janek cried out in a voice that Thomas knew immediately to be a put on. ‘Those seagulls!’

Thomas snorted. What?

He spied a few smiles (not to mention several men biting their lips) amongst those standing around the machinery as they temporarily abandoned moving the hulking bit of metal in favour of the entertainment. Liam’s severe face wore a look of smug satisfaction as he, like his comrades, watched the grey-suited man turn to Janek in horror at the suggestion that a bird had just excreted its lunch
down the back of his suit.

Thomas’s eyebrows still remained lowered however. He could see the amusement, yes, but the situation didn’t merit nearly as much attention as the other workers were giving.

‘Here, Sir.’ Janek neatly darted behind the man, keeping the man from seeing his face fully, and began to bat at the back of the man’s jacket. ‘I’ll get that sorted for you. Best get that off you right away, Sir.’

Each touch of Janek’s hand to the man’s crisp grey jacket left behind a black paw print of grease.

‘Oh!’ Thomas said to himself, giving a loud sigh of relief that turned into a laugh half-way through. Now he got it.

And he, like the other onlookers, endeavoured to keep full on chuckles at bay lest the grey-suited man catch on.

Janek managed almost a dozen swipes at the man’s back before the man batted him away and stomped off. Janek waited until the man was well out of sight before turning back to the workers, arms raised in a gesture of triumph, inviting them to give over to their mirth.

They didn’t disappoint. The sound that went up from the group was akin to an explosion.

Thomas watched Janek bound back over to Liam, the two men sharing a firm slap and a handshake, seemingly mindless of the grease coating both their hands, and a grin only moments before Janek glanced to the side and noticed Thomas.

Janek’s face lit up, becoming somehow even more animated.

Immediately he let go of Liam’s hand and made his way over to Thomas; beaming the whole time.

‘Did you see?’ He said.

‘I did.’ Thomas admitted, his shoulders giving a little involuntary shudder at the discovery the poor grey-suited man was soon to make (and how long it would take him to put it right). ‘Aren’t you… aren’t you worried he’ll report you?’

Janek laughed, clapped his hands together and then held them up, palms facing Thomas to showcase the muck in all its glory.

‘And say what?’ Said Janek. ‘That it was some dirty scouse bloke in a flat cap?’

Thomas glanced behind Janek at the three dozen other dirty men (the majority also with flat-caps and, no doubt, scouse accents) milling about around Liam. He didn’t need to turn around to know that several hundred more were to be found in the immediate vicinity.

Thomas clicked his tongue against his teeth.

‘You know, this conversation is vaguely familiar.’ He said, the words coming out with a level of warmth that surprised him as much as it evidently pleased Janek.

‘Aye!’ Drawled Janek with a wink. ‘But no bugger went and named me. So he won’t be getting me back for it!’

Thomas couldn’t help but snort at that.
‘Didn’t look like the scheming type.’ He said. And damnit if there wasn’t still that unintentionally affectionate warmth in his voice again.

Janek stood looking at him, seemingly lost for a moment before a loud clang from the machinery behind brought him back to reality.

‘Listen, I’ve got things to be doing here.’ Janek said quickly, taking a step back. ‘Meet me later? On the steps?’

Thomas had time to give a brisk nod before Janek vanished into the fray.
Chapter 10

Thomas easily located the steps he had sat on several days before while stewing and wearing Janek’s clothes. The memory didn’t inspire the same murderous rage as it had done previously, and Thomas smiled to himself at the reason as he lit up the first of many cigarettes he anticipated he would get through before Janek was done with work.

The smoke helped the smell of the water be less offensive, and he would have almost gone so far as to say he enjoyed having the gently heaving waves to watch as he waited. The odd person went striding about behind him on the walkway, but his lazy sanctuary on the concrete steps leading to the waterfront remained deserted. A few discarded rags and crusts of bread, not to mention a small knife that occasionally caught the cloud-stricken sunlight a few feet from where he was sitting, told him that had he arrived earlier in the day when the men broke for lunch it would have been a very different story indeed.

He sat there quietly, thinking about nothing in particular except the occasional foray into what the next few hours might hold. The ponderings left him needing to shake his head in disbelief and, when he was absolutely sure there was no one behind him on the walkway, smile like a loon – again, in strong disbelief at his oddly good fortune at having accidently come by this particular man. So he tried to limit such thoughts to a minimum; partly because of the chance he might be taken for a lunatic by a passer-by, but more because his enthusiasm and bashfulness embarrassed him. Intensely.

He thought back to nights when physical encounters had been a little easier to come by. Yes they took some effort (waiting in cloakrooms, pretending to deliver correspondence, acting as valet to men who had conveniently found their own man indisposed…) and yes they invariably required him to sneak back to his room, or sometimes even the house, at ungodly hours of the morning, but when the times were good they were good. But the point was he hadn’t been a bashful loon then. Then it had seemed like a matter of course that men of a certain leaning would find him intriguing and go out their way to put their bodies at his disposal.

Hell, he’d even wondered at one point if the old-boy network had put out a personal advertisement for a new bloke for him after his summer season paramour of 1908 had to leave London early. At the next evening gathering where Thomas had served drinks so many guests were busy giving him the eye that Lord Grantham managed to clean up at the poker table for the first and last time in his life.

Thomas chuckled out loud to himself, forgetting to check the walkway was clear but thankfully finding it was empty once his laughter had subsided.

No, he’d never gone a summer season without a lover. And rarely made it through a hunting season entirely alone if he was honest. The guests of the festive season offered entertainment prospects also. And, actually, the shopping and renovation works and fetes that happened during spring had meant that prospects occasionally made themselves known there as well.

So what the fuck had happened since?

He caught sight of his half-glove as he went to take another drag on the cigarette.

War. War had happened.

Years of having something much more important to think about than parties and paramours. Years in the trenches then years back in a country that functioned solely to support those in the trenches.
Years spent watching the aforementioned country drag itself back up off its knees, leaving the young, rich, beautiful men of Thomas’s past, one way or another, in the dirt.

‘Fuck.’ Thomas swore as he shivered.

He dismissed the train of thought with a vigorous internal grumble at again having fallen victim of unwelcomely deep introspection when having started out thinking of Janek.

That bloody man, Thomas thought. He forced himself to laugh until he truly felt like doing so and redirected his attention to the water.

It had started lightly drizzling with rain and he wrinkled his nose up at the tickling sensation of the minute water droplets. He held a hand up and watched closely as the drizzle seemed to dance around it as much as to wet it. It was having minimal impact on his clothes and wasn’t even heavy enough to pose a serious threat to his cigarette.

It was the kind of rain that one could stay out in for hours and still come home warm, so Thomas endeavoured to remain in his present spot.

Of course, minutes later, it began to absolutely hammer it down.

Thomas jumped to his feet, his already soggy, bent and put-out tenth cigarette hanging uselessly from his lips. He looked about for some shelter, but found no good prospects, or at least no prospects that would allow him to keep an eye out for Janek (assuming the rain didn’t scupper his intention to make the rendezvous).

Improbably and ridiculous as it was, he could think of no better option than staying right where he was, in the rain.

He cursed his lack of a hat. True, it would be getting wrecked in the current deluge if he had one but at least it would keep the rain off his face. He glared darkly down at the grey water which was now shifting about more vigorously in the accompanying rain, blaming it for choosing to hold his hat hostage after he fell in.

Though of course it wasn’t the water’s fault he had gone in in the first place.

No, that honour belonged firmly to…

‘Oh thank god!’

Thomas barely heard the shout over the hammering of the rain as an equally drenched and far less warmly dressed Janek came into view on the walkway.

Only just remembering to take care on the newly slippery steps, Thomas hastened to climb up to meet him.

‘Glad you’re still here!’ Janek yelled, his voice still only barely comprehensible over the sound of the rain.

‘Make’s one of us!’ Thomas yelled back, his voice not entirely devoid of humour but he was finding it a struggle not to crease his face up against the stinging pelting of fat raindrops.

Janek gave a throaty laugh, blinking furiously to keep his eyes clear of water but otherwise seeming very little put out by the rain in comparison to Thomas.
‘I was going to say go back to mine but…’

‘How far?’ Thomas shouted back.

‘Bout two miles.’

Thomas shook his head.

‘Any other ideas?’ He said, pulling his drenched coat tightly together at the collar to try to stop the drips going straight down his shirt.

Janek glanced about them, a fleeting glance that lasted only a moment before inspiration lit up his face.

‘Come on!’ He ordered, yanking one of Thomas’s hands away from his coat collar and holding tightly to it as he pulled him back in the direction of the docks.

Thomas cussed and stumbled and did his best to keep his head down as they ran. Janek jerked him this way and that, before wrenching open a small side door to one of the warehouses and stuffing him inside.

‘Ugh!’ Janek released Thomas’s hand and slammed the door shut behind them, leaving them in almost total darkness as the dark sky rolled by the tiny high windows. ‘Fuck that!’

Thomas gave himself a shake, water droplets flicking in all directions from his hair.

‘Couldn’t agree more.’ He said dryly, cupping both hands against the back of his neck to scrape away at the irritating rivulets of rain still lingering in the fine trail of hair that led to his shirt collar.

‘Anyone home?’ Janek called loudly, his voice echoing. ‘We’re here to steal your things and wreck your ropes!’

There was no answer save the pounding of the rain on the roof.

‘You got matches? Or something?’ Janek’s voice was suddenly very close.

Thomas marvelled at the man’s ability to move so swiftly in the dark without fear of falling over. But then, he mused, Janek had most likely been here before.

Thomas didn’t bother pointing out Janek’s stupidity in assuming that matches, were he to have any, would be dry enough to still work. Instead he produced his lighter and felt rough fingers immediately snatch it from his hands in the dark.

He heard Janek withdraw and make his way over to the side of the warehouse. Thomas took advantage of having a clear bit of space around himself to swing off his coat and shake out as much of the water as he could in vigorous whips against the air.

‘Niech będzie światło!’

In the brief moment before the lamp came alight by Janek’s hand, Thomas could have sworn a third person had joined them. The voice that spoke sounded nothing like the accent he had come to expect from the man before him, with or without the foreign language complication.

‘What was that?’ He said, finding a surface on which to rest his coat before surveying their surroundings. Janek’s earlier comment about ‘wrecking ropes’ suddenly made sense. Looped piles of ropes woven as thick as a man’s thighs sat about the room while even larger ropes were stretched out
along a large central frame that ran the length of the workshop.

‘Hmmm?’ Said Janek, leaving the lamp where it was and moving to light a second one.

‘The words.’ Thomas said, following Janek’s progress about the room intently.

‘Why, what did I…?’ Janek began, sounding like his usual perfectly scouse self as he lit the second lamp. ‘Oh!’ He exclaimed, sounding highly uncomfortable, as the flame caught. ‘It’s nothing…’ He walked back over to Thomas, bringing the lamp with him. ‘Just something from the Bible, you know…’ He tapped at the glass case of the lamp, indicating the flame.

Thomas frowned, wracking his brains.

‘Let there be light?’

‘That’s the one.’ Janek said, wagging a finger in his direction but harrying away from his gaze.

Thomas watched Janek’s back as he set the lamp down on a small table beside the nearest spaghetti-like accumulation of rope spirals. He dearly wanted to question the odd lapse in both accent and language, particularly since he had been under the impression from Janek’s vigorous assertion the other day as to his ‘Englishness’ that the man had been born and raised so. But Janek’s uncharacteristic silence spoke volumes about his willingness to discuss that particular topic.

Thankfully the rain provided another, ready-made, topic for discussion.

‘And I thought the weather on the moors was shit.’ Said Thomas, indicating upwards as what sounded like a thousand angry birds pecked at the roof.

‘Just that time of year.’ Said Janek with a shrug.

Thomas gave a sniff of disbelief at that. He turned about to inspect their surroundings more thoroughly, finding the large frame on which the thick ropes were knotted to be oddly fascinating.

‘You know it’s going to take months to put to rights how much damage this trip has done to my…’ Thomas turned about.

Wardrobe, was what he meant to say. He meant to say ‘wardrobe’. He meant to bemoan the weather, grime, bodily fluids and filthy water that had ruined a sizeable chunk of his available clothes.

But when confronted with the sight of Janek’s naked shoulder-blades, freed from the wet rumples of his shirt at precisely the moment Thomas turned around, the state of his wardrobe suddenly didn’t seem all that important.

Not important in the slightest.
'Bloody. Cocking…' Janek punctuated each word with a vicious shake of his shirt in an attempt to drive out the water. 'Rain!' He concluded.

Behind him, Thomas remained stationery. Staring.

'You alright there Thomas?' Said Janek, giving a glance over his shoulder as he bunched up the soggy shirt in both hands at his front.

'I’m…um…' Thomas coughed and forced himself to look away.

Janek glanced down at his bare chest and looked back up with a raised eyebrow.

'Ah!' He said with a laugh. 'Well you’ve got the wet to thank…' There was the sound of Janek’s sopping shirt being thrown unceremoniously at the wall. ‘…but by all means look if it floats your boat.’

'If?' Thomas said through a nervous laugh, taking Janek up on his licence to stare. 'What do you mean ‘if’?'

He struggled for something to say that would convey his appreciation for Janek’s muscles that wouldn’t leave him feeling like a prize pillock.

'You’ve got…a bit of definition there.' Thomas said, taking a step forwards.

'Mmmm.' Janek said dubiously, sweeping his cap off his head as he turned to face Thomas. 'You should see the lads that work the loading bay.' He grinned, sending his cap flying over to join his shirt on the floor.

'Oh I really don’t think I need to.' Said Thomas.

'Alright.' Said Janek with a wry chuckle, bringing his hands up to muss through his hair that had escaped the worst of the rain thanks to his hat but nevertheless had managed to plaster itself to his scalp in a most ungainly manner. It soon swung freely about his forehead.

Thomas watched him in silence, peeling off his blazer and setting it down carefully besides his coat.

His first thought was that Janek’s torso was pale. But he soon realised it was pale only in comparison to Janek’s sun-baked forearms. Thomas was in no doubt that were he to compare his own chest to the relatively hairless expanse of Janek’s own, the level of tan on Janek’s skin would lead one to suspect he had been working naked outside for days. Not an entirely disagreeable thought, to Thomas’s mind’s-eye, but he was left with the conclusion that Janek’s skin was naturally a little
darker than that he had previously had the pleasure to encounter.

There were also the nipples. Nipples that Thomas felt highly guilty for fixating on given the general lack of sexual-overtones in Janek’s current demeanour. Small, taunt (though that could have been due to the cold) and dark; not in the least the pink softness that Thomas dimly recalled from his last liaisons.

‘Hellooooo. You still there?’

Thomas blinked, realising he had completely lost himself in contemplation.

‘I…er…’ He said, the power of speech once again lost to him.

‘My goodness…’ Janek smirked, closing the distance between them and coming to a halt immediately in front of Thomas, leaving barely a couple of inches of space between them. ‘…you are so new aren’t you?’

‘New?’

‘With the men.’ Said Janek, taking hold of Thomas’s un-gloved hand and drawing it all the way up to place it on his bare shoulder.

Had anyone other than himself made the grunting-snort noise that emitted from his nose at Janek’s assumption regarding his sexual prowess, Thomas would have punched them. And he was not a man generally given to violence.

But he was able to forgive himself the knee-jerk reaction of hilarity at the insinuation of his inexperience.

‘What?’ Said Janek, frowning at Thomas’s reaction.

For a moment Thomas could only smile. He let his palm slide along Janek’s shoulder, his thumb falling easily into the groove by his collarbone. The skin was warm under the cold wetness of his hand and when Janek failed to shudder or protest the move, he slowly moved his hand back to Janek’s throat for another go.

‘I…um…’ He began. This time it was amusement rather than arousing fascination that tied his tongue. ‘…I see why you might think that.’ Thomas conceded, recalling his hesitancy the previous evening (not to mention his overly exuberant gratitude at receiving what was, at the core, a fairly straightforward suck-job). ‘But…um…really…’ He maneuvered his hand to allow him to run the tips of his fingers back along Janek’s shoulder and gently up the side of his neck. ‘…you’re the only new part of it.’

‘No need to be lying.’ Said Janek at a whisper as he looked into Thomas’s face, a grin tugged at the corners of his mouth.

There it was, Janek’s ability to instantly regress from man to cheeky child that Thomas had noted when he first met him.

Under present circumstances it was slightly inappropriate given that the feel of Janek’s skin under his fingertips was busy sending telegrams to his crotch area. And they’d caused an expansion of the area that had almost closed the short distance between his hips and Janek’s.

‘It doesn’t matter what you have or haven’t done.’ Janek continued. He glanced towards Thomas’s wrist, Thomas’s hand still nestled in the crook of his neck and shoulder. ‘Way I see it, you’re having
a good time with me. And that takes me to a good place and all.’

‘I don’t disagree with that.’ Said Thomas gently. ‘But I’m not lying.’

He wasn’t quite sure why he was pushing the issue so much. On one level Janek was perfectly correct; it didn’t matter. But on another, more personal, level there was a sense of pride to contend with, as well as a valiant nod to the person he had been before the world had gone to shit.

‘Look I…’

Whatever words of placating wisdom Janek was intending to bestow were lost to the ether as Thomas’s fingers tightened around his neck and tugged him forwards. Thomas brought his mouth to Janek’s in a firm kiss, pivoting them both around so that Janek rather than himself was pressed back against the table on which he’d dumped his coat and blazer.

Janek made a highly surprised, pleasing, not to mention pleased, noise at the back of his throat as Thomas did so.

In a moment he had his mouth open wide, and accepting of Thomas’s tongue, clinging on to Thomas’s shirt-sleeves for dear life at the constantly shifting, powerfully unyielding kiss.

Thomas pulled back, separating his lips from Janek’s as the latter stayed swaying with his eyes closed leaning against the table.

‘You still there, Janek?’ Said Thomas in a devilish whisper.

‘Mmmm. Definitely not.’ Said Janek lazily, lolling his head back to rest between his taunt shoulder blades.

Thomas ran his thumb down the exposed front of Janek’s throat, just firmly enough so as not to tickle; heaven help anything that arose at that moment to break the mood.

Janek made a highly surprised, pleasing, not to mention pleased, noise at the back of his throat as Thomas did so.

He ran his hand up to Janek’s chest.

Seconds later his mouth was back on Janek’s.

Janek’s spare hand found Thomas’s hair, giving Thomas the warmth of his scarred forearm to nuzzle against, not to mention the scent of him to get lost in, as Thomas busied himself with the task of vigorously prying Janek’s lips open.

Janek’s other hand soon fell away, allowing Thomas full range of movement against his chest. Thomas took immediate advantage by pinching hard and tugging at his nipple, savouring the surprised gasp against his mouth that the move elicited.
The kiss remained all lips and no teeth, mercifully for both of them, despite Thomas’s extremely energetic efforts to direct and deepen it. Thomas frequently felt Janek panting at his cheek for breath when momentarily released, but the hand on the back of his head remained firm to direct him back for more the moment its owner judged he had recovered sufficient oxygen to continue.

Janek’s crotch increasingly found means to bump against his own, reassuring Thomas that his chest play was an unequivocal success as far as Janek’s urges (however much Janek himself may be unaware of them) were concerned.

Gratified and encouraged, and more than a little aflame with the delicious possibilities of the situation, Thomas pushed his hand down to palm the front of Janek’s trousers.

Janek accepted this new development with a moan, even going so far as to transfer his weight onto the table-top to enable him to open one leg out to give Thomas better access, but suddenly he put a halt to the festivities, breaking the kiss and pushing himself up off the table.

Thomas was momentarily concerned he had overstepped, but his worry soon evaporated at the feel of shakily frantic fingers at the buttons of his own trousers, working to get them open.

‘Shhhhhh.’ Thomas said to calm him. ‘Plenty of time for that later you know.’ He said, allowing Janek’s fingers to finish his buttons but not to go so far as to pull him out of his underwear.

Janek’s face instantly went the way of the grump.

‘Won’t you take a little fun for yourself first?’ Thomas purred, resting his forehead against Janek’s and trailing a finger along the bare skin at the waist of Janek’s trousers.

Janek gave him a highly dubious look.

Thomas was hit with the realisation that Janek was potentially unaccustomed to receiving physical ministrations from others, whether through his own penchant for ‘liking the taste of things he shouldn’t’ meaning he always fell into the giving role or through having fairly green partners who lacked the level of confidence and commitment to the male form that Thomas proudly maintained.

But he found the idea of having their earlier conversation in reverse highly distasteful at the present moment.

‘Trust me?’ Thomas said.

Janek bit his lip a little too hard, but gave a small nod.

‘Sure you know what you’re doing?’ He quipped as Thomas gave him a reassuring smile.

‘Ooooh I don’t know…’ Thomas said.

The hand at Janek’s waistband suddenly dove down inside, skin to skin, to grasp and lightly twist at his burgeoning erection.

‘Right…ok…’ Janek said, trying and failing to maintain a steady tone of voice.

Thomas laughed and pushed him back against the table, working Janek’s trousers open with one hand (in the process answering the question of why no underwear had been included with the borrowed clothing) before taking firm, tortuously attentive hold of him.

He leant forwards until he had Janek’s back to the table, kissing him, this time allowing his tongue to
linger against Janek’s to give the latter a little something to suck on to satisfy his oral fixation as his hand continued to coax and arouse him below the belt; relentless in the speed and firmness of his strokes save for the odd lingering press of palms and fingers down the underside to his balls.

He could feel Janek’s back arching and his balls tightening at the point where Janek broke the kiss and panted that it was ‘enough now’.

Breathing heavily himself, Thomas climbed off him.

‘Good?’ He asked.

In answer Janek raised a hand to push at Thomas’s chest, directing him backwards and across the room with the most dangerous of smiles on his face. Thomas allowed himself to be led.

Janek’s trousers made their way to the floor as they went but Janek judged this too insignificant a development to merit attention.

His singular determination and silence had something within Thomas flaring gleefully in anticipation.

The back of Thomas’s ankles found something solid and moments later he had unbalanced and come to rest in the coils and surprising comfort of a pile of thick ropes.

He was briefly gifted with the sight of Janek, very aroused and very naked, standing immediately above him.

A moment later Janek had sunk to his knees in between Thomas’s splayed legs.

Anticipating Janek’s purpose, Thomas had his underwear down just as Janek reached forward to pull him out, enabling Janek’s mouth to be on him in an instant.

‘Christ…’ Thomas muttered to himself, encouraging Janek with light strokes at the back of his head as the man began to move.

Janek, of course, needed no encouragement.

If possible, and Thomas was dubious as to whether or not it was possible, Janek approached the oral ravishing of his penis with even greater vigour than the previous evening.

‘Oh…’

Thomas’s whole upper body jerked forwards as Janek’s tongue found the tiny grove just under his head and tended to it so delightfully roughly that Thomas’s throat emitted a highly undignified whimpering noise as he settled back down against the ropes, only to jerk forwards again a moment later.

Yes, definitely more enthusiastic.

Dear lord.

Dear, sweet, deity in which he had absolutely no faith for providing him with the man on his knees and elbows before him.

It didn’t take long for them to enter into the home-straights; Thomas bucking up into Janek’s mouth as Janek continued to suck and moan around the skin slipping between his lips.

And it would have been the easiest thing in the world to shudder his release into that willing mouth.
But there was something else. Something that had been building at the back of his mind since that morning.

A little voice that whispered a suggestion that he wouldn’t even have considered at that moment had he known they had more time together, or, if he was perfectly honest (and when better to be than in the throes of ecstasy) if he could be certain there wouldn’t be another ten years of wait between this encounter and the next. Assuming there was a ‘next’.

‘Wait, wait, wait…’ He choked out, extracting himself with difficulty from Janek’s mouth.

Janek pulled back reluctantly and climbed up Thomas’s body to look carefully at his face.

‘What?’ He said softly in confusion.

In a flash Thomas had reversed their positions, Janek’s naked backside pressed down against the ropes while Thomas supported himself above him.

Janek gave a laugh, smiling up at Thomas.

Thomas leant down to kiss him, unsurprised to find Janek seemingly appreciative of the chance to mingle the taste of his cock with the taste of his tongue.

He broke away and reached back to extract Janek’s ankles from his pooled trousers and boots. The manoeuvre took longer than desirable, leaving Thomas too impatient to do more than kick off his own shoes before climbing back up Janek’s body to resume the kiss.

His penis found Janek’s easily, both still straining in rapt attention at the proceedings, while his clothed hips slid automatically between Janek’s thighs.

He felt Janek’s muscles tense at this latest development, clenching tight to his hips. It didn’t take a genius to recognise that Janek’s legs were unaccustomed to finding something lying between them.

Thomas’s earlier half-formed misgivings about pushing for something so intimate on so short an acquaintance suddenly blared into fully developed glory.

‘sorry.’ Thomas breathed, raising himself up onto his arms and knees to release Janek’s body from any contact with his own. ‘Sorry, I just…’ He said between panting for breath.

‘No…I like…’ Janek reached up to grasp Thomas’s neck as though afraid he was about to retreat further. ‘…I like feeling you near me.’

‘I know that.’ Said Thomas, propping himself up on one arm as he reached a shaky hand out to touch Janek’s chest. ‘But I’m thinking about being…’ He groped for a means of saying it, without actually saying it. ‘…more than near you.’

‘I’m here. You be whatever you like.’ Said Janek. He took light hold of Thomas’s upper arms and looked up at him unwavering.

‘I couldn’t…Well, no, actually, I really really could…’ Thomas said, hanging his head.

Janek leant up, pressing his lips to Thomas’s downcast mouth gently; lingering until Thomas responded in kind.

He leant back and settled against the ropes.

‘sure you know what you’re doing?’ Janek said with a wink.
But Thomas’s conscience wasn’t willing to take insinuation alone.

‘You’ll have me in you?’

A pause, and then.

‘Yes.’ Quietly at first, and then firmly. ‘Yes.’

And Thomas was upon him, kissing at his neck while a hand trailed up the inside of his thigh, kneading the flesh, soothing him, relaxing him.

Once the thighs bracketing his hips were sufficiently accommodating, Thomas allowed himself some languid ruts against Janek’s crotch, pleased to find Janek’s erection still as attentive as his own.

Thomas raised his hand to his lips then, thinking better of it, instead extended his hand to Janek’s mouth; offering him fingers to suck on.

Unsurprisingly Janek took up the challenge admirably, and with a teasing skill that had Thomas able to fantasise briefly that he wasn’t alone in knowing what to expect from what followed.

Of course, the moment he pressed the first finger southwards the combination of the unfamiliar feeling and the necessity of his thighs being pushed up and further apart had Janek in a highly undesirably tense state.

But Thomas knew how to go.

Slowly, of course, being the first watchword.

Gentle, being the second.

And the powers of soothing distraction in kisses and caresses.

All of which were at odds with the feral arousal coursing through Thomas’s body and, he hoped, soon Janek’s, but as a means to an end the tenderness worked wonders for them both.

In fact Thomas found himself enjoying the prelude to the main event far more than he recalled from previous encounters as he spread Janek open with his fingers while kissing softly at his neck.

Janek’s hips made some truly cavalier efforts to move with his fingers, his hands grasped at Thomas’s shoulders.

Awkwardness at his spread legs seemed long forgotten by the time Thomas asked whether he was ‘absolutely sure?’

Janek answered in the affirmative. His grip on Thomas’s shoulders tightened as Thomas settled over him once more, but Thomas found him still pliant in his nether-regions as he directed his erection, with a sense of intense anticipation, at Janek’s entrance.

Janek ‘gave’ easily, leaving Thomas partially buried and with a blissful sense of warmth tingling all over his body, not just his cock; rejoicing at the long forgotten sensation.

Careful to avoid movement below the waist, he leant his upper body down to offer Janek a reassuring kiss as the latter’s ability to speak was temporarily lost to soundless gasps and watering eyes.

But when he moved next Janek moaned with him.
And when he withdrew and thrust again the effect was the same.

He sped up.

It took less than half a dozen or so thrusts for Janek to begin to participate. And when he did it was with no doubt the same level of determination and strength he brought to his work.

Thomas found himself enveloped in Janek’s strong legs and arms to such a degree that his movements were restricted to small targeted thrusts, punctuated by delicious tastes of the muscles of Janek’s shoulders and arms as he licked and bit to his heart’s content, while Janek laughed and soon made a game out of Thomas’s rising frustration at being unable to move freely.

It wasn’t until a husky bit of begging from Thomas (which Thomas immediately erased from his own memory for shame) that Janek’s teasing resistance fell away, along with his limbs, leaving himself open to Thomas’s direction.

Thomas took hold of his hips and rutted, powerfully, drawing noises from Janek that fascinated him despite his arousal; noises and vowel sounds quite unlike any he had heard before.

Thomas took it as evidence he had taken Janek well beyond the point of coherent thought or process. And it seemed high time that he joined him there.

Chasing that perfect envelopment, tearing into that glorious heat and friction, he pounded. And he did it again and again until he felt his stamina give out.

Near collapsing, already seeing stars, and with yet another outfit on its way to ruination, Thomas sank back down onto Janek, brought Janek’s legs up to wrap around his back, and brought himself and Janek to completion in a wave of pleasure tinged with almost a little too much by way of pain.

And there, wonder of wonders; release.

Exhaustion immediately followed.

As soon as he was able Thomas went to roll off, intending to land beside Janek in the ropes.

Janek held him in place with a firm grip on his arm and, even in the midst of deep fatigue, gave Thomas a wry look at his thinking that Janek was in any way having trouble supporting his weight.

Thomas gave a small laugh and collapsed down, resting his head on Janek’s shoulder. They lay there in silence for quite some time before Thomas noticed that the rain had stopped. As to when it had stopped he had no idea.

He wriggled against Janek, enjoying the comfort, but grimacing at the evidence of stickiness between them.

He let out a loud groan against Janek’s neck.

‘I really should have taken my damn clothes off.’

Janek chuckled.

‘Aye, but then you know how much I enjoy wrecking a suit.’ He said, Thomas could hear the smile
in his voice and moved his face appreciatively against the hand that Janek brought up to rest against his cheek.

‘Mmmph.’ Thomas puffed. ‘Bastard.’

That made Janek chuckle even louder.

The moment was blissful, and Thomas didn’t want to spoil it with anything resembling ‘serious’ talk. But in the end curiosity, and his imminent departure, got the better of him.

‘Why do you hate…suits?’ He said, as shorthand for the more loaded question he wanted to ask. His face still resting against Janek’s shoulder.

‘It’s the people that wear them.’ Janek responded, his hand lightly stroking Thomas’s cheek and hairline.

‘Hmmm?’ Thomas mumbled softly.

‘Managers. Bosses. Directors. Rich people.’ Janek reeled off the list dispassionately, voice sounding as though his mind were a million miles away. ‘Anyone…’ He said. ‘…who has other people face the outcomes of their actions. Or their decisions.’

‘I see.’ Said Thomas. And he really did. He recalled a similar bemoaning he himself had made years before about the shafting of the working classes; when a dying young man’s years of loyal service had been judged less important than social protocol.

He shuddered.

‘You alright?’ Said Janek, his mind having returned from wherever it had sojourned to. He turned his face to regard Thomas’s with concern.

‘Fine.’ Said Thomas with a weak smile. ‘I’m fine. But I should be going.’

‘Of course.’ Said Janek quickly, unwrapping the arm he had around Thomas’s back.

Thomas climbed reluctantly up as far as his knees, pausing there to put his trousers and underwear back to rights. He avoided looking at the mess he was going to have to endeavour to cover up with his blazer and coat on the way back.

‘I’ll drop by tomorrow.’ He said. ‘If that’s alright with you?’

‘Course.’ Said Janek, reclining lazily in the ropes.
Thank you tragic-cranky-porcelain-doll for this beautiful art! xxx
‘You know you don’t have to wear your uniform while we travel, Barrow?’

‘I know, Sir.’ Said Thomas, turning back from the suitcase he was putting the finishing touches to with a small smile. ‘But it’s a smart enough way to dress and I thought I might as well to save time this morning.’ He declined to explain that the two suits he had brought were in desperate need of attention and that if the hotel staff hadn’t taken pity on him after his first liaison with Janek his livery wouldn’t have been wearable either.

‘Right.’ Said Robert, not sounding wholly convinced but far too preoccupied with the prospect of the journey ahead to press the matter. ‘So you have wrapped the cufflinks?’

‘Yes, my Lord.’ Said Thomas, his smile slipping a little in anticipation of the long list that would follow.

‘And the gift for my wife…?’

Thomas watched the clock out the corner of his eye. It was a good twenty minutes before Lord Grantham was content as to his level of organisation and consented to let the hotel staff take the bags down to the cars that had been waiting over an hour.

‘My Lord, might we make a quick detour on the way to the station?’ Thomas asked as they waited in the lobby for the bags to be loaded. ‘I was hoping to visit the docks.’ Said Thomas, knowing without looking that Robert’s eyes were most likely lighting up. ‘I wanted to thank one of the workers we met on the tour for his hospitality.’

Well, it wasn’t a complete lie, Thomas thought to himself.

‘A capital idea!’ Said Robert heartily. ‘I was intending to drop in on Mr Goodrich myself…’

Thomas knew that already, of course, and he smiled to himself.

‘…I was expecting you to accompany me…’

Thomas’s face remained perfectly neutral.

‘…but I think it important the workers be thanked also!’ Robert concluded, nodding firmly as though the idea had been entirely his own. ‘Capital idea.’ He repeated.

And that was that.

Trying not to look too smug, Thomas climbed into the second car and watched Lord Grantham’s car up ahead rattling down the street on the way to the waterfront.

They parted ways just before the loading bay. Thomas’s car parked up at the top of the slope, while Lord Grantham’s driver continued onwards (and judging by the dirty looks the car was getting from the workers he perhaps shouldn’t have) to drop Robert right by the main administrative building.

Thomas watched the car go, rolling his eyes at the presumption of the ruling classes.

He didn’t give the workers diving out the way of the car much thought though. There was the important task of locating Janek as speedily as possible before Robert’s meeting was over to contend with.
At least he knew where to go to find the welders workshop now (and the rope-makers too, but that was most definitely not something to think about at the present moment). The familiar large doors of the warehouse soon came into view.

Thomas quickened his pace; half wishing he’d asked his own driver to bring the car along the walkways as well.

It hadn’t occurred to him until that moment that there was a chance that Janek wouldn’t be about that early in the morning (not that it was that early, but still, he could have been on an errand or similar).

What if he couldn’t find him? Thomas found himself wishing he’d said his goodbye the previous evening, distasteful though that would have been during the blissful aftermath of their activities. At least then there would definitely have been a goodbye.

And to leave without one at this point, the thought had Thomas’s stomach in knots.

No, he had to find Janek before they left. Somehow.

So intently was he focused on the large doors of the warehouse as they came closer and closer with his steps that he managed to quite literally walk right into the man in question.

‘Shit!’ He stepped back, clutching at his shoulder that had taken a painful jolt.

‘You alright?’ Janek laughed. ‘Saw you heading down so I thought I’d come and meet you halfway.’ He tilted his head to get a better look at Thomas’s face. ‘Not paying attention were you?’

‘No.’ Thomas agreed with a grimace. ‘I wasn’t.’ He let go of his shoulder, wanting to seem slightly less of a weakling despite the thing still throbbing after making sharp contact with Janek’s considerably tougher arm.

‘Not that I don’t like you coming here…’ Janek said, cocking his head and giving a wink. ‘…but people’ll talk if you keep doing it. And it’s only bloody morning, I’m not done for hours.’

‘No I…we’re leaving this morning so I wanted to come and…’

‘Leaving?’ Janek interjected sharply.

Thomas stared back into Janek’s confused eyes and felt a shiver colder than the waters of the Mersey run its way up his back.

‘Yes. I thought I…’ Thomas couldn’t in all honestly finish the sentence by protesting that he had told him. He hadn’t. But he was speaking honestly when he instead concluded. ‘…I thought you knew.’

Because he had thought he’d known.

How, Thomas had no idea. But it had been more convenient to assume the man knew, so his mind had evidently managed to convince him it was the truth.

And of course Janek was having none of it.

‘No…’ Janek took a slight step back, dropping his gaze absently to the floor and shaking his head. ‘…no, no I didn’t. Are you really?’ He asked, head snapping back up.

‘Yes.’ Said Thomas, feeling a tightening across his face as good sense attempted to halt whatever expression his muscles were thinking of making.
‘Only I…’ Janek gave a bitter chuckle of disbelief. ‘…I wish I’d known. I asked Liam to move out for the week so that we could…you know.’ He paced first one way then the other, waving about one of his hands wildly with the other planted firmly on his hip.

‘Liam?’

‘Roommate. One I board with.’ Janek shook his head viciously. ‘Anyway, what does it matter now?’

Janek took a deep breath, staring solemnly at the concrete floor, visibly working to settle his nerves.

Thomas remained silent, still fighting to keep his expression under control. He needed to feel in control of something in the present moment.

Thomas relaxed a little when he saw Janek raise his head. Janek looked sorrowful but calmer and Thomas judged that the hopes for an amicable parting were not entirely lost, despite his earlier misstep in assuming Janek had known of the timing of his departure.

‘So when are you coming back? Won’t keep me waiting long will you?’

Now it was Thomas’s turn to be confused. Then uncomfortable.

And he felt that icy tingling at his spine spread out across his ribs to the backs of his arms and run all the way down his legs.

Janek was looking at him expectantly, demanding an answer much as Thomas didn’t want to give it.

‘Well…’ Thomas began, having to cough several times to get his voice firm enough to continue. ‘…I probably won’t be. His Lordship won’t have cause to visit for a while and even if he comes back I probably won’t be with him.’ Thomas concluded, swallowing heavily and avoiding Janek’s eyes.

A horrible horrible suspicion had settled itself in his gut. And Janek’s next query only confirmed it.

‘So will you visit by yourself?’

‘I only get the odd half-day here and there.’ Thomas said, trying to sound nonchalant.

‘Can’t you ask for more time off?’

‘Doesn’t work that way in the service industry.’ Thomas said ruefully.

Janek’s gaze was unflinching.

‘So what are we going to do?’

Thomas’s mind ‘helpfully’ offered several expletives, but sadly no immediate exit-strategy.

‘Janek…we’re not going to do anything.’ He said, trying not to be distracted by Janek’s bright pale-green eyes that were growing wider by the second.

‘What?’

The quietness of Janek’s voice had Thomas’s innards giving a small sympathetic wince.

‘It is how it is.’ Thomas said ineloquently. ‘You know how it is.’

‘No, no I really don’t.’ Said Janek, his voice growing stronger but with a hint of hysteria.
Thomas visibly winced that time.

‘Well you meet someone, in a place or…something…’ Thomas began, dimly recalling a time when he’d been good with words, and grimacing in frustration. ‘…you know, you’re both in the same place for a season or a holiday. And it’s nice.’ He watched Janek carefully, much as he didn’t want to, to ensure the man was listening. ‘…But when the season or the trips over you don’t…well…’ He sighed. ‘…you stop.’

Both Janek’s hands were on his hips now. He stared back at Thomas darkly, his jaw set firm. His body shook almost imperceptibly, but enough to give the clear message that he was in the process of losing the fight for self-control.

Those shocking eyes were still wide, no longer confused, but accusing.

‘And why do you stop…?’ Janek spat out the last word. ‘…Thomas?’

‘Because that’s how it is.’ Thomas responded, suddenly conscious of the men milling about going this way and that in the yard around them and trying to keep his voice down. ‘It’s expected. It’s…’ Thomas sniffed. ‘…it’s how it’s always been with the others. You have a bit of a play, the both of you, then that’s it. It’s not convenient to continue. It can’t happen. I didn’t think I needed to… explain.’ He finished lamely, already bracing himself for Janek’s retort.

Even given the restraints their current location put on volume and physicality, Janek did not disappoint.

‘And what…’ Janek demanded, stepping in just close enough to still be within the bounds of public propriety but nevertheless drawing a few confused looks from onlookers in the process. ‘…if I said I’m not like the others?’ He hissed. ‘What if I said I’m not just another…another play? That is not what I thought. Not for me. What would you say?’

Thomas held his ground, but was unable to keep the internal discomfort he was experiencing off his face.

‘Then I wouldn’t know what to say.’ He said softly.

He had expected Janek to blow up at that. He even braced for it. But instead Janek withdrew from him, shoulders slumping.

Thomas would have much preferred to attempt to defend himself against a punch rather than be forced watch Janek grapple on the verge of tears.

‘For what it’s worth I’m usually on your side of this. I do know how you feel.’ Thomas said meekly. ‘But I’m sorry you’re upset. I didn’t mean you to be.’ He said with a sigh. ‘I’ve…I’ve handled this poorly… But still I have to leave today.’

‘Christ, Thomas…’ Said Janek. The unceasing headshakes were back. ‘…I can still…I can still feel you…from last evening, you understand, I still feel you…and that’s all you say? You’re leaving? That’s it?’

‘Maybe…’ Thomas said, plucking out the first idea that came to mind by way of placation, distressed to realise his own eyes were threatening tears also. ‘…perhaps you could write.’

He declined to point out his suspicions that the two of them were liable to run out of topics of relevant correspondence in so short a time as to render the exercise pointless.
‘Ha!’ Janek exclaimed. ‘You like reading shopping orders? That’s the only writing for me…and there’s no point you sending.’ He added quietly.

‘So you can’t…? Oh.’ Said Thomas. ‘But, you’ve read the Bible, haven’t you?’

‘It was read to me, Thomas. Difference.’ Janek spat.

‘Alright well I…’ Thomas sniffed back the lump that rose in his throat each time his eyes met the look of defeat in Janek’s. ‘…I really don’t know what to say.’ He wracked his brains for something, anything, to enable him to walk away feeling less of a bastard. ‘Here…’ He fumbled in his jacket pocket looking for something.

Janek’s eyes were impossibly wide and looking at him in disbelief before he’d even finished extracting it.

‘…I don’t want you to get behind on your rent because you moved Liam out for the week for me.’ Thomas said, opening his wallet.

‘Oh…’

Thomas looked up to see Janek backing away incredulously.

‘He offers money…for my troubles!’

‘Fuck, he offers money… przecież to zwykła kurwa jest…’

Janek spoke amid watery laughter, screwing up his face but failing to entirely hide the state of his eyes from Thomas.

Not that he seemed to particularly care about Thomas’s opinion or continued presence at that point.

‘…bękart…Oh my God…my God…’

Wherever Janek’s mind had gone at that point, Thomas couldn’t follow.

There was a rumble of an engine from across the way.

Thomas had never found the sight of Lord Grantham’s car so welcome than at that moment.

He backed slowly away, tucking his wallet into his pocket.

‘I’m sorry.’ He said. ‘I really am.’

And then he ran.

He got in his car.

And he didn’t look back.

And the driver followed Lord Grantham’s car out towards the station road.

The heavy pounding of Thomas’s heart persisted until the docks were well, well out of sight.

In fact it didn’t quiet itself completely until he was safely back in the halls of Downton.
Yes, that was definitely the doorbell.

Jimmy hovered by the side of the great hall for a moment, hoping to see Moleslay suddenly appear out of nowhere (or at least from the servant’s stair-case) to answer it.

When no Moleslay was forthcoming he dumped the tablecloths he was carrying unceremoniously behind the nearest cabinet and made his way over to the front door.

As far as Jimmy was concerned, unexpected doorbell rings during the day were the devil.

If a guest was expected then they should be met at the (open) door by the staff and family without having to ring the bell.

If a guest was unexpected (forgotten or uninvited) there was the necessary snap-decision, that Jimmy hated making, as to whether or not they were important enough to merit the Crawleys being disturbed. If they were, a mad panic immediately ensued in the downstairs kitchen and in the upstairs dressing rooms in order to put on an appropriate reception.

He allowed himself several muttered obscenities as he walked over to the door.

Before he could reach it the person the other side rang the bell again. Jimmy winced, disregarding the fact it was improper to re-ring a bell in such a short space of time (because, rude) there was now the very real chance that other members of staff or the family would have been drawn by the noise; and be pissed at him for not getting the door quicker. And he couldn’t very well blame Moleslay when it was clearly him standing by the door.

He was immediately taken by surprise at how close the visitor was standing to the door.

The man was a little taller than him. Jimmy’s eye’s met his merely by virtue of Jimmy’s chin already being raised and Jimmy was instantly captured by strangeness of their colour; so much so that he was briefly distracted from his role in the present situation.

He gave the man a quick once over; his facial expression starting out neutral but quickly degenerating into incredulous eyebrow raising once he realised the manner of person standing expectantly on the doorstep. He was overtaken by the strong urge to simply close the door and walk away.

A tradesman. That much was obvious. The man’s coarse rust-coloured clothing precluded all other conclusions. (That is, apart from ‘beggar’; but the man’s cock-sure smile had Jimmy pretty certain that he wasn’t about to launch into a sob-story.)

But the man had no tools.

And, more perplexingly, was standing at the front door.

Jimmy pulled the door closed a little as though to shield the view into the hallway.

‘Hello.’ Said the man brightly.
Jimmy blinked.

‘Hello.’ He responded, acting on reflex alone rather than conscious thought.

He didn’t care for the amused expression that his own appearance seemed to inspire on the man’s face. Trying to be subtle, Jimmy quickly glanced down to see if any of his buttons had come askew or if he’d managed to get fluff stuck on his waistcoat. There was nothing. He was perfect.

‘Why…?’ Jimmy blurted out a little too abruptly before quickly remembering the proper form. ‘How may I assist you?’

‘I’m here to see Mr Barrow.’ The man responded easily. ‘Is he about?’

Whatever answer Jimmy was expecting, it wasn’t that.

‘You’re…what…but…I mean, um…’ He fumbled, his mouth once again running away from his mind.

On the step the man waited patiently, taking the opportunity to inspect the ornamental stone above the door while Jimmy struggled for words.

‘You’re here to see Mr Barrow?’ Said Jimmy, deciding that clarifying he’d heard correctly would be the first step to recovery.

‘Yes, could you tell him I’m here?’ The man responded with a smile.

‘And you are?’ Said Jimmy, not that he expected this additional information to particularly help him in his current predicament, but he thought it was worth a try.

Any hopes that the man’s name would ring a useful bell were quickly dashed.

‘Janek.’ Said the man, extending his hand to Jimmy. The seams of his jacket strained against the thickness of his arms. ‘Janek Biel.’

Janek’s hand hung in the air between them.

Jimmy was too surprised to take it; a hand shake was one social protocol violation too far for his mind to process at that particular moment given the already tricky situation.

‘Why are you here?’ He said.

Janek frowned a little, retracting his hand and pushing it into his pocket.

‘I told you.’ He said simply. ‘I’m here to see Mr Barrow. You know, Thomas.’

Jimmy’s facial muscles were now strained almost to the point of collapse. He could feel his eye twitch at the inappropriately casual use of Thomas’s first name under the circumstances.

‘Yes, but why are you here?’ Jimmy repeated, tapping at the huge wooden door that he still held partially closed in his other hand.

‘To…see Mr Barrow.’ Janek said slowly, his piercing gaze searching Jimmy’s face as though to establish whether or not the man he was dealing with was a bona fide imbecile.

‘But…’ Jimmy began desperately.
‘Everything alright, James?’

Jimmy’s eyes gave an involuntary roll of defeat as he heard Lord Grantham’s voice behind him.

‘All alright, my Lord.’ Jimmy said, unable to keep his voice from sounding painfully strained.

He attempted to manoeuvre to look back at Robert without opening the door enough to reveal Janek on the doorstep, expecting Robert to move on to the library to deposit the book he was carrying in his hands without further enquiry.

It wasn’t as though unexplained tradesmen on the doorstep was something a Lord would usually concern himself with.

But then, Jimmy thought ruefully, a Footman wouldn’t generally let a tradesman linger at the front door.

Unfortunately Robert didn’t move on.

Reluctantly Jimmy opened the door fully so that Robert and Janek could see one another.

From his position on the doorstep Janek smiled and waved.

Robert stared.

Jimmy winced.

In that moment Jimmy considered himself a bad, bad Footman indeed.

An awkward silence descended. Janek continued to look towards Robert but said nothing while Robert stared at Jimmy for an explanation; one Jimmy didn’t feel in a position to give at that particular moment.

‘Well?’ Robert eventually said, grumpily at having received no words from either man.

‘Oh, I’m sorry!’ Janek said, immediately leaping into life. ‘Mr Barrow said I shouldn’t say anything to you unless you’ve said something first, so I didn’t want to just barrel right in and assume it was alright for me to speak because you hadn’t…said anything.’ Janek finished, looking sheepish at the realisation he’d been babbling.

‘You…Do I remember you from the Liverpool docks?’ Said Robert.

‘Three weeks ago.’ Said Janek with a nod. ‘Yes. From the boiler warehouse. Name’s Janek Biel.’

‘You’re here to see me?’ Said Robert, sounding highly dubious.

‘No. Mr Barrow.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Mr Barrow.’ Janek repeated. ‘He does still work here doesn’t he?’

He looked from Robert to Jimmy, searching for confirmation, and evidently perplexed that his simple mission in being there was somehow causing such confusion.

The silence descended again.
Something in Robert’s expression shifted. The coolness to be found there caused Janek to considerably reign in his enthusiasm.

‘James…’ Robert said levelly, turning to Jimmy. ‘…please convey Mr Biel to Mr Carson who will assist him in his request.’

‘Yes, my Lord.’

Janek was left to stare mutely as, instead of beckoning him inside, Jimmy instead stepped out onto the steps, leaving Lord Grantham in the hall, and shut the door behind him.

‘But…’ Janek said, pointing at the closed door as Jimmy made his way down the steps.

‘It’s this way.’ Came the curt response as Jimmy began to walk across the driveway to the side of the house.

‘But…’ Janek’s finger remained pointed at the front door even as he began to walk after Jimmy. ‘This is the right house isn’t it?’

‘Yes.’ Said Jimmy quietly, his feet continuing to crunch over the gravel. ‘It’s the right house.’

‘So then why…?’ Janek was forced stop indicating towards the front door itself as the two of them rounded the side of the house.

‘Because our entrance is this way.’

Janek pondered this for a moment before responding. ‘But the door was right there.’ He swung an arm in the general direction of where the front door would be beyond the bricks of the house. ‘We were at the door. Couldn’t we have just…?’

‘No.’ Said Jimmy simply.

‘But…’ Janek blurted out, giving a laugh. ‘…it was right there…and we were right next to it.’

‘And I suppose you’ve never heard of a ‘tradesman’s entrance’ before?’ Jimmy said sharply, his patience dangerously close to giving out at the man he felt for sure was being deliberately difficult.

He halted in his progress towards the yard to turn back to Janek.

Janek nodded. ‘I am but…but I’m not here on trade.’

Jimmy’s mood softened a little at seeing the genuine confusion on the man’s face.

‘Thing is…’ Said Jimmy. ‘…it’s not Mr Barrow’s house.’

He couldn’t think of a better way to put it.

Janek remained quiet.

‘For what it’s worth…’ Jimmy continued. ‘…this is the entrance me and Mr Barrow and, well, we all use.’

Janek nodded, accepting the offered information with a blank expression.

They were almost at the side gate when Jimmy spoke again.
‘So…’ He said awkwardly, drawing the word out far longer than proper. ‘…what is it that brings you to Downton?’

‘Visiting Mr Barrow.’ Said Janek. ‘I’ve said it four times or so.’

Jimmy wondered if the man was being deliberately obtuse.

‘Yes, but why? What’s the reason?’ Said Jimmy. ‘His Lordship said something about meeting at the docks…did Mr Barrow ask for some information you’ve now come to give him? Or are you a relative? Or here to give a quote for some manual work?’

‘I…’ That earlier amused expression was back on Janek’s face, but it was with a distinct sense of finality that he said. ‘…don’t see how that’s any of your business.’

Jimmy bit at his lip, holding a hand out to halt Janek before he could enter the yard.

‘Is there a reason?’ He said in what he hoped was a meaningful, but not overly so, manner. Because unlikely as it seemed, especially given the state of the man, he was beginning to fear that the man’s purpose really was as simple as it was stated.

And if that were the case, to Jimmy’s mind it was absolutely imperative that the man be able to furnish Mr Carson with some kind of excuse; to help him and the rest of the household at least pretend there was a valid reason that Thomas had received a rough and handsome male caller, for the sake of Thomas’s dignity alone if nothing else.

‘Not your business.’ Janek replied. The tone of his voice contained an unmistakeable warning against Jimmy persisting.

He went to push past him. But Jimmy, in a moment of daring that surprised himself, once again grabbed hold of Janek’s arm, this time in a much firmer grip, to keep him standing still.

‘No. No I completely agree, it’s not. And believe me I really don’t want to know. In fact I wish I didn’t sort of know because it’s not the sort of thing I want to, well, know.’ Jimmy said quickly. ‘But you do have to give a reason. It doesn’t have to be a real reason.’ He said, dearly hoping that it wouldn’t turn out that Janek really was just there to trade some cigarette cards with Thomas or similar. Otherwise this conversation was apt to be rather hard to explain. ‘But you need to give a reason when you speak to Mr Carson…For Mr Barrow’s sake.’ He added after a pause, feeling more uncomfortable than he would have ever thought possible.

He felt Janek’s bicep tense under his grip for a moment. Then he felt it relax.

Jimmy let go of Janek’s arm. Both men took a step away from one another.

Jimmy closed his eyes and steeled himself in anticipation of the multitude of potential responses Janek could have to this particular speech. None of which were good.

When no tirade was forthcoming, he opened them again.

‘You are his friend.’ Janek said.

It wasn't worded as a question, but Jimmy nodded anyway.

‘We have a practice.’ Janek said, seemingly satisfied. He gave a small bob of his head in Jimmy’s direction. ‘Mr Carson…’ Jimmy was unable to keep a small crease of a smile off his face at Janek’s
comically serious tone of voice. ‘…I am here to visit Mr Barrow. He requested some updates on the ships at the Liverpool docks in order to pass on the information to his Lord Grantcham.’

‘Grantham.’ Jimmy corrected. ‘But yes…’ He said. ‘…that’ll do it.’

Janek gave a satisfied nod.

‘Well then, if you would lead the way please James?’ He said, indicating into the yard.

Jimmy considered this for a moment before responding. ‘It’s Jimmy.’

‘Jimmy.’ Janek repeated.

This time when Janek offered his hand Jimmy shook it (and tried not to look too pained by the ludicrously strong grip he suddenly found around his fingers) before turning to lead the way into the house.

It wasn’t until the point at which he’d ushered Janek in ahead of him at the door, and gotten a good close look at the state of his clothes and slightly over-long hair that Jimmy realised that in hindsight he’d neglected to ask Janek perhaps the most important question.

‘Is he expecting you?’
‘Mr Carson?’ Said Jimmy, poking his head into the servant’s hall with a strained smile. ‘Might I have a word?’

Jimmy glanced sideways towards where he had asked Janek to wait, down the corridor, out of the sight of the others in the servant’s hall and kitchen.

Janek stood, hands in his pockets, staring up and around the small space; seemingly taking in every detail and finding personal amusement in some aspect of his surroundings that was entirely lost on Jimmy.

Carson grudgingly finished up the section of the rota he was working on and replaced the book by the bell-board.

Jimmy took a deep breath as Carson walked towards him, savouring that final moment of calm before the inevitable storm of discomfort.

‘Mr Carson…’ Jimmy said, trying to resist the urge to tug on Carson’s sleeve to draw him away from the entrance to the servant’s hall so that none of the other occupants would see his reaction. ‘…This…this, um…gentleman has…’ Jimmy held out an arm to direct Carson’s attention to Janek.

The sound of a sharp intake of breath told him that Carson’s nostrils had taken deep offence at the sight of the poorly clad man in his corridor.

Jimmy cleared his throat nervously, internally cursing Janek for being able to maintain a look of utterly unfazed amusement despite being faced with the looming spectacle of a man who no doubt had a lowered chin and furrowed brow in addition to his newly flared nostrils.

He tried again.

‘Mr Carson…’ Jimmy said, deliberately avoiding looking directly at him for fear of what he would see. ‘This is Mr Biel, he is visiting from…’ Jimmy’s voice trailed off, having half-hoped that the infuriatingly steady man would jump in and make his own introduction; he’d had no qualms about doing so with Lord Grantham a few minutes earlier.

Jimmy dully noted a trend in Janek’s deportment; namely that the man was apt to do the exact opposite of what was appropriate or desired in any given situation just to watch everyone around him squirm.

That didn’t bode well.

‘…from Liverpool.’ Jimmy continued valiantly. ‘His Lordship instructed me to bring him to you…’ He said, deliberately skipping over the circumstances that had led to that particular instruction (or the possibility that Lord Grantham’s intention all along was that Carson get rid of the man for him), and belatedly realised that perhaps he should have started with that particular piece of information.

In his peripheral vision he saw Carson turn to him in surprise, chin returning to its normal elevation.

The magic mention of Lord Grantham evidently came just in time to save him and Janek from an abrupt dismissal.

‘…Mr Biel has a request to make.’ Jimmy finished, giving Janek a mildly provocative smile at
having put the ball firmly back in his court.

He could have sworn he saw Janek give him a hint of a wink by way of touché.

‘Mr Carson, sir.’ Said Janek, his voice robust and clear.

Jimmy noticed Carson jump a little at the sudden, loud, sound of Janek’s voice.

He almost laughed.

‘I took your Lord Grantham and his man Mr Barrow round the docks during their visit to Liverpool…’ Janek flashed a glorious smile at the bewildered Carson.

Jimmy wasn’t sure if he was trying to placate him or unnerve him.

‘And there were some bits that Lord Grantham said he was interested to know more about. So it got suggested that I visit later to update him on progress since the visit. I’m to feed the information to Mr Barrow.’

‘You…’

Jimmy honestly couldn’t recall a single occasion previous when Carson had looked quite so lost for words.

It didn’t take long for the man to recover.

He gave a loud humph, narrowing his eyes and regarded Janek coldly.

For what seemed like the umpteenth time, Jimmy winced on Janek’s behalf.

‘Your supervisor.’ Said Carson levelly. ‘He couldn’t prepare notes for His Lordship? Couldn’t…’ Carson continued as Janek drew breath ready to speak. ‘…send an official report through the… proper channels?’

It was evident from the tone of voice that there was no fully adequate explanation Janek could offer as far as Carson was concerned.

‘Mr Goodrich is sending official reports. This is about small matters of personal interest that wouldn’t be proper to include in an official report.’

Jimmy had to give a nod of approval at how seamlessly Janek offered the lie. He quickly stopped moving his head at the moment Carson shot him a warning look.

‘Very well.’ Said Carson, sounding far too happy for Jimmy’s liking. ‘We shall go into my office and you shall make your report.’

And go, was the unspoken concluding remark.

‘No.’ Said Janek a little too abruptly. ‘It has to be Mr Barrow. There’s some very specific bits about the ships and it will only make sense to him ‘cause he was there. Has to be him.’

Carson raised himself up to full, imposing height. ‘And if Mr Barrow is unavailable?’

Janek was silent, seemingly pondering Carson’s words in order to make a reply.

But he was pondering a little too long and Jimmy could see a little of the cock-sure energy leaving
the corner of Janek’s eyes and mouth to be replaced by something far more doleful.

‘I believe Mr Barrow said he would be done in the gallery within the hour.’ Jimmy piped up.

Carson shot Jimmy a deeply penetrating look that made the latter almost certain that his intervention had done a lot more harm than good.

‘I see James here is taking an active involvement in assisting you in convening this meeting.’

And there it was.

Any doubt Jimmy had had as regards Carson’s level of understanding following his ill-advised speech was immediately dispelled by the way he managed to pronounce the word ‘meeting’ as though it were the filthiest word imaginable.

Janek, wisely, said nothing.

‘And it has to be Mr Barrow, does it?’ Said Carson.

Jimmy noted the disbelief that tinged the look of knowing in Carson’s eyes. Clearly he was not alone in finding Janek an odd match for Thomas.

‘Yes.’ Said Janek.

‘And…’ Carson turned his attention to Jimmy. ‘…His Lordship directed you to bring him here, to me?’

It sounded as though this was the part of the equation Carson was having the biggest trouble with.

‘He did, sir.’ Said Jimmy.

Carson set his jaw and pursed his lips, regarding Janek sternly as though wishing he could simply make the man disappear. But if, for some reason that entirely escaped him, Lord Grantham had consented to the meeting…

‘Very well.’ He said at length. ‘You may wait in the servant’s hall for Mr Barrow. You may also conduct your conversation, about ships, in the servant’s hall.’

Jimmy caught the sudden flash of frustration in Janek’s expression, and was in no doubt as to why it was there. But it was far more than his job was worth to push for the use of Carson’s office.

‘Thank you, Mr Carson.’ Said Jimmy quickly before Janek could open his mouth and lose the considerable (whatever he may think) concession that Carson had granted in allowing him to remain and wait for Thomas.
Chapter 15

Thomas took half a step into the servant’s hall before pivoting backwards, slamming his back against the corridor wall so hard he dislodged several pieces of plaster.

‘Oh f...’

‘Thomas!’ Jimmy came running down from the kitchen. ‘Thomas I was trying to catch you before...’

‘Mr Barrow...’

Both men turned towards the highly unwelcome figure of Carson.

‘...it would appear you have a visitor, Mr Barrow.’ Said Carson. His disapproval was plain to see, but Thomas could have sworn there was a ghost of a satisfied smile on his lips at seeing his discomfort.

‘So it would seem.’ Thomas said weakly.

‘To your post, James.’ Said Carson sternly.

With an apologetic look Jimmy was off back to the kitchen, leaving Thomas to stare after him in bewilderment.

‘So...I...’ Thomas struggled to get his breathing and pounding heart under control. ‘I should...take him to your office?’

Carson did not bother to respond. He chose instead to give Thomas a look that could have curdled milk.

Thomas shrunk into the wall.

‘I believe Mr Biel...’ Carson began.

Thomas pressed harder against the wall at the name.

‘...can deliver his report to you adequately in his present venue.’

‘Report?’ Thomas said in confusion.

‘Yes.’ Said Carson thinly. ‘Evidently information about the ships that his Lordship requested.’

‘He’s here to give me a written report?’ Thomas said, feeling a glimmer of hope that Janek’s presence had a legitimate purpose (and one which didn’t immediately compromise him) if there was a written report to be had given that the man himself couldn’t...

‘No. Oral.’

Thomas dearly wished Carson had chosen a different phrasing.

‘Right.’ He said weakly.

‘Is there a problem, Mr Barrow?’
Thomas swallowed, forcing himself to relinquish the stability of the wall to stand on his own two feet.

‘No, sir.’ He said, setting his jaw. ‘I’ll just…’ He pointed towards the open doorway into the servant’s hall.

‘Very good, Mr Barrow.’ Said Carson.

Thomas watched as Carson retreated a few steps to stand at the foot of the stairs; blocking the way up to the house. And to the attic.

Thomas tried not to shudder.

He let out a long breath and turned into the servant’s hall.

He was met with glances of varying subtlety from its occupants. The old crowd by way of Mrs Hughes, Baxter and Moleslay gave brief looks of what could almost pass for sympathy, while the gaggle of maids and hall boys in the centre of the table stared in curiosity; wide eyes hungry for the entertainment they knew was coming though for the most part not fully comprehending its significance.

The one saving grace was that the familiar but out-of-place man seated down the far end of the table in rust coloured clothes kept his greeting to Thomas subdued.

There was an unmistakeable light in Janek’s eyes at the sight of him, but he restricted himself to a slight nod of the head and a small smile.

Thomas had to swallow several times before he trusted himself to speak.

‘Mr Biel…’ He said, walking slowly around the opposite side of the table, keeping it between himself and Janek. ‘…I…I trust you had a pleasant trip.’

‘I did, thank you Mr Barrow.’ Said Janek, speaking with considerably more ease than Thomas.

Some of the expectant tension in the room evaporated at the unremarkable exchange of greetings between the two men, but Thomas was under no illusions as to the level of attention they were still being paid.

Thomas took the seat opposite him.

He stared at the Janek with wide eyes that carried more than their fair share of fear. But there was something else too. The man was as he remembered him, every detail. But the sight of him stirred something, excited something that Thomas wouldn’t have thought possible had it not shivered through his body the more he looked at him.

It wasn’t even arousal. It was a strange kind of aching.

Thomas realised he hadn’t taken a breath since entering.

‘I…coffee, please.’ He said with a cough, directing his attention over to one of the maids.

‘Yes, Mr Barrow.’ She said, rising immediately to tend to the task.

Thomas wondered if he could come up with enough jobs to rid the servant’s hall of the lot of them.

He glanced down the table several times, resisting the urge to shake his head at his sheer damnable
luck.

Each time he looked back to Janek he found the man’s eyes solely on him.

‘So.’ Said Janek, leaning forwards to rest his elbows on the table.

‘So.’ Thomas responded.

‘Do you have a smoke?’

Thomas blinked.

‘Yes.’ He said, fumbling for the box in his jacket pocket.

He tossed the box to Janek.

Janek picked it up with a wry grin, and took a cigarette out before pointedly tossing it back; declining to pass it back given the courtesy with which the box had arrived.

Thomas watched as Janek took a match from his pocket and struck it against the wood of the table.

Mercifully at that moment Thomas’s coffee arrived to distract the others from Janek’s mistreatment of their table.

‘Would you like coffee?’ Said Thomas.

Janek gave a laugh, puffing out a healthy stream of smoke.

‘Do you have anything stro…?’

Neither Janek nor Thomas could miss the sharp look suddenly shot at them from the direction of Mrs Hughes.

‘Yes, coffee.’ Said Janek quickly.

The maid looked incredibly put out at being compelled to leave the room again, though whether this was because of whom she was serving or because she was afraid to miss any part of the discussion was unclear.

‘So.’ Janek said again as Thomas took a far-too-hot sip of his coffee. ‘You have paper and pen?’

Thomas frowned in confusion.

‘For the notes.’ Janek said. ‘To take to your Lordship.’

‘Yes…of course.’ Thomas resumed his fumbling and eventually produced a small notebook and pencil and began to scribble.

‘Well now…’ Said Janek. ‘…the…um…your Lord Grantham will be happy to hear that of the two cargo ships he saw, one was floated last week after the hull was made sound…’

‘Which one?’ Said Thomas.

‘SS Lesbian.’

Thomas was all but sure Janek had made up the name, and as a side note quite felt like killing him for it, but he wrote the name down dutifully. Evidently others around the table were of a similar mind
if the hushed tittering was anything to go by.

‘So anyway, it’s been put back out now. The boiler works on the new commission are almost done. They’ve laid off a lot of the welders…’ Here Thomas caught what sounded like a genuine bite to Janek’s words. ‘…but the hull works on that second cargo that you and he saw will be done in a month or so if the suppliers stop playing silly bug…’

The arrival of the second coffee was a welcome relief from Janek’s near slip.

‘Thank you.’ Said Janek, taking the cup directly from the maid’s hands and taking a sip.

His face immediately contorted in disgust.

‘Ugh…what?’ Janek peered down into the cup. ‘Oh, right.’

‘Posy can we have that one without milk please?’ Said Thomas, taking a stab at the least offensive explanation for Janek’s reaction, keeping his eyes fixed on his notepad.

Posy snatched the cup back and stomped back out the room.

‘Sorry.’ Said Janek quietly.

Thomas waved away the apology with a twist of his hand.

‘So there are supply issues?’ Thomas prompted.

‘Yes. Goodrich…Mr Goodrich has been struggling with the steel. At least that’s what the boys say. But nothing for Lord Grantham to be worried about. It’s just that’s why the second ship is still in dry dock. Besides they can always do more with the iron riveting if it comes to it.’

Thomas’s pencil continued to fly across the paper under Janek’s fascinated gaze.

‘From what I hear…’ Janek continued. ‘…there’s been works done on those cranes by the south docks so loading will be faster. They’ve got these stronger pallets too. Next thing will be to see if…’

‘So when these ships do go out to sea…’ Thomas interjected levelly, confident that the majority of the room had by now gotten so bored of Janek’s litany that their conversation was no longer being so carefully monitored. ‘…I take it it’s customary to notify the destination dock that they are coming?’

‘Usually.’ Came the reply. ‘But not always.’

‘And you think that kind of reckless behaviour wise?’

The fresh coffee appeared.

Janek thanked Posy again, this time letting her set the cup on the table in front of him.

For a moment the room was silent as Posy took her seat.

‘Sometimes opening up new trade means taking a punt.’ Said Janek, one hand toying with the cup, as he dropped his spent cigarette on the floor with the other.

Thomas’s pencil remained poised, unmoving, the point pressed hard enough onto the paper of the notepad to dent.

‘And if the people at the destination dock don’t want new trade?’
Thomas’s rising irritation finally allowed him to meet Janek’s unflinching gaze.

‘If they are sure…’ Said Janek. ‘…if after they pull it in and tie it with their ropes…’

Thomas felt his face grow hot.

‘…and they still don’t want it. Well, then they give supplies…’ Janek’s finger nails tapped against the coffee cup. ‘…and send it on its way.’

At some point Thomas realised he had broken the tip of the pencil clean off.

‘But…’ Janek continued. ‘…it would be a very foolish man who did not investigate what the ship had to offer first.’

‘And if the dock has already made clear it does not have the facilities to accommodate the ship…’

Thomas said, forgetting himself, his voice lowering to a harsh whisper. ‘…that it is not \textit{practical} to accommodate it in any fashion? Not possible?’

‘A ship \textit{is} possibility.’ Janek bit back. ‘And it may bring what that very dock \textit{lacks}.’

‘Am I not trusted to judge if a ship has nothing for me?’

‘Not when you have already been on board.’ Janek retorted. ‘And I \textit{know} you wanted to linger there.’

Thomas sat back, and snapped his notebook shut.

‘I don’t know whatyou mean.’ He said sharply.

‘In which case, Mr Barrow…’ The quiet sternness of Mrs Hughes echoed across the room. ‘…I believe you’re the only one here who doesn’t.’

‘Oh God.’ Thomas couldn’t stop himself from blurting out.

Janek rose from his seat with such force that he unsettled the four other people sitting further down the bench.

‘Walk me out.’ He demanded.

Thomas hastily complied, if only to get away from the room as quickly as possible.

Thankfully Carson was no longer lingering in the corridor outside at the point at which Janek burst from the servant’s hall with Thomas in hot pursuit.

They stomped, in silence, the short distance to the back door.

‘What the fuck do you think you’re playing at, coming here?’ Thomas shouted the moment the door swung shut behind them.

Janek spun about, already half way across the yard.

‘What choice did you leave me?’ He shouted back. There was sharpness in the beginning of each word that Thomas hadn’t heard before in his voice. A hint of an accent, fiercely suppressed.

‘It’s not a choice.’ Thomas retorted, damn near at the top of his lungs. ‘I \textit{told} you. I told you in Liverpool. I told you how it was.’
‘And I tell you now I don’t accept.’ Janek hissed back.

‘Well…’ Thomas flung up his hands in exasperation.

‘We need to speak. Properly, Thomas. We need to speak.’

‘We can’t.’

‘No.’ Janek agreed, settling into a more quiet anger. ‘You are right. Not here. We can’t. Not in this… this joke.’ He jabbed a hand fiercely towards the house.

‘Joke?’

‘Yes, this place, it’s joke.’ Said Janek, evidently beyond complete sentences, spitting out the last word like a filthy taste in the mouth.

‘I wouldn’t expect you to understand…’

‘But I knew…’ Janek continued as though Thomas hadn’t spoken. ‘…I knew before I came. But still this is…’ He shook his head, unable to vocalise his full disbelief at the perceived absurdity of the place.

Thomas shook his head too, his face flushed with anger, his hair nearing Janek’s state of messiness with the force at which he moved. ‘Do you have any idea how much trouble you have caused me? How am I supposed to face them?’ He emulated Janek’s gesture, pointing towards the doorway into the underbelly of the house.

‘We need to speak.’ Janek insisted. ‘Thomas I am sure now, more than ever, we need to speak.’

‘Oh God!’ Thomas yelled in his general direction.

‘Tonight. Meet me in the village.’

‘Oh for fuck’s…’ Thomas said, looking at Janek in disbelief. ‘I couldn’t.’ He said.

‘Why?’

‘I can’t just go whenever I please! And if you think Carson’s letting me out the house today after this…this…’

‘And I suppose you’ve not gone when you’ve not been meant to before?’

‘I can’t. And there’s nothing more to say.’

‘There is, Thomas. There is. You must come.’

‘Then tell me now!’ Thomas said, crunching over the gravels towards him. ‘Tell me now.’

‘No.’ Said Janek, glancing towards the back door. ‘There isn’t time. You come tonight. I will wait outside the Inn. You meet me there.’

‘I won’t.’

‘You must…please.’

The last word was disarmingly quiet in the face of the heat of the past few moments.
’You come tonight.’ Said Janek. ‘Or I come back tomorrow and ring that front-door bell again.’

Thomas blinked. ‘Again?’

Janek sighed, subdued, stepping backwards towards the opening that led from the yard to the trackway.

’Talk to the little blond one.’ He said with a shrug. ‘And come and talk to me tonight.’

’Janek I…’

’It’s for you as well as for me.’ He said quietly. And with that he was gone.

And not a moment too soon.

Thomas heard the tell-tale click of the latch of the back door and the usual thump as it swung open.

He turned to see a very incensed Carson.

Thomas couldn’t help but feel a small glimmer of satisfaction at the sight of Carson’s rage immediately evaporating into something resembling disappointment upon finding him in the yard alone.

’Right, yes, well…’ Carson mumbled, turning to go back into the house.

He nearly bumped into Jimmy on his way out.

’Mr Carson.’ Said Jimmy with a quick nod of his head, flattening himself against the side of the door to allow Carson to pass. ‘Just popping out for a cigarette.’ He offered in answer to the unspoken question that Carson glowered at him.

Thomas stayed where he was, shell-shocked, in the middle of the yard.

Jimmy approached him gingerly; packet of cigarettes in his hand to offer to Thomas although he knew Thomas had plenty of his own.

They heard the back door swing shut.

’The front door?’ Said Thomas to Jimmy, taking the offered cigarette.

’Yep.’

’You answered?’

’I did.’

’Did anyone other than…?’

Jimmy glanced towards Thomas, his eyes lingering on the shaky hand with which Thomas brought the cigarette to his lips.

’I’ll tell you later.’ He said.
Chapter 16

Jimmy did tell him later.

However much he might have wanted to spare Thomas that particular piece of information, at least until he started to look less like a man on the verge of keeling over, the upcoming dinner service necessitated it.

Thomas had managed to avoid the majority of the staff for the remainder of the afternoon following Janek’s guest appearance. A combination of the upstairs silver store, the attic linen closet, the cellar wine store and the second east wing china cupboard (that last one, admittedly, he made up to explain his aimless wandering when a hall boy suddenly emerged from one of the reception rooms) kept the illusion of productivity while allowing him to stay hidden and, for the most part, alone.

But escaping the pomp and ceremony of the full family dinner service was impossible.

Consequently Jimmy had to grab him (on his way back from the mythical china cupboard) to tell him of Janek’s accidental audience with Robert.

At least the lingering trauma of Jimmy’s admission kept Thomas distracted enough to largely disregard the looks he got on entering the kitchens to collect his tray; some dark and glowering, as from Carson; others amused or curious, as from Mrs Patmore and Daisy who had evidently picked up more than a little gossip throughout the day.

He walked the stairs like a man going to his doom.

He could only hope that his Lordship, like Carson, would be too angry or disturbed to raise the matter for the present.

‘I gather you had a visitor today, Mr Barrow?’ Was, of course, the first thing out of Robert’s mouth the moment he’d finished pouring his wine.

Thomas’s pulse quickened.

He couldn’t begin to fathom the reason Lord Grantham chose to bring it up in front of the entire family. He would have at least hoped to receive whatever dressing down was coming in the sanctity of the after-dinner cigar smoke once the ladies had vacated the room.

From what Jimmy had told him there was a strong chance that Lord Grantham had grasped the situation with the same alarmingly sharp perception as Carson, and if that was the case there was no possible way the conversation would fit within the realm of appropriate dinner table talk.

Though he supposed perhaps that was the reason for bringing it up; making him fret but without any real intention of fully pursuing that line of enquiry. Maybe Robert just wanted to see him squirm in payback for being forced to deal with the…well, force…that was Janek.

But then, this was Robert.

Maybe he really was just curious.

‘Yes, my Lord.’ Thomas said, hoping he didn’t look as pale as he felt as he played the only card in his hand. ‘Mr Biel, from the Liverpool docks. He came to provide an update.’
That had Robert’s already perfect posture stretch straight out of the chair.

‘He is happy to report, sir, that the first of the two cargo ships is already put back out to sea.’ Said Thomas quickly, banking on Robert’s enthusiasm for his nautical investment to hide the fact that he hadn’t been expecting the report.

He wasn’t disappointed.

‘Oh, capital!’ Robert declared. ‘Repairs already concluded, how splendid.’ He said, beaming at the assembled family, inviting them to congratulate him on his achievement.

Cora raised her glass with a small smile and a nod of acknowledgement. The rest of the family greeted the announcement with the same level of attention and enthusiasm as would befit the mid-section of a four hour church sermon.

‘Yes sir.’ Said Thomas, feeling the blood return to his face.

He resisted the urge to give a triumphant sideways glance at Carson. His sense of relief at having confirmed the shaky alibi for Janek’s presence (beyond anything the Butler could reasonably question) was overpowering.

Not that that was likely to spare him and Carson from an excruciatingly awkward discussion about Janek’s undeniable other reason for being there, but Thomas had a feeling any attack from Carson would be mitigated by his Lordships apparent complicity in Janek having visited.

‘My Lord?’

Robert had said something Thomas hadn’t quite caught.

‘I asked which of the two ships, Mr Barrow?’ Said Robert.

Ah, was the first thing that came into Thomas’s head. Closely followed by some choice swear words.

Between Janek’s obviously fake ship name and the likely fact that Robert actually did know the names of the ships in the dock he had invested in…Thomas felt well and truly sunk.

‘SS Lesbian, sir.’ Thomas said, trying not to bite his lip as he finished speaking.

Across the table, Lady Edith gave the tiniest hint of a giggle, concealed behind a cream-coloured glove. Lady Mary gave her a death glare.

‘Ah yes!’ Robert exclaimed heartily with far more enthusiasm than befitting the formal dinner setting.

You could have knocked Thomas down with a feather.

‘Yes, the SS Lesbian. Pride of Swan, Hunter and Wigham Richardson Limited she was when she was built!’ Robert continued enthusiastically, seemingly unaware of the glazed eyes of the majority of the room’s occupants. Or that Thomas was near fainting.

‘She’s only been around since the summer of 1923 you know. A fine vessel…’

On and on it went; to the degree that the family were close to stuffing the cherries on their desert plates into their ears at the point where dinner was finally concluded.

But Thomas, for the present at least, was saved.
He went up to bed that night without supper. Something for which he was sure Carson was grateful, if only to avoid awkwardness over the servant’s dinner table.

He undressed from his uniform and re-dressed in his suit trousers, taking in the still lingering aroma of Liverpool (and the odd stubborn stain) as he pulled on the fabric. He left off his jacket and shirt for the present and got under the bed covers in the unlikely event that anyone should come into his room on their way to bed and notice his attire.

He debated briefly the idea of seeking Jimmy’s opinion of his nocturnal rendezvous. But he quickly dismissed the thought.

Admittedly Thomas had never had cause to test it, but he knew in his heart of hearts that such a conversation went beyond the bounds of the friendship Jimmy was able to offer.

Their friendship was not in that place. Not by a long way.

And even if it was, Thomas thought, the last thing he needed on top of whatever was to occur that night was someone asking him about it the next day.

So alone, he waited.

At length he heard the clattering footsteps of the others coming up to their rooms, heard the running of water in the bathroom, heard the hushed whispers of conversations continuing after lights out in the hall boys’ quarters, heard the unmistakeable sound of Carson’s door finally closing.

He reached out and took his watch off the night stand. It was midnight.

Thomas waited another good hour before getting up, padding gently on the balls of his feet over to where his shirt and jacket waited.

He donned his coat and paused for a moment at the door, not opening it until he was sure that the faint sound of half a dozen men snoring was the only sign of life to be had.

Like recalling how to ride a bike he stepped carefully from one non-creaky floorboard to the next, marvelling that the lay of the floor had not altered in almost ten years.

He waited until he was over half way down the stairs before allowing himself to walk normally.

Neatly lifting the spare keys from the drawer in Mr Carson’s office, he let himself outside.

His first thought, obvious though it may have been, was that the night was dark. Very dark.

And the breeze that blew down through the yard was chilling.

The unhospitable night air raised an unwelcome possibility.

Was it really realistic that Janek would still be lingering outside for him? Would Janek have even known how late it would be before he could leave the house? What if he’d given up and gone to bed?

The innkeeper would be long asleep by now. How could he hope to gain access to the building even if he knew which room Janek was in?

What if he got there, after the long walk, only to find an empty street, a deserted village square, and darkness?
Still his feet carried him forwards, onwards, out of the yard and into the black.
Chapter 17

The village was still and dead as Thomas entered.

Dark too.

The lamps were long since out and not a single light was to be seen from the tiny lead-light windows of the houses or in the fronts of the shops or post office. It looked desolate in the moonlight.

The open expanse of the village square seem too bare, too exposed and daunting to enter. So Thomas instead walked the long way round it, en route to the inn.

He avoided looking towards the front of the inn for the majority of that final stretch. But, eventually, as the growing wind whipped his coat about his legs, he looked up.

It was deserted.

No signs of life to be had.

Not even the nocturnal scavengers of foxes and cats that usually plagued the village after dusk.

Still, he walked.

And as he approached his perseverance was rewarded by the sight of a shadow emerging from the side of the building. A hulking shadow, foreboding in its appearance, but at the same time more welcome than Thomas cared to admit.

The half-moon of the clear night’s sky gave just enough light to allow Thomas to pick out the features of Janek’s face as he drew closer.

Thomas was not the least bit surprised to see that it wore an expression of knowing satisfaction.

Janek gave a small nod of his head by way of greeting.

Thomas didn’t return the gesture.

He kept his arms thrust tight against his side and his chin down against the cold of the night as he approached.

‘Well?’ He said as soon as he was close enough, his voice stern. ‘What is it?’

Thomas’s calculated coldness did nothing to diminish the look of smugness on Janek’s face.

‘Not here.’ The man jerked his head towards the small space between the inn and the neighbouring building.

Thomas looked over at the small space, the width of a narrow alleyway and in almost total darkness.

There were a number of potential uses for such a space, and Thomas had no interest in any of them.

‘Why?’ Thomas demanded sharply.

Janek gave a light snort. ‘Because…’ He said. ‘…here people could see you.’ He indicated around the expanse of the square and the numerous houses that looked out into it. ‘Now they don’t know
me, but I think they must know you. And besides…’ Janek turned away and started walking towards the alleyway. ‘…I see you shiver in the wind. There is no wind in here.’

Thomas followed him.

Janek leaned back against one wall while Thomas stood opposite at the other, one side of their faces still visible where the starlight fell at the entrance, the other in darkness.

‘Aren’t you cold?’ Said Thomas grumpily. Partly through the indignity of Janek pointing out his weakness, partly through noting that Janek had no coat.

‘This isn’t cold.’ Came the amused reply. ‘Not to me.’

Unable to muster a retort, Thomas settled himself against his wall and crossed his arms.

‘You going to tell me why I’m here?’

Janek nodded, but it was a while before he spoke.

‘I want to say first that you are interesting.’ Said Janek, his voice firm, his gaze unwavering on Thomas’s face. ‘You are confident, you are cheeky. You are a little like me, no?’ He continued, cracking a small smile. ‘So, of course, I like you. Your face is…not like any I’ve seen before. I like that too. You are so precise when you move, and when you speak, it is exciting to watch. But sometimes you are clumsy and real, and that makes me smile too. And I enjoyed…’

Thomas heard some of what he was saying. Not all though. Because he was distracted by the charged air between the two of them, the force that made his fingers twitch and want to reach out for the man in front of him.

‘And why…’ Thomas interrupted tersely, to shut Janek up as much as to distract himself from his own unwelcome thoughts. ‘…could you not have said this at the house?’ He demanded. ‘Saved me the walk? Saved me having to say, again, what I’ve already made bloody clear…’

‘I’m not finished.’

Janek’s steely assertion came so sharply that Thomas was cowed into silence.

‘You know what I think of you Thomas?’

Thomas shook his head, secretly nervous of the answer; though why he should set any validity by Janek’s opinion of him he had no idea.

‘That trick with Goodrich…’ Said Janek. ‘…the first time we met. That trick. That was good.’

Thomas gave a slight shrug. He wasn’t going to argue with that.

‘And the night. Nights, actually. Those nights were good.’

Thomas swallowed and looked away.

‘And you know what I found myself thinking, Thomas?’

Thomas pretended not to hear him.

Janek continued on, dauntless.
‘I found myself thinking here is a man sure of himself. More sure even than me.’

That last part was uttered as though it were the highest compliment imaginable. But Thomas didn’t enjoy it, because he knew a ‘but’ must follow sharply on its heels.

‘And yet his life is not his own. How can it be, I think to myself, that this man…has nothing. He looks after someone else. And that is all. He has nothing of his own, can do nothing that is for himself. How can that be?’

Thomas swallowed again at the growing lump in his throat. His cheeks became hollowed as he sucked them in, trying to keep his jaw from trembling. He wished himself many miles away; away from his life and away from the man questioning it. Somewhere private and alone where he wouldn’t have to think of either.

All he could do for the present was keep staring sideways out of the alleyway, away from Janek, towards the square.

‘How can he stand it?’ Said Janek quietly.

‘Everyone has to work.’ Thomas replied, his voice unable to reach more than a growling whisper.

‘Mmmm. Pain in the arse that is.’ Janek said with a laugh, evidently trying to lighten the mood. ‘But the thing; when I’m done for the day, I’m done. I can be out and about. Or at home. My home. I eat and drink where I want, I talk to who I want, go to bed when I want and if I don’t want to go home at all, that’s fine.’

Thomas listened in silence.

‘And while I’m at work…’ Janek continued. ‘…it doesn’t matter what I wear so long as the job gets done, I swear when I fucking well please and nobody disturbs my vitals break. My mates from the abattoir up the road come down sometimes and sit on the steps with me…’

‘That’s only your kind of job.’ Thomas said to the view of the square.

‘True. More free than most.’ Janek replied. ‘But I’d wager there’s some sort of in-between between the freedom in my world and the nothing in yours.’

‘I don’t have nothing.’ Thomas said.

‘What do you have Thomas?’

‘I’ve…’ Thomas swallowed again at that lump. ‘…a good salary, good standing, a roof over my head, good food…’

‘Name me one thing you have that you couldn’t get in another job.’ Janek said. ‘A job where your boss doesn’t own everything of you.’

More than anything, Thomas wanted to think of something. He wanted to think of something and he wanted to shout it in Janek’s face. But nothing would come. Or at least nothing to quash Janek’s damning judgement.

The working hours, the rules, the requirements, the pomp and ceremony of serving the upper classes in the exact manner required, and while living under their roof…there was nothing that Thomas could take to a man like Janek and say ‘Here! Here is why it is good to do what I do.’
Because how could he say the privilege of handling crystal and silver, beyond anything he could hope to afford himself in his lifetime, was somehow worth more than being able to have a life beyond his job.

And what good would it do to emphasise his half-day break to a man who routinely had several hours to himself (truly to himself) in the evenings before bed. And he’d wager that Janek didn’t work on a Sunday either.

The one positive that Thomas could muster that was peculiar to service was inclusion in the upper class family life, almost like being an extension of the family. But he’d seen too many staff forced to leave the Abbey over the years to dare try to present that relationship as anything other than one-sided and delusional. And any benefits to the sense of camaraderie to be had amongst the servants was mitigated by the complete and utter lack of privacy.

He couldn’t speak freely, dress freely, not even sleep freely. Every aspect was regulated and sanctioned. Every one.

In the end Thomas didn’t say a word. He just stood there, fighting the urge to smack his head against the wall in frustration.

‘There’s people sleeping on sacks in factories with more freedom than you.’ Said Janek. ‘And what I don’t understand is why you endure it. I don’t know if you have nothing because that’s what you want, or because you think you’ve no choice? Because, either way, you’re wrong.’

‘Well done.’ Thomas whispered.

‘What?’

‘Well done.’ Thomas repeated, extracting himself from the wall and moving to leave the alleyway because damned if he was going to cry in front of Janek.

A sudden and firm grip on his arm halted him in his tracks.

‘Thomas, what…?’

‘You want to get back at me for how I made you feel? Then you have.’ Thomas said to the floor. ‘I feel like shit. Well done. Now let me go.’

The grip on his arm remained strong, tugging him back until he was face to face with Janek.

‘I don’t come to make you sad. I come to offer a solution.’

‘Go fuck yourself.’

In spite of the situation, Janek creased up in laughter. ‘You know you are common when you are angry.’

‘And you go Polish.’ Thomas retorted.

That immediately put Janek’s amusement back in its box.

‘Look, Thomas…What I wanted to come here, all this way, to say is that I think you should leave this place. I think you should come to Liverpool and find a new job. And I think you should live with me.’

Thomas stared at him.
'That’s ridiculous.’ He eventually said. ‘I don’t even know you.’

‘Well…’ Janek snorted. ‘…you know me a little.’

Thomas chose to ignore the glint in Janek’s eye.

‘How could I even get another job?’ Thomas said, still staring at him incredulously.

‘Well…’ Said Janek. ‘…it usually goes like “Hello sir, may I have a job?”.’

‘It’s not that bloody simple.’

‘Why not?’

‘I…’ Thomas stuttered at the sheer ignorance of the man. ‘I’ll have references that aren’t relevant to the job, and I’ll need qualifications that I don’t have, experience I don’t have, and I’ve got no connections to speak of. I’ve worked here for ten years. How could I just up sticks and do something else? What place would have me?’

‘Were you in the war?’ Said Janek.

‘Yes.’ Said Thomas. ‘I was a medic.’

‘Well then.’ Janek declared. ‘There’s one skill you have beyond bathing the rich men.’

‘There’s a fair bit of that in medicine too.’ Thomas said sourly.

‘But still, you see my point?’ Said Janek.

Thomas gave a grudging nod.

‘So what else have you done?’

‘There’s no point to this…’

‘You must know how to do mending on clothes and things.’ Janek cut in. ‘You can read and write… Can you do numbers too?’

‘Yes, I can “do numbers” too.’ Thomas said in exasperation. ‘But…’

‘But what?’ Said Janek. ‘If it takes ages to find a job it doesn’t matter. You’ll be under my roof. And I won’t see you starve.’

‘But you’re not…’ Thomas chickened out of completing the sentence. ‘What would we even talk about?’

‘You don’t run out of things to say when there’s someone you want to talk to.’ Said Janek simply. ‘And I want to talk to you.’ He added.

There was a tenderness in that last sentence that turned Thomas’s stomach.

‘You’re not what I want.’ Thomas countered, forcing the hesitant tremble out of his voice; attempting with all his might to sound resolute. ‘And that’s that.’

And he thought he’d won for a moment. Thought he’d shut down the inexorable force that was Janek’s enthusiasm and confidence. Thought he’d finally convinced the man to give up and go,
leaving him to return to his crystal and silver and forget.

But then Janek turned those big, pale eyes on him.

‘I don’t think that true.’ Said Janek. ‘I’m almost sure. But if it is then, of course, I will go. But if there is even small part of you that thinks things would be different if you had freedom from this place, from the people you serve…Then I say to you now, you do not have to live through them.’

Thomas pushed him.

Pushed him hard backwards until he hit the wall.

Then he kissed him.

He managed several good tastes of Janek’s mouth before the latter shoved him back.

‘Is that your answer?’ Janek said, his eyes boring unflinchingly into Thomas’s.

They were pressed together at the chest, Janek’s hand still at Thomas’s arm; their proximity suddenly a maddening obstacle to logical thought for Thomas.

‘I don’t know.’ Said Thomas quietly. ‘But…’

He couldn’t help it.

He went to lean in again but Janek halted him, pressing his fingers to Thomas’s lips to push him back, releasing his hold on Thomas’s arm.

‘Janek…’

Janek sniffed and stepped away, rubbing at his mouth.

‘Well that’s all I had to say. The choice is with you.’ He said. ‘If you decide to come, then you know where to find me. You come and find me at the docks.’

Thomas watched as Janek walked away, wanting to say something but not trusting himself to speak.

Janek paused at the end of the alleyway. ‘I promise I won’t push you in the water again.’

Thomas couldn’t resist giving a bleat of laughter at that. And the smile on Janek’s face as he turned back was cheek personified.

But the moment soon passed.

And all was forlornness and frustration.

Thomas slowly followed Janek out onto the road.

They stood opposite one another in silence for some time.

‘Well I’d best be off then.’ Said Thomas softly.

Janek nodded.

‘You have a good sleep.’ Thomas continued, indicating towards the inn. ‘And safe journey tomorrow, yeah?’
Janek raised an eyebrow. ‘I’m not staying here.’ He said with a laugh. ‘Waste of money.’

‘What?’

‘I’ve gone nights without sleeping before. It’s nothing.’ Janek shrugged.

‘Oh for goodness sake let me…’ Thomas’s hand dove inside his coat in search of his wallet.

‘Thomas.’

Thomas’s hand froze mid-way through pulling his wallet out. He had never met anyone besides Carson who could make his name sound like such a dangerous warning before.

He let the wallet drop back into his pocket.

‘Suppose there’s no one up to check you in anyway.’ He said gingerly.

‘Mmmm.’ Janek agreed. ‘It’s not so long til the first bus anyway.’

‘Three hours.’

‘Like I said, not long.’

Now it was Thomas’s turn to raise an eyebrow.

Janek smiled at him.

‘And then I will get on the bus for free by begging the driver to help me get to my sick mother. And then I will ride the train by jumping into the cargo carts with no ticket. And then I will be home.’

‘You know…’ Said Thomas wryly. ‘…it’s much nicer riding in the train cars made for people.’ He went for his coat pocket again. ‘If you’d let me just…’

With a sharp slap Janek batted Thomas’s hand back down to his side.

Thomas shook the sting from his hand and looked quizzically back at Janek.

‘Don’t reach for your wallet in front of me again.’ Said Janek.

After a moment’s bewildered pause, Thomas nodded.

‘So.’ Said Janek, with a deep breath. ‘You said you were heading off?’

‘Yes.’ Thomas replied quietly. ‘I need to get back to my room soon or…’ Thomas trailed off.

Janek gave him a knowing look before dropping his gaze to the floor. He kicked at the stones on the road.

‘Are you going to think about it?’ He said, so quietly that Thomas almost missed it.

I don’t know, was what Thomas wanted to say. Because that was the truth. Because going back to Downton and wrapping himself up under the bedcovers and pretending the entire encounter had been a bad dream was a comforting and safe option. Thinking about it? Not so much.

But for the price of a single word he knew he could send Janek away lighter, with at least some semblance of happiness.
And he certainly owed him something.

‘Yes.’ Thomas said.
Chapter 18

One foot in front of the other, Thomas began to walk.
Away from the inn.
Down the road.
He took the long way around the square again.

*That man is an idiot.*

The wind kicked up about him, sending the tree branches swirling above him as he left the village.

*A fucking idiot.*

His feet attacked the surface of the packed dirt road with every step.

*Hello sir can I have a job?*

Thomas tugged the collar of his coat up against the wind.

*Bollocks.*

He shoved his hands into his pockets to ease the numbness in his fingers.

*Come to a city you hate.*

His eyes began to water as the wind buffeted his face.

*Fucking stupid.*

The trees crackled and creaked, whipping about the road.

*Live in a slum.*

Thomas plodded on.

*With a pauper.*

The pebbles of the road skitted about before him as he walked.

*Ridiculous.*

He began to run.

*At least he’ll be gone tomorrow.*

Down the road and to the footpath, he ran.

*You never have to see him again.*

His feet found every furrow in the footpath.

*And that’s the end of it.*
His shoes caught every muddy outcrop. He didn’t slow down.

*Because how could a sane man even consider leaving.*

For nearly forty minutes, he ran.

*You know your home is Downton.*

He let himself in the back door.

*You will be Butler here soon.*

He left the keys hanging in the lock.

*If not here then somewhere else. Somewhere better.*

He harried up the stairs and down the attic corridor.

*This is your world.*

He entered his room and closed the door with a soft click.

*You can’t leave.*

He reached up and knocked the suitcase atop the cupboard into his outstretched hands.

*The family have been good to you.*

Ripping his clothes off their hangers he shoved them into the case.

*And you couldn’t possibly leave them in the lurch.*

He pulled out his underwear drawer out the dresser and tipped the contents on top of his clothes.

*A month’s notice is essential.*

He scrambled to gather the contents of his nightstand and bureau.

*A note would be the very least of the required courtesy.*

Clipping the suitcase shut he tugged it with him over to the door.

*The graft of ten years required a proper send-off, proper protocol.*

Opening the door he stepped out into the corridor.

All was quiet save the sounds of sleep.

Adjusting his grip on the case Thomas began to walk. He paused for a moment outside Jimmy’s door but he didn’t linger. His heart pounded in his chest as he hit a creaky slat on the stairs. But he pressed on, downwards, spiralling down to the underbelly of the house.

His feet hit the stone floor of the servant’s quarters with a dull thud.

‘Mr Barrow?’

He turned to see Daisy, on her way out the kitchens with a basket. Behind her he could see the
scullery maids at work in the kitchens, lighting the stoves.

He held a finger to his lips.

Daisy stopped walking.

She looked him up and down, her eyes growing wide at the sight of the suitcase. When her gaze travelled back up to meet his it was with a look of deep wonder in her eyes.

His eyes answered the unspoken question.

Her mouth formed a small smile. Her grip on the basket tightened.

‘Goodbye Thomas.’ She whispered.

‘Goodbye.’ Thomas mouthed back.

With a quick nod, he spun about on his heel and made for the back door.

His feet crunched across the yard, quickly finding the exit, and out onto the path.

He soon reached the point at which the road turned into the trees. And he didn’t look back.

He didn’t risk running again, he wasn’t sure the clasps on his suitcase would survive it. So instead he walked with as much speed as he could muster, which gave him plenty of time to marvel at his ability to fit a lifetime’s worth of possessions into a single case.

The first bus had come and gone by the time he reached the village.

Thomas took a seat on the bench, his case by his feet. Strumming his fingers nervously against his knees he offered greeting to the early-birds of the village as they passed him by in the fresh dawn light.

He was up and on his feet the moment the bus came around the corner.

He looked about behind him as he climbed into the bus, lest a familiar rust-coloured jacket come into view from across the square. But as he passed money to the driver he boarded alone. It would seem Janek wasn’t lying about taking the first bus of the day.

He was one of only three people on the bus as it trundled away, which allowed him to keep his case on the seat beside him. He kept his hand resting on it for support, keeping his eyes straight and forwards throughout the journey until the fields gave way to houses and the station building came into view.

Thomas got off the bus without thanking the driver; his attention was fully ahead on the station.

There was no rust-coloured jacket to be seen inside the station concourse either. Not that Thomas had expected there to be.

The boards told him that the first train out across to the west was still at the platform.

The beat of his heart matching the frantic pounding of his steps, Thomas hurried to the ticket office.

‘No.’ He said, when he was asked if he wanted a return ticket. And from the look the man at the ticket office gave him, he must have accompanied the answer with a very disconcerting expression.
The whistles were blowing as he got on the platform. Risking a run for the final stretch he made his way down to the first carriage he could reach and slipped himself and his case through the open door only seconds before an attendant pulled it shut for departure.

With a scream of steam and a harsh squeal of metal on metal, the train was on the move.

The sounds were the sweetest noise. Inviting Thomas’s nerves and body to finally relax. Now, he found, he could look out the window.

Thomas watched the sidings slide out of view, watched the buildings once more give way to open moorland.

His eager eyes took in each village they passed, every passenger on each platform they stopped at.

Every mountainous hill, every white rushing river, and finally the flat lands as they neared their goal.

To the south he could see the first outlines of the factories of the Mersey river banks in the distance.

Then the fields were gone and there were houses upon houses.

He lifted a good few inches off his seat when the small houses finally gave way to the densely packed grey expanse of the city scape and his view was reduced to the buildings and walls immediately adjacent to the tracks.

Nearly there.

And then there was the station.

He was fully on his feet before the train had come to a stop. He had to grab hold of the back of a stranger’s seat to steady himself as he made his way over to the door, dragging his case behind him.

The porter had to dive backwards to avoid being mown down as Thomas clambered down the steps to the platform, missing out the middle step entirely.

But instead of running to the platform exit, Thomas instead walked the opposite direction.

He came to a halt just before the first cargo carriage, watching the steam and smoke billowing along the platform gap, obscuring the side of the train.

Behind him the platform began to empty out. Those that were getting off had gotten off, and the staff were readying the train to continue on to the sidings to uncouple.

But Thomas waited.

The whistles squealed again, heralding all passengers were out.

Thomas waited.

The noises of the huge engine dumping off steam sounded from behind him.

He waited.

And there, finally, four cargo carts down, he saw the outline of a familiar figure.

The figure in rust-red brown began making its way down the platform.
Thomas watched as Janek walked towards him, unable to let his eyes stray even for a second in case he missed the moment when…

Janek stopped walking.

Even at a distance Thomas could make out his open mouthed shock.

Janek stayed where he was, staring, disbelieving on all accounts.

Thomas took a few slow steps towards the bewildered man.

Janek’s jaw remained at floor level.

Thomas flashed him the most triumphant of smiles.

And then Janek was running, and smiling.

And Thomas moved forward to meet him.

They stopped before they made contact.

Their eyes had to do the rest.
They left the station with Janek carrying Thomas’s case in one hand, with the other planted firmly on Thomas’s shoulder. Catching sight of the looks the men lined up around the station exit were giving them, Thomas went to pull away as they emerged onto the street. But Janek refused to relinquish the contact, half-pushing, half-guiding Thomas out of the station.

‘It’s not what you think.’ Said Janek, leaning in to shout into Thomas’s ear to compete with the din of the street. The rattling of the cars collecting wealthy embarkees, combined with the braying of horses pulling supply carts, and dozens of men and women trying to interest people in whatever the large wicker baskets at their feet contained had Thomas screwing up his face in disapproving discomfort.

He followed Janek’s eye-line as he looked back over their shoulders; the original group of men were still glaring daggers in their direction and, to Thomas’s panic, so were what looked like two police officers. Thomas made another attempt to shake free from Janek’s hold.

‘Easy!’ Janek laughed. ‘I say again, it’s not what you think.’

‘No?’ Said Thomas, glancing nervously back again, expecting in all honesty to find their sullen observers giving chase as they made their way across the street.

‘Those men…’ Janek said, loudly, into Thomas’s ear. ‘…they are angry I saw you first.’

‘Look, this isn’t something you can take the bloody piss about…’

‘Because…’ Janek continued with a grin. ‘…they would very much like to offer to carry your case for you…’

‘I don’t follow.’ Said Thomas curtly, frustrated by Janek’s apparent lack of self-preservation instincts.

‘…And then perhaps you arrive in a crowd of people and the nice stranger who carried your bag vanishes away.’ Janek winked at him. ‘And you never see your case again.’

‘Ah…’

‘Like I say, they are sorry they didn’t see you first.’

‘And the police…?’

Janek chuckled. ‘They are wondering if you are important or rich enough to be worth helping. Hmmmm…’ He looked back as they turned into the next road. ‘…looks like not.’

Under the circumstances Thomas had hoped to be able to look at his most loathed city through fresh eyes, but to have been blatantly ignored by the local police while appearing to be in the act of being robbed was not the most auspicious of starts.

Still, that worry aside, Thomas couldn’t help but appreciate Janek’s ability to take it in his stride that his poor clothing, in comparison to Thomas’s, meant people instantly assumed some kind of con was being perpetrated rather than there being any legitimate attachment between the two of them.

The assumption did have its advantages; chief among them the perfectly ‘innocent’ explanation of a
thief attempting to lull his victim into a false sense of security to explain Janek’s seeming inability to detach his hand from Thomas’s shoulder as they strode through the noisy throngs down into a place Janek enthusiastically introduced as Church Street.

The street was wide, but enclosing buildings loomed large above them. Thomas paused a moment to take in the street-front businesses (as opposed to the vendors standing literally in the street), having a vested interest now he was here in attempting to evaluate the city as a place to live; rather than just a place to house an overly excitable noble, and pubs in which to hide from him.

He found little to immediately improve his opinion of the place, and the car that nearly took out his elbow as he raised his hand to shield the sun from his eyes didn’t help. Being reminded of his lack of hat didn’t do much to improve his mood either.

If he was honest with himself there was just too much to take in. He couldn’t focus on the continuous tirade of place names and anecdotes that Janek shouted in his ear as they walked. And the strange dichotomy of people on the street, the silk cravat brigade marching side by side with scraggly filth, alarmed him; not to mention had his hand going to his pockets to check his watch and wallet were still there at regular intervals until Janek sternly told him to stop signposting their location (in particular as regards to his wallet) to all and sundry.

Ultimately, he knew he was glad to be there. And the treat of Janek’s physical proximity had a significant bolstering effect.

But for the present keeping his nerves sufficiently together to avoid being taken for a simpleton or lunatic by the casual observer was the limit of his engagement. Good humour and being appropriately educated about his new surroundings would have to wait.

He was glad when Janek turned them off of the wide street and into its smaller neighbour, then onwards to a far narrower and less busy street that nevertheless maintained a boarder of tall and imposing residential buildings. Thomas recognised the style of them; he had seen similar buildings in London, and served tea (among other things) in more than a few.

Away from the worst of the noise and the crowds Thomas was able to let his pulse relax a little. But this new place brought its own challenges. The first and most disquieting being the sense of isolation away from the bustle of the busy shopping street, the second being the lack of sunlight at street level in the broad shadow of the buildings. And the dark soot-stained colour of their stone fronts gave a decidedly foreboding appearance.

But most unnerving was the feeling of alienation that swept over him as he craned his head up to take in the full view of the terraced town-houses. He didn’t belong there anymore; whoever owned those places, he had just voluntarily removed himself from their world and the sudden feeling of loss was overwhelming.

‘And here we are!’

‘What?’ Thomas blinked and gave a slight shake of his head to bring himself back to the present.

‘Here.’ Said Janek simply, raising the suitcase as though it were feather-light to indicate the building directly ahead.

Thomas looked at the building, then back at Janek, then back at the building again.

‘You are joking?’

‘Do I look like a man who would joke?’ Said Janek cheekily.
Thomas couldn’t help but give a smile at that.

‘No, really…’ Janek released Thomas’s shoulder and strode towards the door step. ‘…come.’

Thomas stayed where he was.

Janek gave a noise like an impatient horse. Stepping back towards Thomas he halted in front of him, standing toe to toe, he clamped his hand back on Thomas’s shoulder.

‘Over there…’ Janek indicated sideways with a raise of his chin. ‘…that way back to the main streets. Further over there…’ He tilted his head again. ‘…station. Behind…’ He tossed his head to indicate beyond the row of buildings. ‘…water and many men carrying bags to boats. And here…’ He began to walk backwards, tugging Thomas along with him. ‘…home.’

Thomas let Janek’s grip guide him forwards.

Now that the initial overwhelming impression of affluence suggested by the building’s size and façade had faded Thomas was able to scrutinise the place properly. He soon noted that the curtains hanging in the windows, where there were any to be seen, had a decidedly un-affluent look about them. And the same was true of the buildings that flanked it on either side, one of which was missing the majority of its window-panes.

‘No one with money has lived here for a long time…’ Said Janek, guessing at the roots of Thomas’s confusion. ‘…Too many scary men and ladies by the docks.’ Janek explained, giving a theatrical roll of his eyes as the corners of his mouth twitched into that familiar young and yet devilish smile.

‘But is your living here…’ Thomas struggled to find a delicate way of putting it. ‘…legitimate?’

Janek brought them to a stop at the front door. The trace of where a large brass knocker had adorned the wood was picked out in its peeling green paint, likewise the remnant house number.

‘Do I squat here?’ Said Janek. ‘No.’ He said.

Thomas couldn’t miss the unspoken ‘Idiot’ that Janek was clearly tempted to follow with.

Janek opened the front door without a key and stepped inside.

Thomas gingerly followed him into a thin hallway.

He was pleasantly surprised to find things inside to be sparse but for the most part neat. There were no paintings on the walls, but neither was there ripped wallpaper or scratched obscenities. The carpet was old and threadbare but had been swept in the not too distant past. And the small lamps protruding from the walls looked like they might actually work.

All the doors that led from the hallway were closed, though Thomas knew without looking that the door to his right would have once led to a drawing room, the door to the left to a more informal parlour and the door straight ahead to the dining area.

‘Come.’ Janek said, leading the way up the staircase that hugged along the right-hand wall.

Intrigued, Thomas followed.

He found the first floor landing to be in much the same condition as the downstairs hall, although here he could see a small scorch mark in the wallpaper a short way down; as though someone had accidentally set a fire but caught it before it had gotten out of hand and lacked either the inclination or
funds to repair the damage.

‘Come.’ Janek said again, ignoring the stairs leading up to the second floor and instead stepping away down the corridor. ‘A woman, Mrs Porter, she owns the house. And she has made flats from it. We all pay to be here.’ He said, glancing to check that Thomas was following close behind. ‘She lives downstairs.’

Thomas nodded to indicate he understood.

‘This one is mine.’ Janek said, coming to a halt a few doors down.

Thomas’s nerves had been soothed a little by Janek’s confirmation of the ‘legitimate’ nature of his living arrangements, but he couldn’t quite dispel a potent sense of dread at the thought of what might lie beyond the door.

That Janek, The Unshakable, suddenly seemed nervous too as his hand lingered on the doorknob did nothing to quell Thomas’s fears.

‘So…um…’

‘Yes…So…’ Thomas replied.

‘Here we are.’ Said Janek, one hand on the doorknob while Thomas’s case still dangled from the other.

‘Yes.’

‘We are here.’

‘Yes.’

Janek kicked at the door gently with the toe of his boot but his hand remained motionless on the doorknob.

Thomas stepped forwards and reached for it. His fingers briefly covered Janek’s before the latter relinquished his hold.

With a deep breath, Thomas opened the door.
The door swung open far more easily than Thomas had anticipated for such a heavy looking thing. The momentum set him stumbling forwards.

He braced himself, eyes closed, expecting to painfully encounter some furniture or other debris. But his shins found nothing of the sort.

He opened his eyes.

The size shocked him. Though as to why that should be the case, given he’d been in such buildings before, he had no idea.

The room was familiar in size alone. Thomas could tell at a glance that none of the furniture was original (nor suitable to be so) and it was dwarfed by the spatial expanse of the walls and the high ceiling.

One single metal framed bed was pushed against the wall in the far left hand corner, while a second sat a little away from the wall in the central position that would have once held a full-sized double bed and canopy. In fact the remnants of the canopy persisted above it, making the bed appear all the more tiny. The first bed was made, after a fashion, but the second was presently serving a storage function.

Thomas recognised the clothes messily scattered on top of the second bed as Janek’s.

‘I wasn’t really expecting…’

Janek skirted round Thomas and bounced the suitcase onto the first bed in the left hand corner. He continued on to the second bed and began to gather up the scattered clothes.

Thomas’s lips gave a hint of a smile at Janek’s bustling panic as his gaze moved across the room, following Janek’s movements (clothes in hand) past the empty corner to the far right and to the hodge-podge assemblage of wooden storage units arranged below the two windows of the street-facing wall.

While Janek worked on returning his clothes messily to the drawers, Thomas continued his inspection. This was evidently one of the rooms without curtains that he had noted from the street. A glance upwards confirmed that the railings still protruded from the walls above the windows, dull and in need of polishing but otherwise serviceable.

The plaster of the walls was painted a dull yellow, or at least it had been at least a decade previous. Now the gay colour was discoloured by damp and soot. A few hair-thin but lengthy cracks ran the full height of the wall between the windows above Janek’s hunched shoulders.

‘Could use a paint.’ Said Thomas, taking a moment to stare at the expanse of Janek’s back before continuing his inspection.

‘I’ve been meaning to.’ Janek noisily closed the drawer.

‘For how long?’ Asked Thomas wryly.

‘Four years or so.’ Said Janek, earning himself a laugh from Thomas. ‘I’m sorry but I really wasn’t expecting you to come straight back…’ He began again, sounding highly agitated as he began to
scramble together the scattered bowls, spoons and general rubbish on top of the neighbouring chest of drawers. A comb and small tin went skitting onto the floor as he did so.

Thomas could see that the drawers (and he suspected the nearby chests also) were largely empty and he couldn’t help but have a secret smile at Janek’s inability to keep things put away despite the surplus of storage.

‘Don’t worry…’ Thomas said a tad teasingly. ‘…I don’t think you’ve enough bits and bobs to properly make a mess here.’

Janek made a noncommittal grunting noise as he continued to attend to the task of stacking the bowls.

Thomas turned to look to his immediate right.

Here perhaps was the most stark evidence of the room’s downfall. A side of the fireplace had been cut (or hacked) away to insert a heavy-set metal stove into the side of it, ruining the original stone surround and quite possibly making the entire chimney breast structurally unstable. More cracks ran above the cavity. In front of the stove sat a single wooden chair. Beyond, set into the remaining corner, was a large metal basin flanked by two thin shelves that contained stacks of pots and pans.

Dangerous though the stove installation was, Thomas felt compelled to respect its practicality. Combining it with the beds and basin, here were the means of conducting the majority of the daily tasks of life; hidden away inside private walls.

Yes there were issues - there was only a single chair, there was no table to be had, the walls were in desperate need of a paint, none of the furniture matched and the chimney may well collapse and take the wall down with it - yet he couldn’t help but conclude that his present location was a significant improvement on his previous situation.

Not to mention it’s constituting something of an unforeseen means of fulfilment of long-held dream of living ‘upstairs’.

Thomas’s composure broke as a burst of hysterical laughter ejected itself from his throat at the odd thought.

‘What?’ Said Janek, looking over his shoulder with a frown.

‘No, it’s just…’ The muscles in Thomas’s stomach gave an uncomfortable clench as he attempted to suppress a powerful bout of giggles.

‘What?’ Janek said, sounding indignant but at the same time fearful.

‘Bathroom?’ Thomas quickly asked by way of segue.

‘Across the hall, two doors down.’ Janek replied, abandoning the now largely empty wooden surfaces under the windows and coming back to stand closer to Thomas in the empty expanse of the centre of the room. ‘There’s running water here. And all the…ah…things are inside.’

Thomas blanched a little at that, having honestly not considered that a lack of running water or inside privy might be a possibility. He was glad to hear he was spared that particular horror; though he shied away from querying with Janek how many others used the same bathroom. Or whose responsibility it was to clean.

‘And so this is…’ Thomas’s turned to complete his evaluation, his eyes coming to rest on the pegs by
Behind him he heard Janek give a sharp intake of breath at precisely the moment he recognised the two objects hanging from the pegs; the first was the straggly coat that Janek had not felt it necessary to take for his overnight trip, and the second…

‘That’s mine.’ Thomas said, somewhat redundantly, staring at the black bowler hat in disbelief.

‘Yes…’ Said Janek gingerly. ‘…Now, like I said I wasn’t expecting you to come right back. Otherwise I’d have…’

‘What hidden it?’ Said Thomas, reaching for it.

‘No, don’t!’ Thomas heard Janek’s footsteps behind him, at first rapid then coming to a dead halt as Thomas’s fingers touched the brim.

‘Why are you worried?’ Said Thomas, turning it over in his hands, noting it was only slightly stained and miss-shaped from its travels. ‘I went in the water too remember…I’m just touched you rescued it. Ah…’ He suddenly exclaimed, turning towards Janek. ‘…Now I see! I promise I won’t tease you for being so soft.’ He said with a wink, setting the hat daintily atop his head to test out the post-Mersey-dunked brim for size.

Janek’s face disappeared into his hand.

‘It’s not like that.’ He said through his fingers.

‘Then how is it?’ Said Thomas, easing the hat further down over his hair in an attempt to remind it of the shape of his head.

‘I fished it out and brought it back here…’ Janek said, hand still shielding the majority of his face. ‘…for fun. You know, before we met up that first night. Before we…’

‘Fun?’

‘Yes.’ Said Janek. ‘For Liam to wear on…not his head.’

The hat made it half-way across the considerable length of the room before striking the floor.

‘Oh Christ almighty!’ Thomas yelled, his composure having gone from regal to juvenile in the space of a second. He busily fluffed his hand through his previously neat hair to dispel any lingering essence from the hat. ‘You…Ugh! God fucking bloody…!’

Thomas sank down into the solitary chair by the fireplace to enable the energy wasted on maintaining his balance to be repurposed into scratching at his head.

‘If it’s any bargain…’ Janek said, coming to stand in front of Thomas’s hunched figure. He caught one of Thomas’s hands in his own, stilling it against the side of Thomas’s head as he crouched down in front of him and moved to take control of the other. ‘…I think you are the best fun when you are like this.’

With Janek’s large hands either side of his head it didn’t take Thomas long to calm, but his face still wore an expression of deep disgust even as he looked towards Janek feeling desperate to laugh.

‘You honestly telling me you stuck my hat on a bloke’s…?’

‘It was funny, really.’ Said Janek. ‘If I were you I’d be sorry you missed it.’
Thomas gave a brief chuckle before taking advantage of the other man’s proximity to lean his weary forehead against Janek’s.

‘Bastard.’

‘Sorry.’

Thomas sighed.

‘But…’ Said Janek. ‘…you do remember the part about me moving him away once you and I…got to know each other more?’

‘Mmmm, yes.’ Said Thomas with a sniff. ‘How’ve you been affording this place by yourself for the past month anyway?’

‘Irish bloke.’ Said Janek, keeping his forehead to Thomas’s, closing his eyes in contentment. ‘Came here looking for work a couple of weeks back. Didn’t find any. Sodded off.’

‘And did he…also wear my hat?’

Janek chuckled, moving his face to Thomas’s, nestling their noses side by side with lips almost touching.

‘No…’ Said Janek softly, his breath playing over Thomas’s mouth. ‘…no he did not.’

‘Well then…’ Thomas mimicked the gentle tone of Janek’s voice, leaning their faces that little bit closer, letting the curtains of their hair shut out the world about them. ‘…I have to say…’ He said, his lips now close enough to Janek’s to brush against them as he spoke. ‘…go be a dear and throw the damn thing out the window, will you?’

‘Aaah!’ Janek groaned, withdrawing and giving the floor a sharp slap before raising himself to his feet.

He fished the hat up off the floor, displayed it one more time to Thomas, then stomped over to open the nearest window.

The hat went unceremoniously out into the street.

The pane of glass in the window very nearly followed it as Janek yanked it shut.

Thomas stayed where he was in the chair, smiling wickedly at Janek as he turned back to face him.
Chapter 21

‘Mmmhmm…’ Janek cleared his throat.

Thomas’s smile faltered a little.

A conversation of some kind about the odd events of the past 24 hours was inevitable, but he found himself uncomfortably nervous at the prospect.

‘I just…um…’ Janek jabbed a thumb in the direction of the door.

No, the man wasn’t readying for a speech. The man just wanted the bathroom.

Thomas gave a shaky laugh. ‘I’ll…still be here when you get back.’ He said.

‘Right, yes.’ Janek seemed unwilling to take his eyes off him, almost going so far as to motion for Thomas to stay precisely where he was, in the chair. But thinking better of it as he backed away.

Thomas watched Janek disappear out the door.

He dragged himself up to his feet and moved to stand over by the window. Leaning against the frame he stared blankly at the building opposite. He let a long exhale of breath puff out his cheeks in a highly undignified manner, leaving a small cloud of condensation on the glass.

He was glad of a moment to himself. And he suspected Janek felt the same. He couldn’t quite find it credible that Janek would shy away from informing an interloper of what he intended to do in the bathroom under normal circumstances (whether he knew the interloper or not) and so was forced to conclude that Janek was feeling equally stunned by the situation as he was. Especially now that the bustle of travelling through the city was over.

He stared at the mucky bricks of the building across from the window, it was almost the length of the entire terrace on the opposing side. Utterly featureless as a hulking wall save for protruding bare poles that had held up banners in better days. And there were no windows to speak of.

It made Thomas shudder, the thought of it being occupied or empty was equally disquieting, but at least they wouldn’t need to worry about anyone spying through Janek’s extreme lack of curtains.

‘God…’ Thomas whispered, turning to look at the room behind him; half expecting it to have vanished in the manner of a mirage.

No, it was still there. And so was he.

He turned back to glance down at the shadowy street below.

The sight of his hat lying upturned and abandoned, a good twenty feet or so below where he was standing, was oddly painful.

He seriously debated running down to retrieve it. Mysterious stains and all.

‘Alright there?’ The door of the bedroom swung shut. After a few seconds delay Thomas heard Janek slide the bolt across to lock the door, evidently having taking a moment to consider whether or not to do so before committing.

Thomas nodded, rotating just enough to allow him to rest his back against the wall beside the
window as he faced Janek. His hands were clasped behind him at the small of his back, pressed into the plaster by his weight.

He was trained to stand to attention when someone entered the room. And to not need to restrain his hands behind his back to avoid fidgeting while in someone’s presence.

Likewise the man across from him, schooled in the art of overt physicality and coarse words, looked uncomfortable pacing with a mute hesitancy slowly across the floor, silent and subtle. Unnerving Thomas as much as himself in the process.

‘So…you alright?’ Janek repeated quietly, swaying ever so slightly on the balls of his feet as he stared over at Thomas.

Thomas nodded, tongue temporarily failing him.

‘I’m alright.’ He managed eventually. He shifted against the wall at his back, grazing the side of his un-gloved hand a little against the plaster in the process. ‘And you?’

‘Oh I’m…’ Janek gave a sharp exhale. ‘…I’m definitely alright.’ Janek directed his vivid eyes directly onto Thomas’s, wide open. And as ever Thomas was taken aback by the ethereal quality of their paleness. ‘Very much alright.’

‘Well that’s…good.’ Thomas said as Janek slowly approached.

‘I really didn’t expect…’ Janek trailed off, although this time it wasn’t an interruption from Thomas that halted his speech but rather a mutual understanding between the two of them of precisely what it was he was getting at.

‘To be honest, neither did I.’ Said Thomas. His breathing became shallower the closer Janek came. ‘I didn’t even tell anyone. I just…packed up and went. Came here.’

Janek rested his palms at Thomas’s chest, fingertips at his shoulders.

‘What have I done to you?’ He asked. One half of his mouth quirked up in a grin.

‘Got me to the arse end of England.’ Thomas replied, attempting a show of grumpiness, looking everywhere but Janek’s face to avoid grinning back at him.

‘Eh!’ Janek poked him playfully in the shoulder. ‘Try again.’ He said, still unable to stand quite still as he settled himself even closer.

Thomas rolled his head back against the wall.

‘Got me…’ He said nonchalantly. ‘…out of house and home, employment…’

Janek was so close he could feel the warmth of him, but despite taking undeniable pleasure in it Thomas unconsciously pressed back further against the wall, keeping daylight between them.

‘How about…’ Janek said, echoing Thomas’s lazy speech in his Liverpudlian drawl. ‘…rescued you from toil in a prison of stiff shirts.’

Thomas gave a bark of a laugh at that.

‘So…’ Janek continued, tilting his head a little, regarding Thomas with a smug smile. ‘…what shall be my reward for this service?’
‘Oh, there’s many things I’d want to give a man for bringing me to Liverpool.’ Said Thomas, head still lolled back against the wall. ‘Wouldn’t exactly use the word “reward” to describe them…’

Janek’s fingers found Thomas’s chin, catching and bringing them face to face. The tip of his thumb rested at the corner of Thomas’s mouth. The cheeky grin was unfaltering on his face.

The lightly tawny skin of Janek’s face was smooth and robust, even more so up close in the daylight now that Thomas was getting a good look at it. And those few but telling age-lines of entrenched smiles by the cheeks and eyes were all the more prominent in Janek’s current demeanour. And Thomas found the lot of it all the more tantalising.

But still he went to move minutely away, and he realised he was doing it that time.

‘Then what punishment perhaps?’ Said Janek, so so close to him.

Thomas was on the brink of squirming away entirely.

Then he realised.

He was alone, in a locked room, with the most receptive of all men he had had the good fortune to chance upon in life.

He couldn’t quite believe his own hesitancy, however potent he knew the entrenched reasons for it to be. His mouth cracked into a smile at the ridiculousness.

‘I see…’ He said, deciding making a game of his avoidance was the best way to avoid acute embarrassment. ‘…Ah, yes, I see now what he is getting at.’

‘Yes?’ Said Janek.

‘Yes.’ Thomas replied, pushing his lips against Janek’s almost before he’d finished the word.

Janek’s lips opened with a sound of deep satisfaction, pushing back in an effort to match Thomas’s enthusiasm. For once, he fell short; having to work hard to keep up even with the directing influence of the hand Thomas had raised to twist and tangle in his hair.

With a sigh, Thomas snaked his other hand around Janek’s neck, his forearm supported by the bulk of Janek’s shoulder; tugging him closer, closing the daylight.

Janek’s hand moved to the side of Thomas’s face while the other found his waist under the fabric of his jacket, palming the rise of his hip through his shirt.

Those lips. Thomas was happy to linger there. And the mouth.

Janek had a heady flavour to him. Thomas was dimly aware that his own mouth was lacking the usual tooth brush and cigarette he used to keep his breath unobjectionable. But ripe though the both of them might have been from a lack of sleep and a long travel, they still found in each other the most gratifying essence.

‘Ah…’

It was hard to say which of them had made the embarrassing noise, but any deliberation Thomas may have made on the matter was cut off by the feeling of Janek’s fingers grappling at the front of his trousers.

Thomas let his head settle back against the wall, a daffy smile of contentment tinged with disbelief.
playing across his face as Janek’s considerable form sunk down to waist height.

With a firm roll of his tongue on the underside, trapping the tip briefly for a tease against his teeth, Janek swallowed Thomas down.

He was immediately engulfed, feeling the back of Janek’s throat and tongue easing him repeatedly inwards, sucking greedily. Janek’s nose and lips at the base of his shaft, nuzzling at the hair there, taking in all the tastes and scents to be had.

Thomas’s chest heaved, his breath catching in his throat.

Any smart-arsed tease or words of encouragement he might have said were reduced to his taking one of Janek’s hands from his hips and moving it up, under his shirt, to his heart; hoping his heart-beat would do what his words could not in showing Janek the extent of the effect his attentions were having.

Janek’s movements were infinitely more enthusiastic, not that Thomas would have believed such a thing possible, than their previous encounter. And it soon transpired, as Thomas felt every muscle in his body twitch and contract, that this was born of a deep impatience to receive his…Well, in a mere matter of minutes Thomas was spent and ready to buckle his knees.

‘Ha!’ Janek declared triumphantly, bounding up from his knees. His hand was still on Thomas’s heart, leaving Thomas’s shirt to bunch roughly up against his chest. But Thomas was thankful for it, at least it kept him standing, able to meet Janek’s exalted expression head on.

They stared at one another for a moment, panting. Janek holding Thomas up, and Thomas wrapping his hand over Janek’s scarred forearm by way of appreciation as he was still beyond speaking words.

When Thomas got it together enough to begin the task of tucking himself back in, Janek judged him stable enough to let go. He moved over to the makeshift kitchen and dipped a waiting tin cup into a basin of water and took a long swig, repeatedly looking back to smile at the flushed figure of Thomas.

‘Well…God.’ Was about all Thomas could manage, still leaning back against the wall for support.

Janek chuckled and set the cup back on the counter. He walked back, past Thomas, giving Thomas a couple of pats on the shoulder as he went. Janek continued onwards over to the beds on the far side of the room.

‘If you don’t object…’ He said, going all the way over to the side of the bed pushed into the corner. He freed himself from the ruddy coloured jacket. ‘…I think some sleep would be good now.’ The jacket came to rest carelessly on the floor. ‘No sleep last night and do like sleep when I can.’

Thomas frowned at the light still streaming through the windows. He knew without looking at his pocket watch that it was barely past midday.

‘But…aren’t you going back to work?’

‘Tomorrow…’ Said Janek, tugging his ill-fitting shirt off over his head without undoing a single button. The manoeuvre revealed a taunt swell of skin, that distracted Thomas almost enough to make Janek’s next words unintelligible. ‘…I took two days.’

‘But…’ Thomas said. ‘…aren’t you worried? You said that Irish man was looking for work and couldn’t find any. Aren’t you worried that if you don’t go in that they’ll…?’ His speech was ended by a very visual reminder that Janek was not given to wearing anything under his trousers. He
blinked and quickly directed his gaze to the floor.

‘No.’ Said Janek, as though it were the most foolish thought in the world. ‘I’m good. And I have skill.’

That you do, Thomas thought to himself.

With nothing else to add, Thomas’s addled mind decided that sleep was perhaps a very attractive proposition indeed.

He crossed the room, taking care to give Janek his privacy as he bent down to shuffle the discarded clothes into something resembling an orderly pile. He sat down on the second bed, facing the opposite way.

Thomas shrugged out of his jacket and got to work on his shoelaces.

‘Thomas.’ Came Janek’s voice from behind him.

‘Mmmm?’ Said Thomas, hunched over as he peeled off his socks.

‘Thomas.’

‘Yes?’ Said Thomas, he leant sideways to pull back the covers of the bed a little, hoping Janek wouldn’t notice or be too offended at his need to check they were clean.

‘THOMAS!’

‘What!?’ Thomas demanded, twisting about to look behind him to Janek’s bed.

It took some effort to maintain his grump at the sight of Janek stretched out on his side, covers pooled around his feet. But he just about managed it.

‘What are you doing Thomas?’

‘I’m…getting ready for bed.’ Said Thomas, nodding down at the bed he was sat on, easing the knot of his tie open with a firm finger.

‘I meant for you to sleep here.’ Said Janek, giving his mattress a thump.

‘Oh.’ Thomas paused, tie mid-way undone, stretched out from his throat. The urge to release the constricting buttons at his throat also was suddenly very strong. ‘But…is there room?’ He said eventually, eyeing the single bed and Janek’s breadth with sceptical eyes.

‘Of course.’ Said Janek. ‘Come.’

‘You are rather wide you know.’ Said Thomas, bewildered.

‘Not on my side.’ Janek indicated down the length of his body, giving Thomas’s eyes a very good signposting to the entire package, though the gesture was clearly intended to support Janek’s point rather than for erotic effect.

‘Right.’ Said Thomas, some of the mettle leaving his voice.

It was an attractive prospect.

An alien and attractive prospect.
But there was the unspoken implication that Janek expected his bedfellow to be nude also.

And Thomas was suddenly painfully aware that Janek had never seen him anything other than clothed.

Thomas was certain that the harsh light of day would not be nearly as kind to his physique as it was to Janek’s. And if he were to appear naked in front of the man he would have rather it be at a time when he wasn’t sporting utterly deflated genitalia.

Still, despite his misgivings, he couldn’t rightly see a way to refuse the offer. He didn’t want to refuse the offer.

‘I’ll…um…yes, alright.’

Thomas finished undressing where he was, sitting on the bed facing away from Janek.

He had to suck in one hell of a bolstering breath before rising to his feet.

He circumnavigated the bed, fighting the urge to shield himself from view with his hands.

His hopes that Janek might have turned away, or at least lain back, were dashed as he looked up to see Janek was watching his progress.

The small smile on Janek’s face was unaltering as Thomas came into full view. But Thomas nevertheless found himself mentally summoning up something he could say by way of apology or explanation.

Should he make a crack about Mrs Patmore’s cooking to explain the belly? Should he admit to his overtly Celtic heritage to explain the pasty paleness? Should he joke about lycanthropy to justify the hair coursing across his chest in comparison to Janek’s smoothness?

‘Come!’ Janek said impatiently with an expression of pure delight, once again giving the mattress in front of him a thump.

With a shaky breath of relief, Thomas eased himself onto the mattress. He found himself immediately pressed against Janek’s length and had to work hard not to exclaim at the wonderful feeling of it.

‘There we are.’ Said Janek warmly.

He raised his torso, unsupported, to grab the blankets from the foot of the bed, drawing them up over the two of them.

Moments later Thomas was engulfed in Janek’s arms, cocooned in a warmth he could have happily melted and died in.

‘Mmmm…’ Janek moved his lips the short distance required to plant a soft kiss on Thomas’s mouth. ‘…Night.’

‘Night.’ Thomas replied.

The thought of breaking the moment by pointing out that they were about as far from night as it was possible to be never occurred.

In a matter of moments Janek appeared to be sound asleep.

Thomas watched him in wonder. He could feel every inch of the front of Janek’s body pressed
against his own. The rise and fall of his chest was soothing. The sight of the tranquillity on his face was idyllic.

But much as he would have liked to join Janek in whatever dreamscape he might have gone to, Thomas just wasn’t able to block out the sun. He couldn’t remember a time when he had gone to bed with the sun still up.

And there were some other new scenarios to contend with also. He worried that his breath might tickle and irritate Janek’s face and he couldn’t figure out what to do with his lower arm.

His upper arm was no problem, he had it draped lazily across Janek’s waist and was happily savouring the firm skin to be had there.

But there was also the problem of enjoying the situation a little too much. Unused to the press of quite so much warm naked skin, after a lifetime of ‘not sleeping’ with toffs in their silk pyjamas (or, occasionally, dinner jackets), his libido was rapidly re-awakening. Thomas was unsure if his half-mast would be deemed inappropriate, or even offensive, were the man to wake up.

Upon feeling a similar reaction from the man sleeping on his side next to him, Thomas allowed himself to relax a little.

He hugged Janek closer, heard an incoherent contented mumbling in response, and endeavoured to fall asleep also.

He still didn’t manage to close his eyes until darkness fell, but the intervening hours were no hardship in the slightest.

Save the odd bit of shouting echoing down the street and the rumbling of a cart, the night was the most silent he had ever had the pleasure to experience. And he slept soundly til morning.
Chapter 22

Upon waking, Thomas was immediately aware of two things. Firstly that he was going to need to brave the bathroom down the hall in the very imminent future and secondly that Janek was no longer in bed.

He groggily dragged himself up onto his elbows, marvelling at how much springier the mattress was minus Janek’s weight.

Through half-closed eyes Thomas scanned the room.

A clink of metal on metal drew his attention over to the windows.

Janek stood in the first morning light, hunched over the surface of a cabinet, shaving into a small metal bowl. He was back in the ruddy coloured suit from the day before.

Somewhere between the creak of the bedsprings and the groan Thomas gave out at the realisation it was morning, Janek realised he was awake.

‘And good morn.’ Janek drawled.

He was still able to crack a grin despite the hand stretching out his left cheek to gain a smoother shaving surface.

Thomas made it into a full sitting position with the bedsheets bunched in his lap. Rubbing absently at the back of his head he blinked against the daylight and the strands of hair that had fallen across his face.

He groaned again.

Janek chuckled and turned back to his task. ‘Thought you lot got up early.’ He said, through lips bent around his teeth in the cause of accurate hair removal.

‘We do…’ Thomas said, tilting his head from side to side to ease some of the tension built up from sleeping on one side all night. ‘What time is it?’

‘Bout half four.’

‘I hate you.’

Janek chuckled again. ‘Eh, you woke up by yourself. Not my fault.’

‘This is true.’ Thomas conceded. He glanced down beside him at the small empty space on the mattress between him and the wall. ‘Just out of interest, how did you manage to get up without waking me up?’

‘Magic.’ Said Janek. ‘…That and the great lump snoring next to me who could sleep through a fog horn.’

‘Oh you’re just charming, aren’t you?’ Said Thomas, wishing he could come up with a better retort but he was still struggling to keep his eyes open. If he hadn’t been such a mature and refined individual a pillow may very well have gone hurtling across the room in Janek’s general direction, razor in hand or no. ‘Wait…’ Said Thomas, watching Janek as he continued to shave. ‘…are you using your reflection in the window or are you just staring at people in the street?’
‘Number two.’ Said Janek. ‘The man and woman two places down are having a fight again. I think he must be back on whores at Darcie’s.’

‘But…’ Thomas frowned, wondering if he was missing something in his sleepy state. ‘…how can you shave yourself when you can’t see?’

Janek stared back at him, upturning the palm not currently supporting the razor. ‘My chin does not move.’ He said, indicating it’s expanse with a jerky pass of his hand.

‘Yes, but it’ll be neater if you just…I have a mirror in my case if you want to borrow it.’ Thomas glanced about the room. ‘Where’s my case?’

‘Bottom of the bed.’ Janek replied, giving the razor a final wash in the bowl. ‘And I have a mirror.’ He plucked it up off the counter and flashed a beam of sunlight in Thomas’s face.

‘Ow, knob!’ Said Thomas, leaning forwards as far as he could while keeping his nether regions and behind concealed in the scrunched up bedsheets. As Janek had said, there was his case, standing on its edge at the end of the bed. Satisfied he let himself fall back lazily onto the pillow, debating how best to get Janek back for the sun spots now dancing in front of his vision.

‘That Irish man…’ Thomas began.

‘Mmmm?’ Said Janek, noisily clattering about in the kitchen area as he wiped out the bowl. Thomas sincerely hoped he wasn’t using the same bowl (or towel) that he also used for eating utensils.

‘…was he quite old?’

‘Suppose…Yes.’ Said Janek with a shrug. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘That suit.’ Thomas said, nodding to the coarse reddish fabric. ‘It was his wasn’t it?’

‘He left it as a gift. How did you…?’

‘Because you didn’t have it when I last saw you. And that style hasn’t been in fashion since about 1905.’

‘Oh…’ Said Janek, looking down at himself as though seeing the suit properly for the first time.

‘And for what it’s worth…’ Said Thomas. ‘…that colour’s not doing you any favours.’

‘What?’ Janek looked up in confusion.

‘With your hair and skin…that colour just makes you look the same all over. You’re better off in your others.’

‘But my hair’s brown.’ Said Janek. ‘This is red. How is this worse than my other clothes? They’re brown.’

‘It’s complicated.’

‘It’s clothes.’

A stalemate reached, the two men regarded one another darkly for a moment before Janek cracked a grin.

After a moment’s hesitation, Thomas returned it.
‘So…’ Janek said slowly, approaching the bed. ‘…am I to take it that you didn’t decide…’ He bent over, pressing his hands into the mattress either side of Thomas’s chest. ‘…to run away with me…’ He dipped his head to offer a gentle kiss. Thomas’s head and shoulders followed him a short way off the mattress when he withdrew. ‘…because of my snappy style?’

‘Did you…’ Said Thomas, staring up at him. ‘…dress up for me?’ One look at the abject embarrassment flitting across Janek’s face told him everything he needed to know. ‘Oh my lord!’ Thomas burst into laughter. ‘You dressed up. You!’

‘Ah sod you!’ Janek’s mouth came down for another kiss, less controlled this time in his haste, before he jumped up and made his way over to the door.

‘I have to go to work.’ He said, grabbing his cap off the peg by the door.

‘But what about breakfast?’

‘Can’t eat with no appetite…’ Janek said. Thomas wondered how a man who most likely hadn’t eaten in two days could possibly have no appetite. ‘…wait until I get going at work, then I grab something from the cart.’

‘But…’

‘You have something though. Food in the cupboard…um…’ Janek screwed up his face as he attempted to remember what was in the cupboards. He eventually gave up and stomped across the room, sliding the last few feet across the floorboards on his knees, to yank the nearest cupboard door open. ‘…bread…bit stale…but if you fry in bacon fat…’ Janek’s hand made a brief appearance to wave bacon rashers wrapped in paper. ‘…will be good…there’s tins…pilchards…no milk but I can get some later…’ Janek jumped back up to his feet. ‘…I’ll pick up something for dinner on the way home.’

‘Are you around for midday?’

‘No.’ Said Janek making his way back over to the door. ‘But maybe you visit for lunch one day?’ From his position still reclining on the bed, Thomas nodded.

‘But for today…’ Said Janek, pausing with the door partially open. ‘…you should rest. These past few days must have been…shock. You know? You should stay, rest. I’ll see you later.’

‘How late will you…?’ Thomas began, but Janek was already out the door.

The door swung shut behind him.

Thomas sat up, resting his elbows on his knees, and began to debate the eternal question of bacon versus sleep.

Then he remembered he really needed the bathroom.
Chapter 23

Huffing for England, Thomas dragged his naked self to the end of the bed and groped for the handle of his suitcase. Having retrieved it he yanked it up onto the bed with some difficulty and flipped the clasps open.

Thankfully his slap-dash packing had seen his dressing gown wind up to the top of the pile of clothes and other possessions.

Unfortunately it also meant his slippers were still sitting under his bed at Downton.

Still, Thomas reasoned the dressing gown was the more essential of the two items given his current predicament.

He swung it over his shoulders and belted it as his feet met the floorboards. He realised that he hadn’t re-bolted the door after Janek left and in theory anyone could have walked in on his inelegant (and partially clothed) rising. He quickly rushed over to tug the bolt shut, only to have to open it again seconds later after retrieving his soap tin in order to head to the bathroom.

Head held high, eager that his new neighbours perceive him in a suitably dignified manner, Thomas stepped out into the corridor.

It was empty. Which was just as well as it took Thomas a good while to recall how many doors down Janek had said the bathroom was.

No matter how high he held his head, Thomas had a feeling he wouldn’t make the best impression if his first contact with the neighbours was while barefoot, robed and accidentally trespassing into their accommodation.

He could feel every knot in the floorboards under his toes as he approached the bathroom door and realised, belatedly, that really he should have risked looking like an idiot in shoes and a robe as opposed to braving bathroom spillages barefoot. But his level of desperation was such that a return trip to the bedroom was unthinkable.

Bracing himself for whatever horrors may lie within, he tried the doorknob.

In the first instance all he saw was the toilet, and vaguely noted that he had to cross quite a bit of floor to get to it.

Once making use of the facilities, he was free to inspect the finer points of the room.

It wasn’t filthy.

To him that was infinitely more important than anything the furnishings and facilities (beyond the basics) could offer.

And he was very glad to note that his fears about cleanliness had been largely unfounded.

It wasn’t exactly clean, but no worse than the upstairs servant’s washroom had been after a heavy evening. And at least here he didn’t have to duck his head against roof rafters to stand by the basin.

The single toilet stood by a basin along one wall, with two roll-top bath tubs on a raised platform occupying the majority of the centre of the room. There was a copper heater in the far corner.
Thomas felt reasonably secure in assuming that the fixtures were original to the previous more affluent residents of the property, though the pipes were ugly and exposed now – the original material seemingly replaced with a cheaper alternative – and in the tubs, toilet and basin alike there were cracks, chips and discoloration to contend with.

The proof of working flush on the toilet and running water in the sink more than made up for any distaste regarding the decidedly ‘antique’ look of the bathroom set. Though when Thomas decided on a whim to try the light switch he found that the electricity was no longer connected, or at least not to that particular room.

He avoided looking at his reflection in the age-speckled mirror above the basin. For the present his nerves wouldn’t extend to acknowledging his presence in that place in such a tangible way.

He instead turned back to look at the bath tubs.

The idea of having a thorough wash at that time of day (when he should be scrambling to get into his clothes and get downstairs for breakfast) seemed ludicrous even though he knew he no longer had any such commitments. But on the other hand he couldn’t really stomach the idea of getting dressed while still sporting the residues of Janek’s attentions from the day before.

He strummed his fingers against the basin and considered his options.

The copper water heater bricked into the corner looked serviceable, but there was no fire lit beneath it, nor did it look like there was any means to build one in the immediate vicinity unless Thomas wanted to sacrifice his robe.

He decided his old standby, a fairly Spartan affair in several inches of cold water (a routine honed through years of needing to get clean quick without alerting the entire household to his need to do so), would do the trick.

Thomas tried the tap of the nearest bath and was pathetically pleased to see clean, albeit cold, water running obediently into the tub. He watched it as though mesmerised until a good three inches or so of water covered the bottom of the bath.

He draped the robe over the side of the neighbouring bath and pre-emptively tensed as his feet then buttocks hit the freezing water. Grabbing up his soap tin he popped it open and began lathering frantically in an effort to distract himself from the cold.

His hand froze at the sound of the door clicking open.

*Shit, he’d forgotten to bolt it.*

*Was there even a bolt? He hadn’t checked.*

He watched in horror as an older man in threadbare grey trousers with his shirt-tails untucked stepped into the room. He was sporting a bulbous red nose and a deeply sleepy expression.

‘I…’ Thomas began.

The man continued into the room, closing the door behind him.

‘Morning.’ Grunted the bleary-eyed man as he shuffled over to the toilet.

With his hands dropped down into his lap, Thomas debated protesting that the room was occupied.
But the man was clearly aware of that and didn’t seem remotely phased by it.

Thomas fixed his eyes firmly forwards.

For a few moments there was nothing but awkward silence save for the noises coming out of the man as he conducted his morning evacuations.

‘Morning.’ Thomas said weakly as the man tugged up his trousers and shambled back over to the bathroom door as easily as he had come.

As the door closed Thomas spied that there was indeed a bolt.

He resolved in future to use it. Setting the nudity and personal space issues aside, shock alone had suppressed his gag reflex, and he doubted his nostrils would ever forgive him if exposed to a similar indignity in the future.

Towelling himself off quickly with his robe Thomas retreated back to the bedroom.

He paused just long enough to stir up the hot ashes in the stove to re-kindl...
He brought his wallet out of his jacket pocket and tipped its contents out on the bed. Fumbling around in his suitcase he extracted a tobacco tin, opened the lid, and tipped those contents out too. A quick search inside the lining of the case revealed a hidden envelope. Thomas tipped that out also.

He sat contemplating the small pile of money.

Half of it he scraped into his wallet, the other he stuffed inside the envelope. He concealed the latter back in the lining of his case. The empty tobacco tin he tossed on top of a pile of socks.

Totalling his current resources (including the small sum he had banked over the past few years) was largely pointless; he had no notion of what his expenses might be in his new location. But he reasoned he must have at least several month’s-worth of leeway, all things considered.

And, most importantly for the present, he could indulge in the purchase of a new hat.

He sat with his wallet in hand looking around the chaos of the room. This time the chaos was his doing rather than Janek’s, what with his unpacked clothes, the unmade bed and the debris of his breakfast. And Thomas knew he could amuse himself for at least a couple of hours with cleaning and organising. In fact every instinct in his body insisted that he put the room to rights as soon as possible. And certainly before Janek got home.

But he felt restless.

Restless and in need of a new hat.

His lack of hat hadn’t mattered over the past month at Downton. It wasn’t something he wore while inside the house, and somehow his half-day had gotten absorbed by the previous trip to Liverpool.

And he hadn’t had cause to walk the grounds or go to the village until…

Well, now he needed one.

Yes, a hat was needed.

Before he could even think of searching for employment, or even properly exploring his new city, he needed a hat.

And of course he wouldn’t be able to focus on organising the room while knowing that such a crucial extension of himself was missing.

Happy to have a plan that didn’t involve knocking about in an empty room in the immediate future, Thomas quickly tucked the wallet back into his jacket pocket.

He retrieved his coat and made for the door.

As he left the room he was briefly perturbed by the notion that there was no way to lock the door from the outside.

But as there was nothing to be done about it for the present he continued onwards.

He debated knocking on the door to the downstairs accommodation to introduce himself to the landlady. But minus the bolstering presence of Janek (for proof his residence in the building was legitimate if nothing else) Thomas decided against it.

In fact he practically ran out the front door upon hearing the sounds of someone moving about in the ex-parlour.
He stepped out into the street, past the remnants of his previous hat that had been shredded sometime in the night, and strode on in the direction of the bustling streets he and Janek had raced through the previous morning.
Chapter 24

Thomas lit a cigarette before stalking out into the rushing noise of the main road.

It did wonders for the nerves. But it also had the negative side effect of occupying one of his hands which meant his attempts to keep track of his wallet were a little more challenging. Still, he felt its shape in his jacket pocket, reassuringly between his hand and chest, as he wove through the throngs of people that seemed to appear from nowhere as he rounded the corner.

Upon realising he was doing precisely what Janek had told him not to do (and what really, in his logical heart of hearts, he knew already) Thomas abruptly stopped patting his wallet.

Still, he was glad he reflexively reached for it a few minutes later when a collision with a woman selling nuts from a large basket sent him to the floor. He used one hand to push himself to his feet, the other went for his pocket.

The latter found a third hand intruding on his person.

Now the young lad that the hand belonged to may well have been attempting to help him up. And the amount of commotion the woman made (after dropping wares that could easily survive a fall or two) might have been more connected to frustration rather than the urge to cause a distracting scene. But Thomas was glad he had clasped hold of his wallet regardless.

The moment he was on his feet his other hand went to his watch and chain. Thankfully both were tucked where they were meant to be.

At the risk of being considered ungentlemanly, Thomas left the woman scrambling to repack her basket and left the young man to ‘assist’ other passers-by who had come to her aid.

A little way down the street Thomas paused to transfer his wallet to a different pocket. The only trouble was the other options were all on the outside of his clothing rather than hidden.

Thinking for a moment, and checking to make sure no one was paying him particularly close attention, Thomas tugged his waistband out just far enough to let him shove the wallet down the front of his trousers.

He reasoned anyone desperate enough to go down his long-johns for the money probably needed it more than him.

And at least this way there was no chance the wallet would go walkabout without his knowing immediately about it.

The natural-looking nature of the bulge was a further bonus, and Thomas amused himself by striding somewhat lazily down the pavement and admiring it in shop windows.

He pondered why not all the shops were open given the relatively late hour of the morning. In a few cases he could tell that the fronts were derelict behind the shutters, and a bit of an eye sore to boot. But some looked perfectly serviceable, they just weren’t open. In some cases there was the odd note tacked to the window or door to assure the reader that the owner or opening hours would soon be forthcoming. In the vast majority there was not.

Thomas was led to the conclusion that the street wasn’t getting as much business as it would like and that there was something of an apathy surrounding that fact. Mind you, he also wondered if the odd
shop might be a front for the sort of business that functioned more at the day’s end rather than its beginning.

He continued onwards, with no particular direction in mind save the goal of finding a larger street in which he would find a gentleman’s hat maker or a general clothing store that also provided outer wear. Or at least one not filled with quite so many disconcertingly shut-up store fronts.

He had no luck up Church Street. But he reasoned his chances were better away from the waterfront than closer to it, so he continued moving north east. Eventually he came to the turning for the station. Trying to avoid making eye contact with any of the men lurking about the station roads, Thomas instead turned left to investigate the streets in the opposite direction. He was rewarded with the prospect of the relatively empty Clayton Square, a welcome relief after the crowds by the station. Striding past a neat row of flower sellers Thomas continued onwards, feeling lighter at the more pleasant and open surroundings however brief his respite in them.

His persistence was finally rewarded in the next street.

A quick glance through the window proved the shop had precisely the bowler-style hat he was after.

As he entered he was happy to note a proliferation of boxes along one of the walls; it indicated he would hopefully be able to purchase one of the correct size that morning rather than having to be fitted and come back later.

He was correct in his assumption and after studying himself in the offered mirror wearing a neat little black number he felt infinitely more settled than he had done the previous few days (…weeks?). That is until he was obliged to fish down the front of his trousers for his wallet in full view of the two shop assistants.

Unsurprisingly they indicated that the money be placed on the counter rather than in their palms. And neither offered the customary handshake that usually followed a business transaction between gentlemen.

But Thomas’s embarrassment at the awkward conclusion of his purchase diminished the moment he was able to step outside the door of the shop and present himself, properly attired, to the city.

He allowed himself a leisurely walk back the way he had come, and continued onwards to investigate what lay beyond and below the station on the other side of the city. Thomas lost count of the amount of times he turned down street seller’s wares (nuts, apples, candy, even neck ties) while walking through the shadows of tall buildings and dodging carriages and cars as they hurtled down the streets.

Quite by accident he found himself on a street catering more for the ‘better sort’ (if the size of the buildings and the clothes of those coming out of them were anything to go by) and felt right at home for a while; promenading by the side of the well-maintained rectangle of grass running alongside the street.

Even here though there were…undesirables. From the men who seemed to be daring passers-by to move them on to the children who pleadingly followed in the footsteps of any person kind enough to show even the smallest of attentions, Thomas felt continuously on edge as he walked even as he began to warm to the city and his newfound freedom within it.

As the sun rose higher his stomach began growling.
Awkwardly this new street seemed to be one of the few in Liverpool which hadn’t a single café to speak of. He saw several restaurants, but a glance at the patrons confirmed that the prices were unlikely to be sensible.

He checked his watch and briefly panicked at the realisation it was past noon.

He had missed lunch and now would have to be hungry until afternoon tea, potentially even until dinner…

Then he realised he was in a position to eat at any time he pleased.

At this particular moment in time he had no schedule to follow but his own.

And if he wanted to have lunch at two o’clock then he damn well could.

He called himself an idiot and stuffed his watch back in his pocket.

Shortly after this awkward personal diatribe, and still with no acceptable café in sight, Thomas spied a familiar building across the street.

He approached it, wide eyed, as though looking at a ghost.

It was the hotel he had stayed in with Lord Grantham.

It was a surprise to see it as the hotel seemed to belong very much to another world than the one that he, Thomas, now inhabited. He had to remind himself that while he had begun to relegate everything ‘Crawley’ related to the past, the physical existence of their legacy remained very much in his present.

And while he thought about it there was still the pressing issue that he hadn’t given notice, or a note of any kind, as he had left.

He didn’t know to what degree he would have to rely on the goodwill of either Carson or Robert (or in a pinch, Mrs Hughes) in order to secure a new job. The thought worried him immensely. He wanted to succeed without their help, but at the same time he needed to know that any pleading on his part would not fall on completely deaf ears.

And the longer he left it, the more the pride of all concerned was likely to harden against him.

Now the moment was still fresh. He could legitimately claim he had travelled by bus or cart and that his journey was only just over. He could claim he had made it his first task upon arriving in the city to phone and to explain his actions.

Phone.

That would be something of a difficulty.

He would stake the remaining money in his wallet on the boarding house not having a phone, or at least not a working phone.

He glanced up the steps of the hotel, past the doorman, into the lobby. The lobby wall lined with phone booths opposite the check-in desk.

Adjusting his new hat, and debating whether or not his wallet-bulge would assist him in the present moment, Thomas strode confidently across the street and to the hotel steps.
He nodded cheerfully to the doorman as he entered. The man returned the nod.

Trying to keep the colour and expression of his face as neutral as possible, Thomas informed the desk clerk that he would like to place a call.

It wasn’t until he had taken up position in one of the booths and raised the earpiece of the phone to his ear that he realised he had neglected to think through a strategy of how to handle the call once it was connected. He had placed the call to Carson’s phone, but that was as far as his strategizing had stretched.

What would he actually say? Would he be penitent? Would he just be matter of fact and appeal to Carson to document his skills, leaving aside the animosity between them over the years? Should he ask to speak directly to Lord Grantham? Then even if Carson refused he could follow it up with a letter to Lord Grantham about how he had tried to contact him to explain, and it would be the truth… But…

‘Downton Abbey, Carson the Butler speaking.’

Hearing the greeting over the phone was even more hilarious than overhearing it in person and in spite of himself Thomas fought the urge to laugh.

But then he was left with the terror of knowing he had only seconds to decide how to proceed.

‘I…’ He began. ‘I…’

There was nothing for it.

‘I…’ He pinched his nose to disguise his voice. ‘…need to speak with a Mrs Baxter about an order she has placed. Some silks. Very important.’

‘This is most irregular!’ Carson declared.

Thomas knew that.

And he had deliberately settled on the one person downstairs (save for senior leadership) that he could make up an excuse to speak to that Carson would not question.

‘It’s very important, sir.’ Said Thomas, tempted for a moment to push his luck and deliberately mispronounce Carson’s name. ‘I’m calling from Rutlet and Main, specialist suppliers of lingerie and…’

He smiled to himself as he practically heard Carson blanch down the other end of the phone line.

‘I’ll…I’ll fetch Mrs…Miss Baxter.’

He heard the earpiece of Carson’s phone make sharp contact with the surface of the desk.

Thomas let out a long breath while he waited, glancing over at the hotel desk in the hopes that they still had not made him out to be an imposter.

No, the clerks were still going about their business.

The prospect of speaking with Baxter was oddly calming, and it wasn’t until he heard her first tentative words over the phone that he realised he hadn’t felt the need to plan his words at all while waiting.
‘Hello?’ Came the slightly confused voice of Miss Baxter.

‘It’s me.’ Said Thomas quietly.

‘I see…’ Baxter said, her voice faltering as she spoke. ‘And where are my silks?’ She continued in a much stronger voice.

It didn’t take a genius to figure out that Carson had decided to linger in the room after passing over the phone call.

Thomas wet his lips nervously with his tongue. ‘Liverpool.’

‘Oh…’

The sound of the sigh was one of complete deflation.

‘…I…Are you alright?’ She eventually managed. Thomas took it that Carson had taken himself off into another room.

‘Yes I…’ He had to swallow before continuing. ‘…I’m alright.’ He paused again. ‘How’ve they taken it?’

‘I don’t know.’ Said Baxter. ‘I wasn’t around when Mr Carson…’ There was a pause as she made sure the man in question wasn’t still lingering by the door. ‘…told Lord Grantham. Yesterday evening I couldn’t tell if her Ladyship knew or not.’

‘Any chance you could…find out?’

‘Thomas I…’

‘Please…’ Thomas was surprised at how easily the word came to him. He wouldn’t have dreamed of begging a favour from Baxter while in the house. But now he had few options. And the touch of old familiarity that she brought from a place that pre-dated Downton seemed more important than ever in his new strange environment. ‘…I need to know if I can make enquiries about a reference.’

‘You’ve left with no job to go to?’

The very real sense of panic in her voice, even with the buffering effect of miles of phone cable, sent a clenching in the depths of Thomas’s gut.

Spoken aloud it sounded very stupid indeed.

‘I didn’t leave because of…’ He began before changing tack. ‘You must have worked out that I haven’t gone because of work.’

There was a long pause before Baxter spoke again.

‘That man?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh Thomas…’ She said.
‘Look, could you at least try?’ Thomas said, glancing over at the concierge desk again as he nervously tapped at the glass of the phone booth with his fingertips.

‘I’ll try.’ She said, though not sounding particularly steady in the sentiment. ‘But I don’t think I’ll be able to telephone.’ There was another pause while Baxter performed a similar manoeuvre to Thomas, looking over her shoulder at the empty doorway to Carson’s office. ‘Do you have an address?’

‘I do.’

I just don’t know it, a nasty little voice added.

‘Well…?’

‘I’ll write to you.’ Thomas said quickly. ‘In a few days. I’ll write. Then you can write me back.’

There was a moment of silence. Thomas could only assume Baxter was nodding to show she understood.

‘How’s Jimmy taken it?’ He asked a tad tentatively.

There was the distinct sound of a huff down the other end of the phone line.

‘He’s been in high dudgeon since you didn’t come down to breakfast yesterday.’ She said. ‘He offered to go and wake you but Carson went instead…I think he resents Carson for keeping whatever was in your note to himself.’

‘There wasn’t a note.’ Thomas said, resting his head against the wall by the side of his seat. ‘I didn’t…I was in a hurry.’

Thomas didn’t need to see Baxter to know she had closed her eyes and bowed her head.

‘Thomas what have you done?’

Thomas’s mouth opened but he didn’t manage any words.

‘Thomas? Thomas are you there?’

Thomas extracted himself from the wall.

‘Tell Jimmy I’ll write. And do what you can with the Crawleys, won’t you?’

He hung up the phone so quickly that the ear piece almost missed the clip. After a moment’s fumbling he managed to place it properly.

He got down unsteadily from the phone booth.

Thomas debated briefly if he ought to go to the desk and guess at the name of a hotel guest’s tab that the phone bill could be added to. In the end he decided not to risk it. He tossed down the coins he had in his pocket (clearly too much for the amount of time he had spent on the phone, but for exact change he would have had to retrieve his wallet) onto the desk before making a hasty retreat out of the lobby and into the street.

He felt unsettled and strange.

But any lingering thinking on Downton was pushed aside for the moment as he pondered the problem of not knowing the address of his new residence. He had taken himself on a zig zag
throughout the city and wasn’t quite sure on the route back. Mind you, he wasn’t sure he’d risk asking for directions on the street even if he could remember the address.

He headed off loosely in the direction he had come from, trusting to his instincts to do the rest. But almost a solid hour of walking later he was none the wiser. He found familiar streets, yes. But how they related to his street was a mystery.

There were two obvious choices. He could find his way back to the station and then try to retrace the route Janek had taken him on the first day. Or he could make his way down to the waterfront to find Janek at the docks and beg his help.

The first option he discarded as he imagined the surly hangers-on about the station building would almost certainly recognise him from earlier in the day and he fancied they probably had a sixth-sense for a lost traveller. The second option he was willing to consider only as a complete and utter last resort. He screwed up his face in distaste at the thought of the level of mocking and embarrassment that would descend upon him were he to go and admit to Janek that he’d managed to lose the house.

As he rounded a street corner he almost went flying over what he initially took to be a crate. On closer inspection turned it out to be a credenza. Rubbing his shins ruefully, Thomas found himself immediately set upon.

‘Good afternoon chief, what can I find for you today?’

Thomas looked about him to find he was standing amid a large collection of furniture that had been dragged out onto the cobbles in front of the shop window. Everything from bird cages to cupboards was hap-hazardly arranged as though to make out a series of eclectic rooms in the street.

‘No, I’m just…’ Bleeding internally, were the words on the tip of Thomas’s tongue. But then his gaze came to rest on a small round table.

‘Aye, just in in from France that one!’ The man said, expertly picking his way through the displayed wares to pat the light wood of the table top. Thomas couldn’t help but marvel at the man’s ability to deduce what he’d been staring at amid the sea of items.

‘It’s…interesting.’ Thomas said, coming closer.

He was in no doubt as to the fact that the table had never seen France in its life, but he found its simple smooth lines very unobjectionable. And he was all but certain it would sit easily in the space in front of the fireplace cum kitchen area in Janek’s room without obstructing anything. It was plenty big enough for two. The only problem was that the rickety chair already in the room was too thickly set to look well with it, and it’s dark wood wouldn’t match the table one bit.

‘I don’t suppose you have…?’ Thomas began.

‘Chairs…’ The man declared as though heralding the arrival of a queen, sweeping his arm about in a circle to direct Thomas’s attention a short distance away. ‘…are right here chief. Made specially for this quaint little set.’

Thomas didn’t care for being called ‘chief’, and he could tell at a glance that the two chairs stacked atop one another had not been made to go with this particular table; they were similar, in both wood and style, but not quite similar enough to pass.

‘Mmmm, those aren’t quite right are they?’ He said, giving a wry smile.

‘No…No, chief, you’re right…’ Thomas wondered if the man ever gave himself whiplash with the
speed of his turning. ‘…but I can give you them free with the table.’ He leant in as though sharing a marvellous secret. ‘How ‘bout that?’

Thomas was tempted by the table. But his interest in it was very dependent on the price.

‘Going to make me an offer then?’ He said, his smile unflinching but taking on a sharp edge.

‘Well for a gentleman of quality such as yourself I can go to four pounds. What do you say chief? Four pounds the table and chairs for free?’

‘I’d say I’d not pay more than a quid.’ Thomas said with a snort of laughter.

‘Sold, chief!’ Said the man gleefully.

‘What? No! I didn’t mean…’

Well actually, a pound was a pretty good deal. A very good deal given the goods, which had Thomas wondering if there was something a little off about the furniture’s origin.

But Janek’s room did need a table, and chairs.

‘Yes, chief?’

‘I can’t take them now.’ Thomas said honestly. ‘I’ll have to come back later and…’

‘Ah these won’t hang about.’ Said the man.

‘Well I…’ Thomas began. Then he was suddenly struck by an idea. ‘I don’t suppose you know Mrs Porter’s boarding house do you?’

‘That I do.’ Said the man quickly.

Thomas didn’t particularly care if the man was being honest or if the man just had trust in his ability to quickly find out if needed.

‘If you’ve got a couple of lads who can carry this back to the house for me, I’ll take it now.’

Minutes later Thomas’s wallet was a pound lighter following another awkward trouser-extraction (Thomas doubted the proprietor of the shop gave a toss about where his money was coming from provided it made it into the till) and he was following three men carrying his new purchases through the streets towards the house.

They made an odd parade as they progressed through the streets, but with each new road Thomas’s spirits rose as he began to recognise where they were.

He congratulated himself on having solved both the problem of his having being lost and Janek’s lack of furniture in one fell swoop.

His jubilation was tempered a little by the awkwardness of directing the men carrying the table up the stairs, he had never met a pair so incapable of taking direction, but eventually all furnishings were safe in the room. The din the men made scraping the small table up the stairs could have roused the dead but no one came out of the other rooms to investigate. Thomas could only assume that all other residents of the house were out, including Mrs Porter.

Thankful he had had the foresight to keep out a few coins to give to the men by way of thanks, Thomas sent the movers on their way, waving them off at the front door.
With the chaos of the furniture manoeuvring over, Thomas found himself feeling a little drained as he climbed the stairs back to the room. By the time he reached the top step he was moving with considerably less speed than he had begun with at the beginning of the climb.

As he made his way along the corridor he wondered if it was something other than tiredness. His face seemed locked in a permanent frown, that and the rest of his muscles felt tensed beyond comfort, and there was a pounding in his ears.

He opened the door to the room.

There was the table, and chairs.

Thomas blinked. Yes, there was the table and chairs.

He looked up. There was the washing up he hadn’t done that morning, there was the unmade bed, there were his clothes hanging out his suitcase…The room was a mess, it was…Why hadn’t he cleaned…tidied…

Before he went out he should have tidied. And now there was all this to do and he felt so tired.

The clothes should go away. In the drawers, they should go away.

There was messy ash in the stove.

How could he have just…?

His forearm hit the table at the same time his knees hit the floor.

Fuck, it was a mess.

Huge mess.

He couldn’t breathe.

He was propped up solely by the solid wood of the table.

The table…

He’d bought a table.

Why had he bought a table?

Chairs, chairs also.

He’d bought a table and chairs.

Thomas slid his arm free from the table surface. He came to rest with both palms on the floor under his shoulders.

Janek wouldn’t want the table.

Or the chairs.

He’d…

The floor seemed to pitch violently in one direction then the other.
What had he done?

What had he done?

Thomas dragged himself to his feet, knocking off his hat and wrenching off his coat.

He lurched over to the nearest window, got the latch open and stuck his head out into the breeze.

Eyes closed, he breathed in deep, begging the world to stop spinning.
Chapter 26

Thomas paused, tin cup half-way to his lips, pen stilling in his hand, as he heard the door open.

‘Hello?’ Thomas heard the unmistakeable liverpudlian lilt as the door swung shut.

‘Hello.’ He replied, somewhat sheepishly.

He allowed his face to momentarily contort into a wince while Janek remained by the doorway, just out of sight behind the stones of the fireplace.

‘So I brought…’ Janek’s footsteps and voice stopped as he went to hang up his jacket and cap.

The lines around Thomas’s face deepened as his grip on the pen increased.

‘You went and got your hat out the street?’ Said Janek, sounding surprised but also perhaps a little impressed.

Thomas fought the urge to laugh despite his trepidation. How anyone could mistake the higher crown and cleaner black felt of this hat for its poor abused forerunner was amusing regardless of the circumstances. But perhaps, he thought to himself, he really shouldn’t have expected anything less.

Janek came into view, sans jacket and clutching a cloth bag by his side.

Thomas looked gingerly up at him from his position, sitting one of the new chairs at the new table.

‘You…’

Janek stopped in his tracks, staring.

‘What is…?’

‘Table and chairs.’ Thomas offered helpfully.

‘And you…’ Janek’s gaze swept over the new furniture, across to the kitchen area, to the beds, to the floor, up to the ceiling.

The man didn’t know where to look. And it would have been hilarious had Thomas not been feeling quite so apprehensive.

‘What did you…?’ Janek tried and failed to complete another sentence.

‘I tidied up a little.’ Thomas said, indicating over to the kitchen.

‘And scrubbed!’ Janek exclaimed as though it were the most scandalous thing a man could do to cooking pots. ‘And…’

‘Made the beds.’

‘But…’ Said Janek. ‘You…’

‘I did some laundry.’ Said Thomas, nodding up at the damp items strung across the length of the room on three lines. ‘In the bath, I did some laundry. I wasn’t sure if there was anywhere to hang it so when I found some ropes in the chest I just…’
‘I…’ Janek tried, and again failed. ‘And now, what do you do?’ He said, holding out his spare arm, palm upturned, towards the table top. ‘Write a story?’

‘It’s for work.’ Thomas said, running an unsteady hand over the paper on which he had scrawled and re-scrawled his life’s history. ‘I’m getting straight what I’ve done, what experience I’ve got, so I can show people when I go looking for a…’

‘Stop.’

Janek said the word in almost a whisper but Thomas flinched away from it as though from a shout. He hunched his shoulders, clinging on to the pen in his hand and bracing the other against the wood of the table.

‘This…’ Janek took a few steps backwards to take a better look at the coat pegs by the door. ‘…it’s new isn’t it?’ He pointed to what could only be the hat.

‘Yes.’ Said Thomas gingerly.

‘You bought a new hat…’ Said Janek. ‘And…’

‘Table and chairs.’ Thomas completed for him as the man seemed to be having trouble saying it for himself.

‘And this!’ Janek’s attention was now up and on the hanging flags of clothing dangling across the room.

‘Well I went to put my things away and the things in the drawers and boxes needed folding and then I saw that some were a bit…well, needed attention. So I did a bit of mending then I got some soap and filled up the bath and…’

‘This…some of this isn’t even mine.’ Said Janek, walking with an incredulous expression into the fray. ‘These are Gareth’s, he was here months ago.’ He said, tugging at a pair of trousers with a neat patch sewn over the knee. ‘And these…’ He looked up at some greying long-johns. ‘…I don’t even know whose these are!’

‘Well they’re alright to wear now.’ Thomas offered, giving a small shrug.

‘Fuck.’ Said Janek, raking a hand through his hair; still wet from whatever end-of-day washing he’d done at the docks.

‘I just…’

‘I think you should go to bed, Thomas.’

‘What?’

‘I think you should go to bed now.’ Janek said quietly, nodding as he walked slowly across the room to where Thomas sat hunched over his papers.

‘No.’ Said Thomas, summoning up a breezy demeanour from somewhere beyond extreme fatigue and uncomfortable gut wrenching panic. ‘Come on…’ He swept the papers aside. ‘…I believe someone promised they’d bring dinner this morning. Let’s have it.’ He tented his fingers and looked to Janek expectantly. A slight shaking of the hands and shoulders belied his easy speech.

‘I said rest, Thomas. Rest.’
Janek came to stand closer to the table, looking down at Thomas with unguarded concern.

‘Well I’m not really one for doing nothing.’ Came the soft, slightly apologetic reply.

‘I can see that.’ Said Janek wryly, glancing up at the dripping clothes.

‘Can’t we just…?’

‘And this…’ The wild gesticulation was back, directed squarely at the table.

‘Look, if it’s about money I’ve some put away.’ Thomas said, his tented fingers clenching around one another. ‘But we do need to talk about that. I need to know how much I owe for my share of board here and…’

‘Stop!’ It was closer to a shout this time, but the bite was lessened by the look of affection in Janek’s eyes.

‘I just want to…’

‘Not now.’ Said Janek firmly. ‘We will…’ He held up a hand to halt Thomas’s response before he made it. ‘…talk about that. We will. But not now.’

Thomas sat back in his chair, meeting Janek’s gaze with a not entirely convinced expression. Janek stared unflinchingly back.

For a moment, all was stalemate.

‘So what’s for dinner?’ Said Thomas eventually, his lips quirking up into a spontaneous smile.

‘I brought pie.’ Janek announced with an air of, to Thomas, undue triumph.

He began to fish awkwardly about in the bag.

‘Oh.’ Said Thomas, his emotional fatigue allowing a distinct air of distaste to sound in his voice before he could keep it in check.

‘What’s wrong with pie?’ Said Janek, balancing two paper-wrapped parcels on his hand as he let the cloth bag fall to the floor.

‘Well it’s just…’ Thomas said with a grimace. ‘The stuff you get on the street, you can’t be sure what’s in it. Can you?’

Janek blinked. ‘But it’s delicious. These are the best you will ever taste. I can assure.’

‘Yes, but what’s in them?’

‘They taste good.’ Janek replied. ‘And I don’t know what kind of pies you’re talking about, but these are rabbit.’

‘Yes, but you can’t be sure can you?’ Thomas persisted before he could stop himself.

‘I can.’ Said Janek simply. ‘Because I know who made them.’

‘Alright.’ Said Thomas after a pause. ‘Well…come and sit down then.’ He said, getting to his feet to locate some plates and cutlery.
He glanced over his shoulder and saw Janek make a lurch as though to go to the chair, but stopping himself and remaining where he was.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘It’s just…I don’t…’ Janek indicated towards the table.

‘No. I know you don’t usually, but it’s here so…’

‘I don’t like sitting at a table.’

‘You didn’t seem to mind at the pub.’ Thomas said, bending down to open the cupboard.

‘That’s different.’ Janek replied. ‘I don’t like to…Here I just sit on the floor by the stove. You know, by the fire.’

Thomas declined to mention that he had done the same thing that morning.

‘Well there’s a table and chairs here so…please.’

Grudgingly, and looking at the table as though it meant to bite him, Janek sat down in the offered seat and deposited the packages on its surface.

‘Fine. I’m at the table.’

‘Well done.’ Thomas said, still hunting for suitable plates.

‘So in return perhaps you stop fannying about for plates and come and eat?’

Thomas stood up, looking back at Janek with a quizzical expression.

‘You just eat out the paper.’ Janek explained, unwrapping his and miming taking a bite.

‘Right…’ Said Thomas.

Lacking the energy to push the point, Thomas sat back down at the table empty handed and began to unpick the paper.

‘So…’ He said, in an effort to bring the situation back to a sense of normality. Though it was somewhat difficult while holding the uncovered pie on a bed of paper in his hands. ‘…how was work?’

‘Mmmmpfh?’ Said Janek, mid-way through a mouthful.

‘Work.’ Said Thomas. ‘How was it?’ He gave a small smile before adding. ‘They going to fire you for taking off?’

‘Ha!’ Janek laughed, thankfully swallowing his mouthful with an oddly ecstatic expression before doing so. ‘I told you, they won’t fire me. I’m good at what I do.’

‘Eh…’ Thomas said, nodding towards the stripes of raw skin exposed by Janek’s rolled up shirt sleeves. ‘…there’s tiger stripes there that might suggest otherwise.’ He needled with a wink.

‘Least I never got shot at work.’ Janek chuckled back.

‘Hmmm?’
Janek reached across the table with a slight frown to tap at the back of Thomas’s half-gloved hand.

‘Oh…’ Thomas looked down at his hand. ‘The hunting...It was an accident you know.’ He quipped, feigning indignance with a smile.

‘Course.’ Janek replied with a snort before going back to his pie. ‘What kind of man is it that gets shot on purpose?’

Thomas’s pie remained in his hands, un-tasted.

The moment of cold-running blood proved an effective focus channeler; directing his attention to the way Janek shifted continuously, awkwardly, about in his seat even while ravenously enjoying his pie.

‘You know you don’t have to wear that?’

‘What?’ Thomas hadn’t quite caught his words.

‘The glove. You don’t have to wear it here. I have seen much much worse.’ Janek said, raising an elbow to display his ruined forearm in all its glory. ‘And remember I’m one of the ones good at my work.’

Thomas’s shoulders gave an involuntary quiver. ‘Took it off for bed didn’t I?’

‘Yes, but…’ Janek took another mouthful. ‘Why keep it on here at all?’

‘Helps keep my hand steady.’ Thomas lied.

He finally took a bite out of the pie.

It was good. Janek hadn’t over sold it. And the taste of rabbit was comfortingly familiar. Though having never tasted dog or suchlike (that he knew of) Thomas still couldn’t conclusively say that his fear of unprovenanced pie was sated.

Through a mix of wishing to move the conversation on and general altruistic perceptiveness his attention was drawn back to Janek’s discomfort at being seated at the table.

‘Look let’s just…’ Thomas rose out of his seat, pie still in hand. He took a few steps forwards and sank cross legged to the floor in front of the stove.

‘Ah, yes!’ Janek was immediately by his side, giving him a playful shoulder barge as he sat and continued to munch.

Thomas attempted another mouthful but ended up with gravy down his chin as the crust gave way at the base.

‘No, no.’ Janek’s hand was suddenly under his, gathering the paper to prop up the base of the pie. ‘Like this or you make a big mess.’

‘Mmmm…’ Thomas said, laughing through a mouthful of rabbit. ‘…you back off there you, I know how to eat!’

‘What, even without the silver forks?’ Janek retorted. He gave another nudge to Thomas’s shoulder.

‘You keep this up and I’m getting a cloth for that table.’
'You wouldn’t dare!'

Thomas nearly lost the contents of his mouth at the look of pure horror on Janek’s face.
There was a brief pause in their gorging while Janek got up to light the candles Thomas had placed about the room (Thomas having earlier tested the light switch and found, as half-expected, that the electricity didn’t work) but he swiftly returned to his position by Thomas’s side in front of the open door of the stove.

They ate largely in silence; Janek clearly being ravenous and Thomas not trusting himself to be able to speak and avoid dripping the contents of his pie wrapper down the tight front of his waistcoat.

Janek finished first.

Stuffing his gravy-soaked papers into the waiting flames he lolled back, leaning on his hands, to stare round at the improvised laundry rails.

‘Listen, Thomas, do you think those trousers would fit you?’ He said, nodding up at the pair he had identified as Gareth’s.

Thomas, caught mid mouthful, had to stifle a snort of laughter at the thought of donning the sad garment before being able to construct a more seemly response.

‘No. Too short.’ He said.

‘Mind me ripping them up for work cloths? I know you did some nice work on the patch there, but they won’t fit me neither and there’s always need of rags.’

‘Oh…No, that’s fine.’ Thomas replied. He swallowed his next mouthful before pointedly adding. ‘I wonder you didn’t just take them before?’

‘Didn’t know they were there.’ Janek said, springing to his feet. ‘I might take some of the other bits too…’

‘Fine.’

‘Eh!’ Janek kneed him softly in the back. ‘No one asked you to do mending.’

‘I know.’ Thomas admitted. He tossed his crumpled paper on the fire to join the ashes of Janek’s. His annoyance faded at seeing the cheeky look on Janek’s face before the latter went to tug down half a dozen or so of the items he’d washed.

‘Do none of those belong to you?’ Thomas said in astonishment.

‘No.’ Janek shoved the still damp pile of clothes down on the floor by the door in a heap. ‘Hadn’t gone down those boxes really.’

‘So…’ Thomas swivelled on his rear to face Janek. ‘…how many blokes have been here?’

‘Ahhhh…’ Janek mused. Thomas watched in confusion as Janek plucked up one of the large stones of the hearth with both hands. ‘I’d have to work it out…Umm…’ Janek began to repeatedly lift the stone from waist to chest height. ‘When I came here there was five, then six of us…’

‘In this one room?’ Said Thomas incredulously.

‘Yes, Gareth was one of those…’ Janek said. ‘But Mrs Porter threw most of them out maybe three
months...yes, three months later.' He smiled down at his chest, pausing for a moment in lifting the stone at the memory. ‘She could do with noise and such, but twelve rotten eggs to her couch killed it!’ He laughed. ‘But she likes me, so I could stay.’

‘Right...’ Said Thomas slowly.

‘So that group was Gareth, Todd, hmmm Michael...’

Janek shifted his position and began lifting the stone above his head, bringing it down towards his shoulder blades. Thomas watched, somewhat mesmerised, and now no longer confused as to how Janek’s physique outstripped the majority of the others he had seen at the docks.

‘Lissan and...I forget the others. Then after that I lodged some sailors, few weeks a time when the boats came in...Then there was Jonah. Ah, then another Thomas actually, then...’

‘Right, um, I...’ Thomas had zoned out somewhat during the list, but forced himself to come back to the present. Janek began to pace the room as he lifted, neatly dodging the hanging clothes. ‘So how many blokes have you had live here?’

‘I suppose too many to count.’ Said Janek. He turned back just in time to catch the look on Thomas’s face. ‘Thomas...’ He said, somehow managing to hold the large stone with one hand as it dropped to his side. He walked back to Thomas and crouched down in front of him.

Thomas shifted awkwardly about on the floor.

‘Thomas...’ Janek repeated, his head cocked to one side to follow Thomas’s. ‘...they haven’t lived here in the way I hope you will.’

Janek’s expression was easy, teasing almost. But Thomas felt the alien flush of a hotness to his face nonetheless.

‘Right.’ He said in a small voice.

‘So...’ Janek said abruptly, breaking the moment. He stood and returned the stone to the fireplace. Thomas could have sworn he caught a hint of a blush on Janek’s swarthy face also and his dull mouth turned up in a slight smile at the realisation. ‘...you are now going to bed.’

‘No, I need to finish my notes before...’

‘To. Bed.’

Janek spoke with an air of finality befitting a sharp governess. The affectionate grin spoiled the effect somewhat but nevertheless Thomas was moved to comply.

‘And what are you going to do?’ Thomas said as he rose unsteadily to his feet, brushing off the non-existent dusk (he had also thoroughly swept the floor earlier) from his flank.

‘I am going to go down and see Mrs Porter.’ Janek said, somewhat theatrically. ‘And let her know the new lodger is in.’

‘I think she might have guessed already while they were lugging this up.’ Said Thomas, rubbing at the surface of the table.

‘Mmmm, which is why I ought to see her now.’ Said Janek dryly.

‘Really I should come too and meet...’
‘Bed!’

‘Alright, alright...’ Thomas headed off in the direction of the bedsteads. ‘Christ, you’re worse than Carson.’ He added out of reflex.

‘Which one was that?’ Said Janek, one hand on the door knob.

‘Butler. Big fellow, sour looking.’ Said Thomas as he began to undo his buttons. ‘Looks like there’s something unpleasant under his nose.’

‘Ah, I have him...’ Said Janek. ‘And ‘Oi!’ at that!’

Thomas laughed as Janek disappeared out the door.

The laughter died the moment the door clicked shut.

Still, Thomas continued to undress. He took his time folding and putting away his clothes, his hands felt strangely numb. He repurposed one of the now empty boxes to act as a laundry bin for his undershirt.

After some internal debate he left his long johns on, not feeling quite right about removing their comforting warmth but at the same time not having it in him to put on his pyjamas.

Sliding into the bed by the wall he tugged the covers up about his chin.
Chapter 28

Thomas couldn’t get to sleep.

He tried every remedy he could think of that didn’t actually require him to get back up out of bed.

He stroked the top of his nose between the eyes. He massaged his temples. He stretched both arms above his head. He lay on his back, his sides, then on his front. He buried his face in the pillow.

His head just wouldn’t grant him serenity. It wouldn’t shut down. His thoughts were now so muddled that he couldn’t disentangle the one from the other into any resembling coherence, but they kept him up all the same.

It was frustrating.

All the more so because, while he had never had much time to sleep at Downton, he had always managed to get to sleep when he wanted to. Even after the horrific night of Alfred’s discovery and Jimmy’s rage he had managed to get to sleep through sheer determination (partly wanting to make the most of the bed as he expected to finish the next day without one). But now, no. Sleep wouldn’t come.

A rattling noise sounded from the street outside.

Thomas barely reacted. The sound would have made most people jump, or at least rouse them from doziness. But to Thomas it was oddly welcome. The silence unsettled him. Those thick walls of the house meant the activities of his neighbours remained a mystery. And while he was in no doubt he would hear them were they to head down the corridor to the bathroom or to the staircase, evidently no one felt the need to be out and about at present.

Thomas turned over violently, coming to rest with his head largely buried in the pillow, his body to the wall.

He couldn’t say how long it was before he heard the sound of Janek’s footsteps.

He stayed turned to the wall as Janek entered the room. He heard him quietly close the door and draw the bolt. Heard him walk about the room, extinguishing the candles. Heard the rustle of fabric and soft groan of relief as Janek shed the layers of tension from the day along with his clothes.

As the press of Janek’s knee tilted the mattress, Thomas realised he was sleeping in Janek’s spot.

‘One minute…’ He mumbled in a gravelly voice, raising his upper body to shift over in the tiny bed to allow Janek to climb over him and take his place by the wall.

‘You…’ Said Janek, pausing with one knee either side of Thomas, his face briefly lowered to Thomas’s. ‘…should be asleep.’

‘You woke me up.’ Said Thomas, feigning annoyance. He noted Janek’s hands sliding down the side of his waist and stopping at the waistband of his long johns. He was grateful for the reassuring squeeze that followed, just a little north of the fabric on his bare torso. And that Janek chose not to comment on the garment.

‘Mmmm bullshit.’ Janek rolled into the waiting space on the mattress, his hands sliding round Thomas’s waist but keeping contact.
His eyes were closed and his head resting against the pillow, a cheeky half-smile at his lips.

Thomas grunted back at him, mirroring Janek’s position save for his arms which rested awkwardly in the space between them. Thomas could still feel the heat of his body, channelled through those big hands at his waist and the bare forearms that enclosed his own in their present position.

Janek didn’t say anything, and he didn’t move to bring their bodies closer. He remained, eyes closed, softly resting, where he was.

And in the first instance Thomas was glad. Relieved almost.

The thought of anything else was an added layer of stress and worry on top of an already pounding and weary head. Like his uncertainty regarding the general state of his finances, career and future; there were most definitely unknowns in the bed also, and Thomas had little to no space in his head to contemplate them.

So the reprieve was a relief.

At first.

But then his mood turned to dissatisfaction.

Here in the dark, behind the security of a locked door, having that heady warmth so close yet not close enough became a source of frustration. He knew it was his own fault. He knew his mood (and choice to remain attired) had undoubtedly sent clear anti-signals to the man beside him. And he wasn’t entirely sure what he was hoping for should Janek choose this moment to disregard those signals. But that heat…

‘Stop…’ There was a rustle of covers as Janek raised his hand to tap at Thomas’s forehead. ‘…thinking.’

‘Mmmm…’ Thomas grumbled into the pillow. ‘You don’t know what I was thinking about.’

He turned his head slightly to keep contact with Janek’s fingertips as long as possible as they ran down his hair-line to his jaw.

‘Bed isn’t time to think.’

‘No?’ Said Thomas hummed. ‘Are you sure?’

Janek sighed. ‘Alright, let’s have it. What’s in your head?’

In reply Thomas shifted towards him, crushing against his chest, his stomach. Wrapping his arms about Janek’s back to tug him tight, Thomas kissed him. His lips sloppily applied but needful, he hoped, provided adequate answer and perhaps apology for his earlier mood.

Janek gave an audible exhale as their lips came apart.

‘That…that is alright.’ He said unsteadily.

‘Good.’ Said Thomas, savouring another taste of Janek’s mouth before rolling contentedly onto his back, his lower arm still wrapped around Janek’s back, the other hand grasping Janek’s forearm as it came to rest across his belly.

Janek pressed himself tightly against Thomas’s side.
‘You are fun in the dark.’ He said lazily.

‘Not so used to being fun in the light.’ Thomas replied somewhat dolefully.

‘I understand.’ Said Janek, gently running his hand over the hairs on Thomas’s stomach.

‘I’m so tired.’ Thomas said, staring up at the ceiling.

‘No surprise.’ Said Janek. ‘And there is bad thinking in there, isn’t there…?’ He slipped his arm out of Thomas’s grip.

Janek’s fingers made contact with Thomas’s forehead again. This time no tapping, just a gentle slide across the troubled brow.

‘Yes.’ Thomas admitted with a sigh, leaning in to Janek’s palm as it came to rest at his cheek.

Janek leaned in to gently kiss at the line of Thomas’s jaw.

‘Want help to sleep?’ He whispered, his lips tickling at Thomas’s skin.

Coming from anyone other than Janek the insinuation might have been more vague. As it was, Thomas got it in an instant.

‘Christ no!’ He laughed, scrunching up his face. ‘Couldn’t stand that mouth of yours right now.’

‘Hey!’

‘Oh you know you’re a bastard tease!’ Thomas said, turning his head to nudge at Janek’s nose with his own. ‘Could barely make it back to the hotel after that first night. And if you had me like up by the wall the other day…You’d do me in.’ He spoke in jest, but Janek was moved to give a sheepish duck of his head, briefly burying himself in Thomas’s shoulder before coming back up to face him.

‘I will make you feel nice…’ Janek lips brushed against Thomas’s. ‘…better…’ Another kiss. ‘…promise.’

The feel of Janek’s breath against his lips was near as intoxicating as the rough feel of his lips, and Thomas found himself wanting very much to believe him.

‘Promise…’ The quiet tenderness on a man of Janek’s usual brashness would have drawn a devilish laugh had Thomas not been feeling quite so tired. Or quite so hot.

‘When you put it like that…’

Thomas appreciated that the answering kiss was as light as the previous ones, only the tiniest hint of triumph; he didn’t think he had the energy to counter had Janek crowed.

The warm weight by his slide was slowly removed as Janek slid downwards, tugging the covers back up over his head to keep Thomas’s chest enveloped as he vanished beneath them.

Janek’s hands ran down the exposed rise of Thomas’s hip bones, continuing lower, fingers coming together to clutch at the waistband of his underwear, tugging it down.

The hands stopped the moment he’d freed as much as he needed to, a short distance below the curve of Thomas’s buttocks, evidently through some lingering respect (now near gone as Thomas’s body began to awaken to the prospect developing under the covers) as to why Thomas had chosen to keep them on in the first place.
There was still a feeling of trepidation in Thomas’s mind, not wholly trusting Janek’s assurances that his lips could ever produce anything other than torture (blissful torture, yes, but not something he could stand in his present state).

But the soft, wet, open mouthed gentle worship of his cock that Janek slowly embarked upon had Thomas’s worries fleeing. Tension he hadn’t known he was holding escaped on the back of a languid breath as Janek’s lips gently sucked in slithers of the malleable skin, not hard, not painful, not like anything Thomas had encountered before, but lazily pleasurable in the extreme.

The lack of full contact, the fact that Janek’s attentions were restricted to kisses and slow rolls of his tongue over his shaft…Had someone suggested a man could spend such a long time down there and not present his open mouth for the prize, Thomas imagined he might have laughed at the thought of such a disappointing encounter. But now, no there was no rush. No, this could continue.

Indefinitely, as far as Thomas was concerned.

Thomas’s head rested back in the pillow, eyes open but unseeing. His breaths were slow and steady, his heart rate inconspicuous, every muscle in his body relaxed save the arm he had stretched down to enable him to rest a hand on the back of Janek’s head.

Janek’s hair was thick and sleek to the touch, thankfully whatever washing he had done at the end of the working day at the docks had taken out the grease he seemed addicted to smearing on it.

And Thomas didn’t feel hard done by for the lack of sparks behind his eyes, lack of pounding heart and catching breath.

This, this was just what was needed.

Still he wouldn’t really mind if…

Janek repositioned himself under the covers.

Thomas let himself slide into the willing mouth.

He let out a long breath to the ceiling, head lolling back further down into the pillow.

Janek moved slow, lips enclosing but not tight. No sucking, just delicious sliding.

Thomas relaxed into him.

There was no speed, but there was rhythm. One that didn’t bring clenching muscles or wanton groaning but sent a glow shivering across his body.

Thomas found himself wishing his legs were free of the waistband of his long-johns. Wished he could raise his thighs either side of Janek’s head to feel him working between them.

But that would mean halting the encounter. And stopping for anything…no.

‘Ah!’

Janek slightly reneged on his promise of no tease in refusing to let Thomas’s hips buck up with a firm grip pressing him into the mattress, but Thomas didn’t mind in the slightest as the glow across his body crackled into life as he came; deep in Janek’s throat.

The mound under the covers shifted as Janek came back into partial view, crawling up Thomas’s body, hands and knees pressed into the mattress either side of him.
'Better?’ He said with a self-satisfied smile that Thomas could just about forgive him for under the circumstances.

‘Oh yes.’

‘Think you can sleep now?’ Said Janek.

Thomas pondered the question. Yes, he most probably could. Could sleep for a hundred happy years.

But there were other things he could do.

Not many, true, given his flagging energy levels which made any athletics strictly off limits.

But there were some.

And one thing in particular he found himself desperately wanting.

‘Come closer.’ Said Thomas, bringing his hands up to Janek’s shoulders to urge him forwards.

Janek smiled, moving forwards to kiss at the corner of Thomas’s mouth.

‘No, no…further.’ Said Thomas wryly, shifting a little way down the bed underneath him, his head coming to rest at the lower edge of the pillow, his hands falling from Janek.

Janek frowned. ‘Like this?’ He crawled a little further, raising his upper body to move forwards upright on his knees. He stopped when his knees bracketed Thomas’s ribs.

‘Further.’

Now it was Thomas’s turn to give a smile as Janek’s knees came to a halt as far as they could go without Janek climbing over his arms.

In the dull light from the street outside, Thomas allowed himself to savour the sight of the firmness of Janek’s thighs, the curve of his hip bone and the package to be found in between, not to mention Janek’s adorable enduring confusion, before uttering his next instruction.

‘Lean over.’ He said, running his hands up the backs of Janek’s thighs, massaging the taunt muscles.

‘What?’ There was the sharpness of inflection that Thomas had learned to recognise meant that the voice’s owner was sufficiently distracted to be unable to keep hold of his accent.

‘Maybe hold the bed rail?’ Thomas suggested helpfully, fighting the urge to raise and turn his head into the flesh of Janek’s inner thigh to take in the scent of him.

‘I don’t…’ Janek shook his head. ‘…I really don’t know what you are…’

‘Do you not?’ Said Thomas.

He could practically see the cogs working over in Janek’s brain as he stared down at him from above.

‘You…you mean to…?’

‘Why don’t you lean over and find out?’
Well, just because he’d forbidden Janek from teasing under the current circumstances didn’t mean he couldn’t.

Dubiously, but with a sense of curiosity that warmed Thomas’s heart, Janek complied. His knees shifting back a little as he leaned over and above Thomas’s head and shoulders, and the now largely vacant pillow as Thomas slipped a little lower, to grip the rails at the top of the bed.

Thomas’s hands moved up to Janek’s backside, coaxing him to bring his hips downwards.

It took a wider (and tentative, on the part of the man in question) splaying of Janek’s knees to enable Thomas to achieve his end. Namely, to bring himself face to face with Janek’s penis.

The sight put Thomas in mind of making a crack about the ‘delicious’ appearance of dangling fruit.

But he could hear Janek’s tentativeness, drifting dangerously close to discomfort, in the sound of his breathing and decided that now was not the time for teasing or jokes.

Or delay.

Raising his chin and shoulders off the mattress, Thomas brought his mouth up to the skin suspended just above his face.

He went straight for the main event, taking his first taste of Janek’s penis with the tip of his tongue just moments before his lips enclosed it.

He was too distracted to note the surprised, incoherent exclamation Janek made at the contact. But the palms of his hands couldn’t fail to notice a twitching of the muscles of Janek’s buttocks, and Thomas’s world grew even smaller and darker underneath Janek’s body as the latter’s knees shifted even further apart to bring more of himself to Thomas.

Thomas knew his skills and enthusiasm couldn’t hope to compare to Janek’s in this specific arena. Not that he had ever felt himself lacking in either regard before he’d met the man.

Still, in his present position there were limits to manoeuvrability so he was able to confine himself to sucking firmly on the hardening appendage without worrying he was failing to live up to Janek’s standard. And that was a much appreciated bonus as it meant he could enjoy the taste and thickness of the thing without complications.

And even this inelegant and simple arrangement had Janek shaking, tensing and gasping above him as though in the grips of the deepest euphoria.

Thomas could feel any lingering sense of unease or hesitation leaving Janek’s body as he became more receptive and less guarded in his movements above Thomas’s mouth.

Thomas couldn’t take much of him like that, but what he could accommodate he made the most of.

He lost himself in the feel of the hard skin between his wet lips, the leaking tang of flavour at its tip.

His palms splayed over Janek’s buttocks, his fingers gripping tightly, unintentionally tugging them wide. Janek leaned into the feeling nonetheless. So Thomas did it again.

Out of reflex (his instincts drifting to a different time, place and most definitely different type of man) Thomas’s fingers drew into the cleft between them, pressing forwards.

Thomas came back to himself. He stilled; mouth and hand coming to a halt.
A moment later his attentions to Janek’s penis continued, but he went to remove the wandering hand from its present location until such time as a proper discussion (one they hadn’t managed to have yet) on acceptable boundaries was possible.

With shocking speed Janek freed one of his hands from the bed rail and stretched it behind him to keep Thomas’s hand in place.

Emboldened, and deeply invigorated by the needfulness of the man above him, Thomas went to remove his hand for an entirely different reason.

When Janek’s strong grip failed to loosen Thomas briefly abandoned his attentions to Janek’s dick to enable him to whisper.

‘Just a moment.’

Janek’s hold loosened.

‘Promise.’ Thomas added.

Panting, Janek brought his hand back to join the other on the bed rail; bracing himself firmly against its solidity.

Thomas brought his right hand back, just long enough to gather the wetness glistening along Janek’s penis on his fingers and quickly dip inside his mouth for extra juice before reaching around again.

His mouth slid back around Janek’s penis as his finger slid into his ass and there was the distinct sound of creaking as the metal of the bed frame groaned in protest at the strain Janek’s hands were putting it under.

Oh and this was fun.

Thomas hummed contentedly, and perhaps a little smugly, to himself around Janek’s penis as the man above came apart caught between the twin torment of probing fingers and eager lips.

While enjoying his position below Janek; it was the thought of the view (were he to be standing a little way away, across the room) that had Thomas’s muscles fluttering.

And Janek seemed painfully eager to put on a show for that spectral Thomas.

Every move encouraged greater friction, greater depth, more of anything and everything.

And so it built and built.

Until Janek found his release.

Despite his evident enjoyment, Janek still sounded surprised when he came; something which had Thomas’s lips quirking into an affectionate smile even as he dragged them over the remnants of Janek’s erection to clean him off.

Thomas wasn’t one for the swallowing. And it hadn’t been his intention to start that night.

But it was clear Janek’s shivering (and heavy) body wasn’t moving any time soon, so for the first time he was compelled to do so.

He determined it wouldn’t be the last time as his tongue slipped out to catch any remnants of Janek’s from his lips as Janek continued to rest above him.
When Janek finally made it back to his side on the mattress Thomas was half way to the land of nod. He just about managed to sit up to tug off the offending long johns before collapsing back down.

He felt Janek shift to be closer, felt his arms slide around him.

He caught the small whisper of gratitude that Janek breathed against his cheek.

Turning his head to Janek, Thomas touched their foreheads together

Neither was aware of anything further in the short moments until sleep claimed them both.
Chapter 29

The moment he woke up and saw daylight, Thomas recalled Janek’s comments about the dark.

Squinting in the low light from the windows Thomas turned his head to regard Janek’s sleeping form beside him.

He was on his back, neck twisted, face sunk into the pillow, facing Thomas. One arm was thrown up above his head the other rested under Thomas’s neck, extending to the edge of the bed where his fingers dangled.

His breathing was just loud enough to be heard, in through the nose and swelling the chest. Eyes closed, sandy lashes against his cheeks.

Thomas watched him lazily.

It was odd to see Janek’s face so still. But Thomas fancied he could still make out hints of that strangely jibing and determined furrowing of the forehead that Janek was prone to while awake. While awake and teasing Thomas about his partiality to only operate under cover of darkness.

Thomas’s chin rested against the firm forearm as he relaxed against the pillow, head still turned to Janek. He wasn’t quite sure at what point in the night their positions had reversed, but he found it no hardship to find Janek’s arm around him (or at least under him).

And he wasn’t minding the view one bit either.

The view in the daylight.

The view in the daylight in the room that was theirs.

Smiling at a glimmer of a mischievous thought, Thomas raised a hand and tapped Janek’s chest lightly with his fingertips.

The hand above Janek’s forehead swept clumsily downwards as though swatting away a fly. His hand scratched at his chest for a moment before returning to its previous position.

There was no other reaction.

Thomas gave a sharp exhale, almost breaking into a snort of laughter as he smiled at the stubbornly sleeping man.

He tapped again, a little harder.

Janek’s hand made another southwards journey, this time connecting with Thomas’s hand as he went to withdraw it.

For a moment Janek’s forehead creased in confusion. Eyes still closed, fingers fumbling and frown deepening he groped at the puzzling irritant.

Thomas smiled into the pillow, breaking out into laugh at the point when one of Janek’s eyes finally cracked open.

‘Agh…’ The noise Janek made was inhuman and pained as he squinted through the first few moments of his exposure to daylight.
But he soon settled back to his usual self upon recognising Thomas’s face watching him from the opposite side of the pillow.

‘Mmmmm…’ He mumbled groggily, his fingers and palm wrapping around Thomas’s intruding hand, pressing it to his chest.

Thomas watched Janek’s eyes begin to drift closed again with an impish expression.

He leaned closer.

‘Janek?’

‘Mmmmm…’

‘Janek?’

Janek’s eyes opened.

‘What you bastard?’ He murmured warmly.

Thomas leaned even closer.

‘How long till you have to be at work?’

Janek groaned, craning his head up slightly to look across the room at the fireplace.

‘Mmmmm…hours.’ He said. ‘Sun isn’t at the second stone yet. Fuck.’ His head dropped heavily back down onto the pillowcase, his eyes beginning to close again.

‘Hours?’ Thomas said in voice dripping with suggestion.

Janek’s eyes were immediately wide open.

‘Yes…’ He said, eyes and voice full of an endearing sense of wonder. ‘…hours.’

Thomas began to raise himself slowly onto his elbow, the bedsheets sliding down off his shoulder towards his waist. His joints protested a little at the early hour (and the night of immobility) but the slither of Janek’s torso that the action exposed was more than enough incentive to keep him moving upwards.

Janek’s gaze followed him intently.

The moment Thomas’s body began to incline fractionally in the direction of the open space above Janek’s, the other man latched on to the proof of Thomas’s intention with an eagerness that astounded them both.

In the blink of an eye, with a twist of his body and a push of his arms, Janek had himself beneath Thomas.

Thomas was taken aback by the immediate contact between the whole of their bodies, and there was just enough sense left in him to marvel at the immediate provision of a space for him between Janek’s thighs.

Further thought was drowned in a wet kiss and didn’t resurface again for some time.

Thomas pressed Janek’s head into the pillow with the eagerness of his mouth and his backside into
the mattress with the firmness of his rutting.

Janek’s eagerness and his own personal disbelief at the glory of the situation (in its entirety) had Thomas intensely hot and bothered in all the right ways. His body and brain were impatient enough to be content with the crushing of skin on skin. And his arousal left no doubt as to whether his present actions, sliding his penis against Janek’s stomach and cock, would do the business.

But there was the lingering memory of the look on Janek’s face, sometime before he’d started smothering it with his mouth, when he had gone to lie on top of him in the first place.

That look of absolute delight.

And based on what little past precedent there was, Thomas fancied he knew precisely what it was regarding.

With titanic resolve, he forced himself back from the brink and broke contact with Janek’s hips.

The fingers he raised, intended for his own lips, soon found a revered welcome between Janek’s and moments later were travelling down Janek’s stomach, past his arousal, and down between his legs.

Thomas did the best he could under the circumstances, but the disorientation of recent sleep, the pounding pulse of stimulation and Janek muttering filthy and desperate things into his ear soon had him abandon a more complete mode of preparation.

He had to leave the support of his upper body to his chest (still pressed against Janek’s) to allow him to fully focus on the task in hand as he attempted to enter the man below. A little guidance with one hand and a little tugging and distraction with the other, not to mention uncompromising determination on Janek’s part, soon had him well seated.

Then he was free to move. They both were.

And Thomas could marvel at the fact he had even momentarily considered anything less than this sufficient.

Janek matched him well.

Both seesawed into a motion that was intoxicating, at a pace that was unsustainable.

And release followed soon after.

Had Thomas not been too far gone himself he might have congratulated himself on bringing Janek off without any of the usual frills he had often had to employ in similar situations. But as it was he was too busy enjoying the shudder of muscles around his cock and followed soon after.

Janek’s arms and thighs fell away from him as Janek collapsed back into the mattress.

But Thomas felt no such fatigue.

In fact there was no tiredness at all.

There was almost euphoria.

A giddy glee that had him up and off the bed, swinging his dressing gown about him and picking his way across the room (through the remnants of the previous day’s laundry) towards the basin.

A quick splash of water on his hands and he was on his way over to the stove.
Bending down a moment, only partially aware of what his dressing gown was and wasn’t covering, he snatched up the remnants of a packet of bacon.

‘So…’ Thomas said, sharply enough that Janek was raised from his stupor to peer down his naked body and across the room to him. He raised the packet in his hand. ‘…Reckon you’ve an appetite for breakfast?’ He said smugly.
Over his shoulder Thomas caught sight of Janek immediately reaching for his clothes having extracted himself from the mattress.

‘Are you…?’ He began, frowning, before he could stop himself.

‘Am I what?’ Janek said, jumping as he tugged his trousers up over his otherwise naked lower half.

‘Ah…’ Blinking at the bouncing view, momentarily forgetting completely what he had intended to ask, Thomas eventually managed. ‘You going to bath, or something?’ He said.

‘No.’ Janek said as though it were the most stupid question he had ever been asked.

The thought of Janek going to work in his current state offended Thomas’s delicate sensibilities, but he was not immune to the romanticism behind Janek wanting to have evidence of him on him all…

‘No point…’ Janek continued, ignorant of Thomas’s musings. ‘…I get dirty when I work.’

That quelled the smile that had begun to creep across Thomas’s lips.

‘Not down there I’d hope.’ Thomas said sardonically, a little embarrassed at himself in the moments previous.

‘Ha!’ Janek wrenched a shirt sleeve up his arm as he replied. ‘No…’ Thomas watched in astonishment as Janek made his way over to the table and dropped into one of the waiting seats without complaint or hesitation. He buttoned his shirt up to his chest. ‘…but I can tell you there’s some lads needed extra trousers last time the rig snapped and sent four months of work down into the Mersey.’

‘I can imagine.’ Thomas said with a sympathetic grimace. The memory of the huge metal works coming out of the workshop at the docks loomed large in his mind and he could only imagine the despair were something to go wrong at the point of installation. Oddly, he felt he was more affected by the story than Janek, who was busy laughing at the recollection.

‘I clean up after work at the pumps.’ Janek concluded with a shrug.

‘What? And just stand around in the…til you dry out?’

‘Or towel off with the overalls.’ Said Janek, frowning curiously at Thomas’s interest.

‘You know I noticed there’s some nice tubs in the bathroom across the hall…’ Said Thomas, tipping bacon and toast onto two un-matching plates before bringing them over to the table. ‘…reckon you’d fancy making use of them when you get back?’

‘No.’ Janek leaned heavily on the table with both elbows as he packed a folded slice of toast with bacon and hungrily devoured the ensemble. ‘I never use the bath.’ He took another bite and mumbled through crumbs. ‘Takes too long.’

‘Oh.’ Thomas said. He chewed absently on a piece of crispy bacon fat, watching Janek’s ravenous and hurried eating opposite. ‘You know, speaking of baths I met one of your neighbours yesterday.’

That accomplished the seemingly impossible task of breaking Janek’s focus on his breakfast.
‘I’m afraid to ask!’ He said with a smile and a hint of merriment in his eyes.

‘Mmmm…’ Thomas murmured ruefully. ‘I was having a bath and one of the neighbours sort of walked in on me.’ He tapped the remnants of his back on the plate, realising for the first time he had been eating with his fingers. ‘Least I hope it was a neighbour!’

‘Which one?’ Said Janek, the look of amusement in his eyes growing by the second.

‘I don’t know. Didn’t really seem the right time to ask his name.’ Said Thomas. ‘He had a really red nose and…’

‘Archie Berring.’ Janek said immediately through a final mouthful of food. ‘And I’ll bet you felt the need for an open window after he’d been in there!’ He added with a laugh.

‘Could say that.’

Janek caught the fleeting look of discomfort on Thomas’s face.

‘Don’t worry. He doesn’t think anything by it. You know, sharing the facilities and all that.’ Said Janek, abandoning his empty plate and leaning back in his chair to close the last few shirt buttons up to his neck. ‘Everyone does it.’

Thomas gave an involuntary shudder.

‘If you feel strongly, you know there is a lock for that door…?’ Said Janek wryly as he got to his feet.

Thomas nodded. ‘I know that now.’ He said.

He watched Janek donning his shoes.

‘Don’t suppose…’ Said Janek slowly as he got into his coat and cap, gathering up the discarded laundry pile on the floor to take with him to the workshop for rags. ‘…there’s anything I could say to get you to stay here? Have another try at that rest?’

Thomas met his gaze but didn’t reply.

‘Thought not.’ Said Janek with a whisper of a laugh. ‘If only I could lock this door from the outside, eh?’ He said, nodding towards the inner bolt of the door.

‘I need a job. I can’t not work.’

Janek’s mouth and nose wrinkled ruefully. ‘It’s been two days.’ He said, oddly tentatively given his usual brashness.

Thomas didn’t reply.

‘Right. I’ll be off then. Um…’ Janek paused with his hand on the door knob. ‘…let’s see, we’re in need of…well…everything, so I’ll get some food in on my way home.’

‘I could go and…’

‘You could, but I know the best shops.’

Thomas nodded mutely, finding he lacked the energy or will to argue as Janek began to disappear out the door.
‘Have a good day.’ He managed before the door swung shut, leaving him alone in the room with the crackling and hissing of the stove for company under ropes hung with other people’s clothes.
Chapter 31

Thomas fought a raging internal debate about whether or not to wash up the plates and pan, sort out the laundry and make the bed. Obviously he would need to do them, eventually, but in the present moment it seemed too much like delaying tactics to keep him from heading out to begin his job hunt.

Likewise with his personal morning toilette routine.

Shaving was a necessity, obviously, as was a proper slicking of the hair and a dash of cologne. But whether or not to include a bath before getting to that point was somewhat up for debate also. A wash of some kind really needed to happen, under his dressing gown he felt sticky, satisfied, but sticky. And while the morning cigarette that dangled from his lips as he languished at the table took away the ability of his own nostrils to pick up the lingering smell of Janek, he couldn’t count on any potential interviewers having as voracious a smoking habit as his own.

In the end he compromised, using the basin in the room to give himself a good wipe down before attending to the more precise matter of shaving.

A short while later (the room still in a shambles and thus doing nothing for his nerves) Thomas was dressed and preened and ready to leave. He tucked his wallet into the new pocket he’d sewn inside his waistcoat (hoping to avoid having to reach into his crotch for that, or any other reason throughout the day) and grabbed his coat and hat off the peg.

Scuttling down the stairs, Thomas quickly hurried across the hallway. In his agitated state he couldn’t quite stomach the idea of having to make introductions with…

A sing-song thickly accented voice sounded from behind him.

‘Well there we are!’

Bollocks…

Thomas turned on his heel, painfully close to the front door, yet so far.

‘Hello…’ He said, forcing a convivial expression with all his might. He found himself looking at a tall, spindly woman, swathed in multiple shawls with a black woollen dress just about peeking out underneath. She leaned against the open door to her quarters, one arm resting across her waist, the other nursing a thinly rolled cigarette that to Thomas smelt more of sickly sweetness than baccy.

‘Mrs Porter?’

She nodded, a sly looking smile on her wrinkled face.

‘I hope you’ll permit me to introduce myself, I’m Mr Barrow.’ Thomas said, raising a gloved hand up to tip his hat the slightest bit in her direction.

Mrs Porter seemed familiar with this piece of information already, but the hat tipping was evidently unexpected.

She made a pleased humming noise through her nose, her posture remaining fixed to the door frame.

‘He said you were proper.’ She said. ‘A real gent.’ She added.

‘If he said that I doubt it was meant to be complimentary.’ Thomas said.
Mrs Porter lost herself in raucous laughter.

She soon degenerated into hacking coughs of smoke, slapping at her chest to quell the irritation, but the brightness in her watery eyes told Thomas that he’d managed to connect.

‘Off with you…’ She said, motioning him to the door through her coughs.

Thomas nodded to her gratefully, though for a moment he wondered if he ought to stay to make sure the woman wasn’t about to keel over in the hallway. Still, he bid her farewell and got on his way.

The moment the door shut behind him the congenial expression fell right off his face. He sighed in relief at having escaped the unexpected and unwelcome encounter.

Yes, she was nice enough. He liked his older women with a bit of slyness. But he just couldn’t be fagged with being sociable.

Not a good mind-set to be in, he thought to himself with a grimace, given that if the day was to go well he would be meeting a great many more strangers during its course.

He exhaled slowly and treated himself to another cigarette before he left the steps.

The weather was crisp and cold, with grey clouds creeping over head to blanket the city from above.

Altogether an inauspicious start.

He tried not to be too harsh on himself at the lateness of the hour when he finally began to make his way down the street. Though he couldn’t quite shut out the niggling little voice that reproached him for having somehow wasted most of the morning.

He shook his head, set his jaw, and strode forwards to implement the first (and currently only) phase of his plan.

He had a kept a couple of coins in his pocket and he needed to find a newspaper boy.

That was the plan.

That and looking at buildings he passed for promising signs involving legal firms, accountancy firms or clerks offices.

Perhaps visit the civic buildings if he made it that far.

Anything promising he saw (or read in the paper) he resolved to walk in, introduce himself and hope for a miracle. The rectangle of folded paper in his inner pocket, as close as he could get a résumé before Janek interrupted him the previous evening, was designed to bolster his resolve.

As he strode towards the street corner, where he was almost certain he would find a malnourished youth with lungs to rival Melchior clutching broadsheets, Thomas’s mind strayed back to the one previous occasion he had been obliged to look for work – at least before Downton became his life.

In fact it was the time when Downton had become his life.

He remembered the odd combination of stubbornness and desperation that had driven him to apply and interview for the role of hall boy. And he remembered the level of consideration that had gone into that particular choice ran something along the lines of wanting a position where room and board wouldn’t be an issue to enable him to be gone, and stay gone, from his father’s influence as immediately as possible.
Of course it was only going to be a temporary measure. He wasn’t going to stay in service.

He was going to find his own place in the world.

Thomas had to stop walking for a moment, resting a hand out to the nearest wall to steady himself.

Because he never had. Had he?

He’d failed to leave of his own accord and he’d been so close to being forced to leave so many times but he hadn’t. He hadn’t left. Hadn’t gone anywhere. Hadn’t done anything with himself, had nothing to show for having thrown a good upbringing and a family business into his father’s face.

Had he not really wanted to leave? Was that it?

Or did he just stop trusting the arrogance of his youthful assertion that he could ever make anything of himself outside of someone else’s strict controlling structure.

Well now he was out and what was there left?

Anything. If he was honest with himself, he would take anything.

Tasks for a wage. That was his requirement.

The money he had saved wouldn’t last forever, and he couldn’t abide the notion of being supported by Janek. He needed income, focus.

Fuck, he needed an identity.

At some point during his musings his feet had begun to carry him onwards down the street and now he found himself standing in front of a bemused paper boy.

‘Give me one of them.’ He heard himself say as though watching his life play out on a screen, some distance from him, in a darkened theatre.
Chapter 32

Thomas noted with irritation that the paper he had just purchased was for the previous day, and that the headline bore no relation to the one the paper boy had been shouting (though that was neither here nor there). But the boy had vanished round the corner the moment money had changed hands and Thomas lacked the inclination to make a spectacle of chasing him for the sake of small change.

Besides, a quick scan of the advertisement pages revealed several open interview sessions were still due to be taking place that day.

He picked out one calling for a Junior Office Assistant, balking at the work ‘Junior’ but reasoning he would perhaps stand out in life experience – as opposed to a more elevated roll which would require him to have previous comparable employment. Also he recognised the street name in the advertisement (a considerable advantage given his navigation failure of the previous day) as being close by, just off the main road on the way to the station.

Off he went, neatly avoiding the many obstacles the noisy street chose to fling in his direction. He managed to pick up a mud smear on the side of his leg as a cart went rattling past him and flicked up crud from the gutter, but otherwise he made the journey unscathed.

He found the building, or at least thought he had, but he entered to find himself inside a store.

The man behind the desk gave a weary look at Thomas’s confusion and motioned for him to take the stairs behind the counter.

Not liking the dank, dark staircase (or lack of street frontage) one bit, Thomas nevertheless continued to climb. He comforted himself that at least the level of competition should be low in a place such as this.

In that he was woefully mistaken.

He entered the upstairs hallway to find a grey clad woman seated at a small table at the head of a corridor filled with just under a dozen men. Young men. Boys really.

And every one of them turned their heads expectantly to him, brightening when they saw him, sitting and standing up straighter in a bid to be noticed.

They think...

No. Absolutely not.

There was nothing, nothing that would enable him to remain in that corridor and keep his dignity.

It was just…

The issue then became how to extract himself from the present situation without further embarrassment.

Attempting to keep his head high he walked over to the lady half-hidden behind her typewriter.

‘Hello, I was wondering if I might ask for…Mr Davies’s…’ Thomas recalled from the advertisement. ‘…availability for a meeting to discuss some paperwork requirements for my employer?’
The lady gave him a very dry look and didn’t make a move to check the calendar behind her.

‘How would next Wednesday suit?’

‘That would be wonderful. Thank you.’ Said Thomas quickly, hoping she caught the gratitude in his eyes before he turned and retreated back down the stairs as rapidly as propriety would allow.

His cheeks were absolutely flaming as he stepped out onto the street, and he took himself off for a slow walk back to the familiar comfort of his and Janek’s street corner to calm the heat in his face before consulting the adverts again.

His shoulders gave an involuntary shudder at the memory of the young expectant faces, and he had to pause a moment to quell it before opening the paper.

A grocery firm needed an Orders Administrator.

Thomas wasn’t sure whether to consider the specifics of the advertisement (i.e. the reference to groceries) as some sort of ‘sign’ given his ill-fated foray into the world of commerce following the war, but the brief description of duties seemed well within his capabilities and didn’t specify particular experience as essential; which boded well for his less than conventional work history.

But still, groceries.

But, he had wanted to work with groceries before.

No, he’d wanted to make money before. That had been the salient point.

Still, he couldn’t sniff at a job he had a genuine change of getting.

He flagged down the nearest solo man he could see who was dressed somewhat in the same fashion as himself (safety in familiarity, and clearly not poor enough to try to snatch his wallet and run) and begged directions to the storehouse named on the advertisement.

With a broad and winsome smile the man talked him through the steps required to get there.

Thomas quickly thanked him and moved on; declining the man’s offer to take him to a nearby office down the alleyway across the street where apparently they were looking for someone ‘just of his type’ and also declined the offer of a ‘quick drink’ in a nearby pub – also located down an alleyway.

As he walked Thomas recognised enough of the route to realise he was heading closer to the docks. He supposed it made sense that the storehouse might be located close to water transport.

He was intensely glad to spy the building when it came into view, having half suspected that the man from earlier had deliberately led him to the edge of the city in order to…

Thomas looked around. The man wasn’t following. Or at least nowhere he could see.

And besides, here was the storehouse.

Thomas walked towards it, staying to the side of the road as it opened out into a warehouse yard, past the final row of terrace houses before industrial architecture fully took over around him.

He noted that a fairly innocuous house within the terrace had a ‘Help Wanted’ sign below a polished sign proclaiming the premises to be called ‘The Sailor’s Rest’.

He passed it by, noting absently that it looked like some sort of private pub.
The storehouse was empty save for four men hauling crates of apples from the empty expanse of the building onto a waiting cart and there was no one in the site office. Or at least no one that Thomas could see through the chicken-mesh screen that divided the administrative space from the floor where the labourers toiled.

‘Pardon me…’ Thomas tried awkwardly to get the attention of the man closest to him without being noticed by the others, but of course he failed. ‘…I wonder if you might direct me…’ Thomas realised that perhaps he was overcomplicating his sentence structure a little given the circumstances, but he could do little about that now. ‘…to where the interviews are taking place? You know…’ He brandished the newspaper. ‘…for the Administrator?’

‘Filled yesterday, chief.’ Piped up the eldest of the men.

He immediately went back to loading the cart and the others followed suit.

‘Right…’ Thomas said quietly. ‘Thank you.’ He added, although the men were no longer paying attention; Thomas reasoned he needed to cultivate all the good graces and favour with the universe he possibly could given the way his luck was going.

He caught sight of the ‘Help Wanted’ sign again as he made his way back.

He considered for a moment.

‘Fuck it…’ He whispered to himself, stepping up to knock on the door.

He found himself face to face with a man so heavy set he wondered how he could comfortably fit down the tiny corridor beyond.

‘Not open yet.’ The man said gruffly.

‘I’m here about the sign.’ Thomas said quickly as the man went to close the door. ‘The one…’ He pointed to the right, where it was stuck to the blacked out window. ‘…there.’

‘I see.’ Said the man, he looked Thomas up and down and concluded his inspection with a look of interest rather than disdain so Thomas decided he may as well press on.

‘So…I wondered if I might ask about the role?’ He said, trying not to sound too tentative.

‘Public relations.’ Said the bloated man with an almost toothless grin.

‘Oh, right, so the job is…liaising with the customers?’ Thomas took a stab in the dark, not caring for the man’s unhelpfully brief response.

‘Sometimes. When there in need of “liaising”…’ The man said.

The stress the man put on the word ‘liaising’ had Thomas wondering if the man was unfamiliar with the word and had misinterpreted its meaning.

‘…then you help me get them away from the girls.’

‘The…’ Thomas blinked in confusion. ‘…girls?’

‘Yeah. Sometimes they think to have more than they can pay for so…’

‘If you’ll…’ Thomas said, jumping back off the doorstep as though the thing had suddenly become molten. ‘…excuse me…I just remembered I have to…’
He turned and walked away without further explanation, his heart pounding in his ears until he made it a good long distance away and was absolutely certain that the large man wasn’t following.

Leaning back against the wall of the warehouse he had wound up beside, he retrieved a cigarette and stuck it quickly in his mouth.

‘Christ…’

He clicked his lighter shut and breathed out until he felt his lungs clench in protest.

He felt unsettled and strange. Not to mention tired and sick of the paper that flapped about under his arm.

But Christ it had only been a couple of hours.

A couple of hours and…

He needed to regroup.

The smell of the Mersey pervaded the air and he knew he couldn’t be far from the waterfront. He also knew it couldn’t be far off lunch time.

Throwing the out of date paper to the floor he stomped around the perimeter of the warehouse, searching for the waterfront.

Upon finding it, he continued to follow the concrete walkway towards the docks, trailing smoke and discomfort behind him.
Chapter 33

As he walked, his embarrassment grew. And the more it grew the angrier he became.

By the time he arrived near the familiar workshops he was fuming.

Heaven help the world if he’d arrived at the wrong time to catch Janek at lunch. And he didn’t fancy the chances of anyone that got in his way as he stalked across the docks, wielding his scrunchily rolled newspaper like a sword.

Thankfully, if the deserted walkways were anything to go, by he’d arrived at the right time.

The flock of squalling seagulls circling off to the far side of the warehouses was a hint also.

As he rounded the final building Thomas was taken aback by the chaotic array of men, seated, lolling or standing on the concrete steps for as far as the eye could see.

The sheer numbers were surprising. Seeing the workers all squashed together in the same place to catch the sun (it had finally managed to break through the clouds) was vastly different to seeing them scurrying in crowds about the docks.

A scruffy array they made, some without jackets, some with waistcoats unbuttoned; men shouldering each other or throwing bread to the seagulls as they sat on the bare stone steps that led directly to the water’s edge. And all with hair that had managed to break out of whatever style they’d set it in for the morning, squashed to sweat-stained foreheads by weather-beaten caps.

Thomas had never felt more conspicuous.

Thankfully, after the morning he’d had, he’d also never felt less like caring.

He picked his way gingerly through an obstacle course of bottles and rubbish, past stretched out legs and load-bearing hands, scanning about for his familiar face.

The men he passed invariably looked up at him with surprise, fear or hostility but upon getting a better look at him their expressions dropped and their attention went back to their food. Thomas supposed they assumed he had come from the site offices (and thus that he was someone to be feared or hated – and definitely not expected within the crush of lunching workers). He supposed it was a compliment of sorts that the men initially made that assumption – but he couldn’t quite shake off his annoyance at the irony that he looked immeasurably better off than all of them but in reality had no job, no friends and accommodation that he’d done nothing to earn.

He was in enough of a grump by the time he’d climbed over the first dozen or so men that he had to bite his tongue to avoid screaming ‘I’m unemployed’ at the next man who jumped up to his feet in deference to let ‘the gentleman’ pass.

Thankfully, it was then he saw Janek.

Or rather Janek and company.

It was clear even in the mass of bodies littering the steps that Janek’s immediate neighbours formed a tight core group. Each of the dozen or so men, including Janek, seemed to be leaning towards a common centre; chattering excitedly (and no doubt raucously) while they passed around a couple of half-empty bottles, crusty loaves of bread and sprayed crumbs from their mouths as they laughed.
Thomas recognised most of them as workers from the welders’ shop, including the sour-faced Liam who sat three men down from Janek. But there were some who by dress and appearance (and the fact Thomas hadn’t seen them before) seemed to belong perhaps better with a different trade group. Yet here they all were together, mixed and rollicking like bawdy school boys preparing to kick a pig’s bladder about the street.

Had he not been quite so in the dumps, Thomas might have balked at attempting to penetrate the seemingly impregnable group.

But at this particular moment he would have happily bowled over the King of England himself to be able to put himself in the vicinity of somewhere to rest his bones and someone he could moan to.

Mentally daring any of the men to reference the occasion he had ended up in the Mersey at Janek’s instigation, Thomas approached.

The men did a similar double take as the other dockers upon spying the approaching besuited interloper, and like the others their demeanour relaxed upon seeing he wasn’t management.

Unlike the others, however, they didn’t lose interest in him.

They watched as he approached, their conversations and vitals passing on hold for the moment in favour of staring silently at Thomas.

Thomas didn’t care for the sly looks of recognition on several of their faces. He didn’t know if they stemmed from his unintentional swim the month before or the scam he’d fallen afoul of at the pub, but either way he met the looks with a glare of pure death.

If anything, this only seemed to amuse them more.

‘Ah!’

Thomas was distracted from his attempts at ocular stabbing by Janek’s soft exclamation of recognition.

Janek’s face beamed at him from within the ranks of his more subdued companions.

Thomas turned the full force of the dull death-glare on him.

Janek grimaced and gave a sheepish, and no doubt sympathetically intended, shrug of his broad shoulders.

Thomas let his dark expression fall from his face in response. It was replaced by a look of deep fatigue.

Janek gave him another quirk of a smile.

The men around them remained quiet, watching, until Janek extracted his right arm from where it rested on his knee to smack the upper arm of the man sitting next to him.

Without further input from Janek and surprisingly minimal grumbling, the man (and several in his immediate vicinity) scooted sideways to make room for Thomas.

Thomas picked his way through the group and flopped down beside Janek so hard he suspected he would be taking his trousers off to a black and blue backside that evening.

He stared straight ahead, out to the water.
Without a word, Janek leaned his arm in Thomas’s direction to offer the remnants of the bread.

Thomas reached, tore off a slither of crust, stuffed it in his mouth, and chewed.

‘So…Good morning?’ Said Janek.
Thomas sighed. Took in a deep breath. Then sighed again.

‘Spectacular.’ He said. ‘You?’ He added with false brightness.

Janek chuckled.

‘Not so bad.’ He said, nudging at Thomas’s arm to get him to abandon his blank staring and look him in the eye.

When Thomas looked in Janek’s direction he found himself staring at comically wide eyes and contortedly pursed lips. He collapsed immediately into giggles before subduing himself and blushing furiously at having laughed aloud, and at nothing more than a silly face, in a sea of hardened labourers.

Thankfully none of the others were paying the slightest bit of attention.

In fact the moment he’d sat down they all seemed to lose interest. They had returned to their food and shared chatter as though he were not there, leaving he and Janek alone, still and silent, in their midst.

‘I’m…’ Thomas began. He intended to add an eloquent and explanatory sentence, but in the end just found himself summarising. ‘…fucked.’

Janek raised the hunk of bread up to his mouth and bit, altering Thomas a little too late that what he had eaten may well have touched multiple people’s lips and grubby hands before making its way into his mouth.

Janek spoke quietly, making a point of speaking low and only to him. ‘You know what I will say. Don’t you?’

The stupid thing was, Thomas did.

Janek would say it had only been a day…less than a day, in fact...since he had taken himself out into the city in search of work.

Thomas knew that. Even if he hadn’t known Janek was thinking it, Thomas would have known that.

Didn’t make a lack of instant success any harder to swallow for someone who had attained a degree of excellence in their previous world, but Thomas did know it had only been half a day.

‘Fuck.’ Thomas said sourly.

He reached to tear off another chunk of the potentially hazardous bread from Janek’s hand.

As he was chewing he paused a moment to consider the fact that Janek had most definitely not left the house with the bread he was currently eating. He wondered which one of the grubby faces around them had provided it, not to mention the bottles of some kind of fermented substance that were currently making the communal rounds.

Thomas watched the bottle with a sense of intense need.

Janek must have followed his eye line because seconds later, by clicking his fingers behind the head
of the man currently swilling from it, Janek had procured the bottle for him.

‘No luck then.’ Said Janek. It wasn’t a question.

Thomas still obliged him with a shake of his head before swallowing the miscellaneous substance in the bottle with gusto.

‘Eh!’ Janek called sharply. The exclamation and the accompanying claps were aimed at the men surrounding them. ‘Who’s taking on now?’

Thomas sat, half-chewed bread on his tongue, feeling suddenly horribly conspicuous as every man in the immediate vicinity turned to look towards him.

‘There still taking on the casual.’ Said a fairly wiry young man seated to the far left.

‘You serious?’ A gruff voice barked from Thomas’s right. Thomas caught sight of the man gesturing pointedly towards his clothing.

He leaned a little towards Janek to query. ‘The casual?’

‘Half-day casuals.’ Janek said quickly. ‘They stand by the loading bay first thing in the morning and first thing after midday. Get taken on for lifting and such like.’

‘Ah.’ Said Thomas.

‘Ah indeed.’ Said Janek, then continuing loudly enough for the rest of the group to hear. ‘Any serious thoughts?’

Thomas saw the young man who had spoken shrink in disappointment for a moment, beforebrightening and sitting straight upright to declare.

‘My cousin’s at the auditor’s office.’ He said. ‘They need someone to talk to their duf…um, their customers. You know, keep them happy.’

‘David and Erickson’s? Nah, bunch of cunts.’ A voice sounded from behind them.

There were mumbles of agreement from all around.

With a defeated sigh Thomas retrieved a pen from his pocket and poised it over a blank space on hisout-of-date newspaper. ‘And where do the bunch of cunts work?’

‘Ninety six Boundary Street.’ Janek replied from beside him. ‘Thank you Turner.’ The young man positively glowed at that, looking around at those seated either side of him to ensure they had also heard Janek’s words.

‘Anyone else?’ Janek said sharply.

‘They need an orders admin guy over by the…’

‘Filled.’ Thomas said dully, cutting off the man who spoke from the space immediately below hisfeet. Realising he may have been a little too curt, Thomas extrapolated. ‘If it’s the grocery storehouse over by the Sailor’s Rest, it’s filled.’

The man nodded apologetically to confirm that was the one he had spoken of.

‘How do you know the Sailor’s Rest?’ Janek whispered.
‘Let’s just focus on the matter at hand, shall we?’ Said Thomas quickly, feeling his cheeks begin to colour.

‘Frank’s old place…’ Said Liam. ‘…Cathy’s brother’s boss. They’re taking on new clerks.’

The names meant nothing to Thomas. But evidently they did to the others seated about him.

‘Speaking of the sweet Miss Cathy how is the marital bliss?’ Said the man behind him.

‘Auuuuuh…’ The noise from the back of Liam’s throat, the lolling back of his head and the expression of pure closed-eye bliss on his upturned face told the group all they needed to know. ‘No words mate, no words.’

Thomas was caught somewhere between the oddly obscene sight of the usually dour Liam looking happy and the surprise at hearing reference to a recent wedding.

‘You’re married?’ He blurted out before he could stop himself.

‘Hard to believe with that ugly face, isn’t it.’ Janek quickly chipped in as Liam’s expression returned to its usual stormy self. ‘We are all so…’ Janek reached forwards to pat Liam’s shoulder, no mean feat given the two men seated between them. ‘…proud of you. You old dog!’

Various clamours of ‘Here, here’ came from all sides.

Thomas caught the warning look Janek shot him. He felt a shivering numbness trail up his back at recalling the space they were currently inhabiting was the real world.

Not that the question he wanted to ask would be any more appropriate were he and Janek to be alone in the flat than in their present location.

‘You’ll find the firm at twenty two Vauxhall.’ Said Liam, tossing the words over his shoulder at Thomas. Not deigning to crane his head far enough round to look at him.

‘Twenty two Vauxhall…’ Thomas repeated, scribbling on the newspaper.

Janek performed his usual trick of playfully nudging his side.

‘That enough to be going on for now?’

‘Yes.’ Thomas replied. ‘Thank you.’ He added meekly, speaking generally to the other men.

Now that the brunt of his bad mood was over, Thomas found himself conspicuous amongst the group of labourers. Felt downright uncomfortable in fact. He mentally cursed the bravado that had led him to place himself quite so firmly in their midst because the chances of inconspicuous extraction were now nigh on impossible.

Plus now that the men had been given licence to contribute to their conversation by Janek, they failed to turn away once the jobs discussion had concluded and continued to chatter excitedly to Janek.

Thomas shifted uncomfortably about on his cold concrete seat, staring down at his shoes, wondering if he ought to insist on Janek’s attention, even if only to say goodbye.

‘Oh buggering fuck…’

The drawling grumble came from the man seated the other side of Janek.
Thomas continued to stare at his shoes as he heard the sound of rustling fabric all around him; heralding every other man turning to see what had prompted the remark.

Several other men offered obscenities.

It wasn’t until Thomas heard Janek swearing as well that he raised his head to see what all the fuss was about.

There up ahead, picking his way through the crowd of lunching workers, was a man in a very similar coat and hat to his own. For a moment Thomas wondered if he had gone daft and thought he actually was looking at himself in the distance. But reality (not to mention the way the considerably weedier, albeit taller, man was stooping to shake the hand of every man he passed) soon caught up with him enough to realise he was looking at a stranger.

A stranger who was deeply unpopular if the low hissing he could hear from several of the nearby men was anything to go by.

‘Who’s that?’ Thomas said to Janek.

‘Payton.’ Janek replied, not taking his eyes off the man making slow progress through the men lining the water front. ‘Central warehouse manager.’

‘Right…’ Said Thomas.

‘Think’s he’s one of the lads.’ The man the other side of Thomas offered. He spoke the phrase in such a derogatory tone he may have well announced that the man in question thought himself a pink elephant or a five year old girl. ‘Comes down…’ He continued. ‘…every mumping day…just to have a chat, like.’

‘Tosser.’ Someone nearby muttered.

Thomas turned his attention back to the man picking his way through legs in the distance.

He was just close enough for Thomas to make out the vacantly cheery expression on his face as he offered out his hand repeatedly for the other men to shake. Very few took it, but the smile remained.

Thomas detested the overtly cheerful and resented those financially better off than him on principle, but he couldn’t help but consider indicating over to the man to invite him to sit by them.

He could see that was what the man was angling for. But the odd hand shake was all he was managing.

That and bits of bread thrown at his head.

The men were clearly making a game of it, trying to restrict their throwing to moments when his back was turned.

But inevitably Payton caught one of them in the act, or at least had a good enough idea of where a particular missile had come from to be able to wag a finger in the direction of the offender.

He wasn’t angry though. No. He was laughing.

He was clearly happy to be included in the fine games of the workers. What better indication of acceptance?

Thomas almost felt sorry for the oblivious sod.
He was happy to note that none of his immediate group were engaging in throwing things. But he couldn’t quite miss the rumblings of discontent around him that repeatedly affirmed that, in the dockers’ opinion, that man had no business being amongst them.

Thomas saw the man stumble and almost pitch down to the next step.

‘Oh come on!’ He exclaimed, aware he was risking the ire of those about him.

‘What?’ Janek turned to him.

‘They’ve chucked something at his head and he’s almost gone rolling down the step. That’s not bloody fair is it?’

‘He’s always stumbling.’ Janek replied dismissively. ‘He limps. It’s not the things they throw.’

‘Why does he limp?’

‘You think anyone’d let themselves get stuck with that…’ Janek said wryly, indicating over to the man who seemed to have finally taken the hint and begun making his way back to the warehouses. ‘…long enough to hear stories?’

‘I suppose not.’ Said Thomas absently, rolling the newspaper between his hands.
Thomas decided to try ‘Frank’s old place’ first.

He didn’t have the company name so he checked and re-checked the numbers of Vauxhall Street until he was certain that the subtly signposted Bettles’s Legal Firm was the one he was after.

The building was a dour grey and the sign badly in need of some sprucing (or at least a clean). But Thomas was happy to note that Bettles, whoever he was, at least seemed to be in possession of the entire building instead of just an upstairs sub-let.

A smartly dressed elderly woman sat at a desk in the centre of the first room with an array of six or so desks behind her, all with low glass-lamps and most with harried looking young men sat hunched over them, typing furiously.

‘Good morning sir, welcome to the Bettles’s offices, and how may I assist you today?’ The woman rattled off almost the entire speech in the time it took her to raise her head from the diary on her desk. Her manner was eminently pleasing and obliging, her voice carefully strained into clipped tones befitting an address to royalty, but Thomas had enough experience of reading nuances of behaviour to recognise that she was irritated at not being able to place the dark-haired interloper in the list of clients expected to visit that day.

‘Good morning.’ He said. ‘I wonder if I might have an appointment with the man in charge.’

He noticed a couple of the men working busily away in the background looked up from their desks in surprise and trepidation at that. Evidently meetings with ‘the boss’ were not a regular occurrence and generally denoted something having gone catastrophically wrong.

‘Might I enquire as to the nature of your business? We have many fine Barristers in a position to offer council, Mr…?’

‘Mr Barrow.’ Said Thomas quickly, kicking himself for not having followed proper form in starting out with an introduction. ‘And no, thank you, this is not regarding a legal matter. I am given to understand…’ He said, slipping surprisingly easily into his service persona of authority and self-assurance. ‘…through a mutual connection that there is a requirement for a new clerk. I should like to speak with him…’ He continued, neatly concealing the fact he still didn’t know the name of the ‘man in charge’, ‘…with regards to this.’

He maintained an easy smile as he spoke despite his discomfort at the eavesdropping going on the other side of the room. His face conveyed the reassuring message, honed over years of repressing scathing inner feelings, that he was ready to be of assistance to her, to the firm, in any way convenient.

‘Oh I see…’ The woman leaned into the desk, resting heavily on her folded arms, seemingly drawn forwards, towards him.

‘Might I schedule an appointment?’

‘Schedule an appointment?’ Said the woman, happy at Thomas speaking her language. ‘Absolutely. Two o’clock tomorrow?’ She immediately offered after only the most cursory look down at the diary.

Thomas’s nerves were unwilling to prolong the agony of job hunting any longer than necessary. But
he was unwilling to break whatever spell his pleasant expression had placed the woman under by attempting to negotiate an earlier meeting.

‘That will be fine, thank you.’ He said before making a hasty retreat back out onto the street.

He walked with a big smile on his face, knowing he looked like a man who’d had a few too many over lunch (and to be fair, he had taken a swig from the miscellaneous bottle) but too satisfied to care.

He had an interview.

The thought simultaneously lifted his spirits and crushed them uncomfortably small. He hadn’t had cause for an interview since joining the medical service, and in that case acceptance had been all but certain. The fear of performing poorly followed on closely from any waves of euphoria at having secured an interview at all. But at least for the moment the feelings of glee seemed to be winning.

Even the bustle of the streets as he wandered aimlessly couldn’t kill his spirits. He barely minded the handful of times when people bumped into him; he knew his wallet was safely concealed in the extra pocket he’d sewn into his waistcoat interior and he now walked with his hand at his watch-chain at all times. And he no longer felt completely adrift in the city, having now learned the lay of the land to the degree that he could be reasonably confident as to which compass direction he was walking in, even though the specific names of streets still remained a mystery to him and he had yet to venture down a single one of the tiny alleyways that cut between the high buildings.

He treated himself to some toffee from a sweet shop (after lingering outside the shop for a long moment before realising he could stop in and purchase whatever he wanted) and half-sucked, half-chewed on the sugary goodness as he continued along the street. He mused as he ate that he didn’t think he’d had sweets of any kind since after the war, and most of what had come before that had been stolen from Mrs Patmore’s concoctions.

There was of course the slightly embarrassing fact that he, a man dressed in his finery and pushing into his thirties, made a slightly odd spectacle walking down the street with sticky sugar at his lips.

But he didn’t know these people.

The thought came to him, clear as day, and was surprisingly liberating; he didn’t know them and they didn’t know him.

Yes, it was important that as many people in the world as possible see him as a successful, efficient, well presented, elegantly mysterious and confident man.

But at this precise moment he wanted to eat sweets and it was a nice feeling that he could.

Of course, one of the richly dressed men walking by could turn out to be none other than the boss of Bettle’s himself - at this moment the only person in the whole world who’s opinion he had to worry about - but Thomas sincerely doubted it.

The thought of the Bettle’s firm had Thomas thinking about the second lead he had been given at lunch. He wondered if it was worth him looking in on the colourfully described men at David and Erickson’s now or if he ought to wait and see how his interview went the next day.

Logic of course dictated that the one shouldn’t impact on the other at that stage. He had nothing to lose by visiting the other office to try his luck and might wind up liking them better.

But his fragile nerves, bolstered by his recent success (however tiny), begged him not to throw
himself immediately back into the fray.

In the end it was the memory of how quickly the job at the grocery warehouse had gone that made up his mind for him.

He stuffed the remaining toffees into his handkerchief, unsure whether he intended to eat them himself later or offer them to Janek, and started scanning the people around him for a safe person to ask for directions.

David and Erickson’s, it soon emerged, was another of those businesses that occupied the first and second floor above a ground floor shop-front. Not that Thomas could hold that against them; unlike any of the other buildings he had been inside during his short stay in the city this one actually had a decent standard of decoration. It was very well done, even down to the gold-leaf (Thomas assumed some kind of fake substitute for the real stuff, but the effect was convincing) detailing around the skirting rail of the upstairs hallway.

A slightly younger man sat on the desk, enabling Thomas to use his superior age as well as his charm (albeit a slightly more restrained version than that turned on the old lady at Bettle’s) to convince him to go and ask his boss immediately if it would be possible to interview a candidate for the position in customer care.

Thomas took the time the man was away from his desk to retrieve his résumé from his coat. He wished now that he had brought a proper case to hold papers in so that they wouldn’t have to be folded (and then wrinkle) in his pockets. But while he could happily turn a blind eye to a penny worth of toffees, and the bowler hat he had unquestionably needed, such an extravagant purchase as a brief case couldn’t possibly be justified until he had secured employment. He could afford one, yes, but the question of how long the money he had hidden in his suitcase had to last was still unanswered at that stage.

Thomas scanned down his somewhat thin list of prior jobs.

He was reassured by the clear focus on working with people in his employment history, both at Downton and during the war; tending to the needs and whims of sometimes very challenging cases. In fact he had noted something to that effect in his opening statement at the top of the page. Oddly the position at David and Erickson’s seemed a perfectly good fit for his history in service if his assumption about what ‘customer care’ actually meant was correct.

The man emerged from a side-door and informed him that yes, Mr David and Mr Erickson both were happy to see him.

Thomas gave his coat and hat over to him, happy to lose the conspicuous bulge of the toffees in his left coat pocket but now left feeling very conscious of the odd bulge that his wallet made in its makeshift home in his waistcoat.

Still, there was nothing to be done about that now as the man ushered him into the next room.

‘Mr David, Mr Erickson…’ Said the man with a reverence that had one of Thomas’s eyebrows threatening to quirk in amusement. ‘…may I present Mr Barrow. He has come with a view to interview for the position of customer care relations.’

The two gentlemen were comically similar to one another, both fairly pale, grey before their time and dressed with a bleak smartness that spoke of unnecessary frugality. They both nodded their heads in acknowledgement as the man said each name so Thomas had no idea which was which.
‘Thank you Mr Joseph.’ Said the man on the left in a highly plummy accent.

He bowed and immediately left the room, leaving Thomas standing somewhat bewildered in the doorway.

‘Please do have a seat young man.’ Said the man on the right. He was as well-spoken as his business partner but with a little more life in his voice.

*Young man…*

It wasn’t unkindly meant, Right had spoken perfectly pleasantly, but Thomas was severely thrown.

He didn’t think he’d merited that particular descriptor since the days *before* Downton.

‘Mr Barrow it is a pleasure to greet you to our office.’ Said Left in his flat voice, holding out a hand to Thomas.

Thomas moved forwards and gratefully shook it. He didn’t miss the look of annoyance that Left shot at Right at the latter’s condescending greeting. Right smiled back penitently and gave Thomas’s hand a particularly vigorous pump when it was offered by way of unspoken apology.

Having only been in the office a matter of moments Thomas felt reasonably secure in assuming that Left was the brains of the operation while Right was its heart.

Unsure of which to give his résumé to, he eventually settled on placing it in the centre of the desk as he sank into the offered chair.

‘Let’s see what we have here then, shall we?’ Said Right, immediately snatching up the sheet of paper.

‘Well, as I hope you’ll see, my business is very much ‘people’ and I’ve spent almost my entire life…’ Thomas began, feeling weightless and unsteady but pleasantly surprised at how even and confident his voice sounded (at least to him). The words seemed to flow through him without thought, without his needing to consciously summon them, and he was dearly hoping he would be able to say enough while in this semi-trance to convince the two men opposite to take him on without too much by way of interrogation.

Much to his annoyance he was interrupted almost immediately.

‘If we might begin at your schooling Mr Barrow…?’ Said Left, peering over at the résumé in Right’s hands. ‘I see you haven’t listed your educational background.’

‘I’m sorry.’ Said Thomas easily. He gave an apologetic smile. ‘It’s so long ago now I went that I didn’t think it was relevant.’

‘It can seem that way sometimes can’t it.’ Said Left warmly, displaying the first real feeling Thomas had seen on him since he entered the room.

Right nodded in agreement.

Thomas wasn’t quite sure how he’d stumbled into it, but the reminiscing regarding school seemed to have somehow enabled a bonding moment between the three of them. He marked a mental score in his favour on the slate in his head and hoped to stumble into many more such instances in the near future.
‘So where did you attend school?’ Said Left.

Thomas had to think for a moment to recall the name.

‘Mrs Evecker’s.’ He said.

‘Mrs Evecker’s?’ Both Left and Right spoke in unison.

‘Mrs Evecker’s…School.’ Thomas replied, wondering why two educated men couldn’t fathom that the word ‘school’ had been a heavily implied addition to his earlier statement given the question he had been asked.

‘I…don’t think I’m familiar with that establishment.’ Said Right, looking quizzically towards Left.

‘Nor I.’ Left confirmed. ‘Whereabouts is it; is it in the South?’ He asked Thomas.

‘No.’ Thomas said with a slight frown. ‘It’s in Manchester.’

‘Oh.’ Said Left. ‘Well I, I can’t say I’ve ever heard of it.’ He said apologetically, sounding highly perplexed at himself because of this, and now looking towards Right in the hope that he might have miraculously managed to recall the school himself.

Thomas was more than a little bemused at the degree to which the question seemed to be distressing the two men.

‘Begging your pardon sir…’ He said. ‘…but there’s no reason you should know it. It was a small school. It was just the one class of about fifty-odd of us from the south end of Gorton Urban.’

‘It was a pauper school?’ Said Left.

Thomas blinked. ‘I wouldn’t say that.’

‘My apologies.’ Said Left, sounding cautious rather than sorry. ‘Tell me, what manner of school was it?’

‘It was…Well, a parish school I suppose.’

Right and Left exchanged a look that indicated they deemed ‘parish’ and ‘pauper’ very much interchangeable in the present context.

Thomas shifted about uncomfortably in his seat.

‘Right, well I…’ Left began unsteadily, but he was halted by a pat on his forearm from Right.

Right gave a reassuring glance to Left before turning his attention to Thomas.

‘So where…’ Said Right, an optimistic tone in his voice and a reassuringly warm expression on his pale face. ‘…did you commence your secondary education?’

Thomas paused an uncomfortably long while, searching desperately for a way to segue out of the present topic.

He had a feeling the two men opposite would be unimpressed by the prospect of a ten year old clock maker’s apprentice.

‘I didn’t.’ He eventually replied, feeling it was pointless to attempt to sugar-coat it. He thought
wistfully of the toffees in his coat pocket and off the safe anonymity of the street outside.

Right felt the immediate urge to clear his throat.

Left looked like he might faint.

‘But as you’ll see if you look at my…’ Thomas quickly continued, indicating towards his résumé. ‘…I have had many years of experience working with…’

‘Thank you, Mr Barrow, I believe you are not what we are looking for.’ Said Right abruptly.

‘But…’

‘Thank you, Mr Barrow.’ Left managed to echo, having now gotten over the shock of Thomas’s announcement.

‘But…’ Thomas persisted. ‘…what does school matter? You’ll not find a better person for helping and reassuring people in this whole city I can guarantee you. If you’ll just look at my work history you’ll see that I’ve worked for years as…’

‘Thank you, Mr Barrow.’ Said Right again, practically barking the words at him behind the veneer of an easy smile.

He picked up the résumé and pointedly held it out to Thomas.

Thomas couldn’t bring himself to take it.

‘Oh you know what you lot are…’ He said scathingly as he pushed himself up from his seat.

He didn’t finish the sentence. Much as he would have liked to launch an elegant diatribe, most likely involving the words ‘elitist’ and ‘short-sighted’, he couldn’t quite get the dockers’ assessment of David and Erickson out of his head. And while he took an odd pleasure in being able to actually retort without fear of reprisal (a refreshing notion after years of biting his tongue), his pride and sense of dignity wouldn’t quite stretch to calling two business men ‘cunts’ in their own office.

So instead he left the sentence hanging.

Judging by the shocked expressions on their faces that was enough.

He stomped out of the office as speedily as humanly possible and ripped his coat and hat off the pegs outside before the man at the desk could rise and offer them to him.

Back out on the street he made for home, stuffing every one of the remaining toffees into his mouth as he did so.

He did his fair share of shoulder barging people on his way back to the house. It wasn’t intentional, more brought on by a haze of embarrassment and anger that prevented him from keeping his mind on the present task of dodging pedestrians in the street, but his dark humour had him wondering if those people immediately shot their hand to their pocket to see if their wallets were still there.

As he finally left the main street and turned into his road he noted with annoyance that there was a man distributing leaflets along the row of houses.

In the time it took Thomas to walk ten paces, the hatless man in a pale grey suit darted up and down the steps of two houses (including Thomas’s) to deposit leaflets through the letter boxes.
Thomas watched as the man skipped down the steps, licked a finger, extracted another leaflet, and offered it to a bedraggled lady with an infant tugged along by her side in the road.

Thomas braced himself as his and the man’s paths came closer; ready to perform the usual ‘no, thank you’ routine with a bite of annoyance.

But the man didn’t offer him a leaflet.

He just walked straight past and went on to the door of the next house.

Ordinarily that would have seemed a boon.

Normally Thomas would have rejoiced in the fact that something in his presence had sufficiently deterred a street-touter to enable him to go on his way without ever having to acknowledge him.

But today, with the shadow of rejection infecting every pore of him, Thomas simply couldn’t abide being passed by as though he were nothing.

‘Oi.’ He called to the man. ‘Don’t I get one of those?’

The man turned on the steps of the house, looking to him in confusion.

Now getting a good look at him Thomas was tempted to march him down to David and Erickson’s, point at him, and loudly inform Right that this was what a ‘young’ man looked like.

‘I…’ He said, taking a few tentative steps towards Thomas. ‘…I suppose.’ He continued to move forwards. ‘It’s just that…it’s about the soup kitchens.’

Thomas took the offered leaflet, noting the yellow of a fading bruise under the man’s shirt sleeve as he did so.

‘It’s for the hungry.’ He continued awkwardly, clearly attempting to skirt having to state the obvious fact that Thomas was not part of the target audience for the advertised facility. ‘Those with no job or those whose husbands or mothers have gone and frittered away Friday’s money before Sunday comes around and then spend the rest of the week starving.’

‘Frittered?’

‘Drink.’ The man said wryly.

‘I see.’

‘So anyway, that’s that.’ Said the man, clearly eager to be on his way.

Thomas nodded, beginning to read over the leaflet anyway given how much effort he’d made to get it.

‘You know…’ He said as the man began to move away. ‘…at least one of the blokes who lives there…’ Thomas indicated towards his house. ‘…can’t read.’ He brandished the leaflet with its dense typing. ‘And I imagine he’s not the only one down here.’

The man nodded sadly. ‘Sometimes there’s pictures.’ He offered ruefully. ‘Cartoon drawings and such. But they’re so much more expensive to make up to print.’

‘Course.’ Said Thomas absently, reading over the line ‘are you unemployed and desperate?’ with a sense of detached despair as the man continued on his way.
'I bring food and…’ Janek announced as he swung open the door, bag in one hand, bottle in the other. ‘…cheer.’ He concluded with slightly less enthusiasm at the sight of Thomas seated at the table with his forehead resting heavily on his hands.

Thomas heard Janek’s footsteps on the floorboards but he didn’t raise his head.

Janek crossed the room silently, skirting round Thomas’s hunched form a little more widely than necessary, over to the kitchen cupboards.

Thomas heard the rustling of the bag being emptied onto the counter top and then the clacking of one cupboard after another being opened and closed as Janek attempted to find homes for whatever items of nourishment he had bought. Thomas suspected if it wasn’t for his presence that Janek would have simply left the shopping sitting out hap-hazardly on the counter until needed, and it was this thought that finally compelled him to raise his head.

‘You know you’re going to have to let me pay for some of that.’ He said dully, realising too late at the look on Janek’s face that perhaps a ‘hello’ or similar might have been a slightly more appropriate way to begin.

There was a long pause and for a moment Thomas thought Janek was going to argue him for it. But in the end Janek just shrugged.

‘Alright.’

Thomas turned back to the piece of paper in front of him, his previous efforts lining the floor by his feet. Again and again he had attempted to rewrite his résumé but each time crumpled it up in frustration. He was now highly paranoid that a lack of educational history (or reference to his uncomfortable familial apprenticeship) to account for the earlier years of his life might also hurt him in the interview he had planned for the next day. But he just couldn’t make it fit with the rest of the career history in a way that satisfied him.

Of course there was every chance that the next interviewer wouldn’t give a hoot where he’d gone to school. With any luck the man from Bettle’s would prove to be a self-made one, or at least someone who could see beyond all the negative things that his résumé seemed to be saying about him at first glance.

Had Left and Right actually cared about ability rather than school name-dropping Thomas was certain he could have run rings about them. He was educated. Largely self-taught after his early years, true, but educated nonetheless. The lofty tomes he signed out from Lord Grantham’s library almost from the moment he arrived at the Abbey hadn’t been wholly for show. He had a genuine enjoyment for reading beyond its ability to enable him to converse with Lord Grantham and hold his own in arguments among his lower class peers.

What he didn’t yet know he knew he could learn. And…

‘Potatoes?’

‘What?’ Thomas said irritably, craning his neck to see Janek still standing by the kitchenette counters holding, unsurprisingly, several potatoes in his hands.

‘For food. I think potatoes with veg in some broth.’ Said Janek with a hint of cheerfulness that would
have been almost too subtle for most people to notice, but which had Thomas in his current mood wanting to launch the table at him.

‘I’m not hungry.’ Thomas said, returning his attention to the half-done résumé.

‘Ah!’ Janek exclaimed, snatching up the leaflet Thomas had left on the counter. ‘Fergus has been round again!’

Under different circumstances Thomas might have been mildly interested to know what Janek knew about the young crusader.

‘Why are you bothering looking at that?’ He said instead. ‘Thought you couldn’t read.’

Janek set the leaflet back on the counter. ‘Sometimes there’s pictures.’ He said quietly as he fished around for a knife and pot for the potatoes.

‘I’m trying to bloody concentrate.’ Thomas said sharply as Janek’s rummaging set off what sounded like an avalanche in the cupboard.

Janek didn’t reply but the noise from behind Thomas dramatically decreased.

But the sound of the careful, gentle chopping and placing of potatoes, carrots and goodness knows what else, into the pot was somehow worse than the vigorous thuds that usually accompanied Janek’s movements. Waiting for the knife to slowly make its way through each potato before it connected with the countertop with a small knock was something akin to water torture.

Thomas’s carefully written résumé became a mess of heavily written curse words, underlinings and whole sections of page inked over as he attempted to exorcise his bad mood through his pen.

But at each noise from behind him his sourness increased.

When the cooking pot began to boil Janek set it simmering and briefly entered Thomas’s line of view to pick up the loose stone from beside the fireplace.

With it clutched in his hands, Janek retreated behind Thomas’s back. The soft groans that shortly followed alerted Thomas to the fact Janek had begun his evening’s exercise.

Thomas wasn’t sure what annoyed him the most about the present situation, but the soft rhythmic noises from behind him prompted nothing by way of arousal and everything by way of irritation – irritation that Janek was still making noise, irritation he was making that noise, irritation he was happily cooking, doing his exercise, and generally getting on with his evening, while he, Thomas, was sat with another ruined sheet of paper and the prospect of having to start all over yet again.

And even though he knew Janek couldn’t read he was reasonably certain that Janek would be able to spy over his shoulder that a quarter or so of blacked out space on a piece of paper wasn’t the normal fare when it came to writing.

That pissed him off too.

‘Could you not do that right now?’

Again, there was no reply from Janek. But moments later the man appeared in view again to replace the stone by the fire before retreating once more out of Thomas’s view.

After what seemed like an age, during which Thomas did precisely sod all save for stare darkly at the
ruined paper in front of him, Janek deemed his food ready.

Thomas heard him spooning it into a bowl. Heard him replace the lid on the pot and set it off the heat to cool. Saw him walk past him on the other side, sit down in front of the stove with his bowl and spoon, his back against the leg of the table by Thomas’s knee.

‘Can you not sit at the table like a normal person?’

For a moment the only sound was the scraping of Janek’s spoon against the side of his plate. ‘You know…’ Janek eventually said, continuing to slurp spoonfuls into his mouth as he spoke. ‘I want to be outside this room. I want to be out. I want to eat and drink and have nice conversation…’

Up on the desk Thomas crumpled up the latest aborted résumé attempt between his fingers.

Janek’s voice continued from below him on the floor. ‘…but I don’t think you should be left alone right now. So I stay here.’

This time when Thomas’s head rested in his hands it was to cry. Not gulping sobs or keening wails, but crying nonetheless. From the floor Janek gave little to no reaction; taking this latest development as something of a logical and welcome progression from Thomas’s earlier foul mood.

‘It might take months.’ Said Janek softly, still spooning broth into his mouth.

‘It can’t.’ Thomas replied through his hands. He repeated this several times, part statement, part prayer.

No doubt by way of punishment for Thomas’s earlier gruff treatment, Janek remained seated where he was on the floor until the last drops of his supper had been licked clean from the bowl. But the arms he closed around Thomas after he’d risen to stand behind his chair were as warm and soothing as ever they were.

Thomas could feel his unsettled body and mind calm under the weight of those arms, and the urge to rise up out of the chair to face Janek and claim further contact was strong.

But Thomas had promised himself he was not leaving that chair until he had his résumé ready for the next day.

So in the chair he remained, while Janek took up his stone again and began pacing the room beside him.
Janek was in bed, and the fire and candles almost completely burned out by the time Thomas was done.

He had finally concluded his ninth, and final, attempt at documenting his career history in a way that screamed ‘perfect man for the job…any job’. He placed the sheet of paper carefully on the furthest chest of drawers, away from potential contamination from the stove or washing up bowls.

The two candles closest to him chose that moment to snuff themselves out, their little flames reaching the makeshift tin dishes they were sat in and extinguishing, giving Thomas the clear hint that it was time for bed.

He went about the room softly, blowing out all but the one candle on the side of the occupied bed and closing the stove door lest any ash should spill out while they slept.

For a while he had suspected Janek was feigning sleep while he worked, but now seeing the way he was sprawled out across the whole bed Thomas was almost certain he wasn’t.

The oddly determined look on Janek’s sleeping face and the exposed skin were a highly diverting view. But under the circumstances all Thomas could muse on was whether it would be polite to wake him to enable him to slip into the bed also.

Thomas severely doubted his paltry strength would stand up to the task of shunting the load that was Janek while he was still sleeping. And even if he could it was unlikely he would be able to unbunch the sheet that had wrapped itself around, and under, Janek’s left leg without the latter’s conscious assistance.

The other bed remained where it was, empty, a short distance across the floorboards.

Thomas only gave it a moment’s consideration before discarding it.

Beginning to undress himself with one hand, he gently squeezed Janek’s shoulder with the other.

‘Could you move over a little?’ He whispered as Janek began to stir, continuing to stroke gently at his shoulder. He was unwilling to bring Janek back to full consciousness as he was painfully aware it was very late (or early) and that Janek had to be up first thing in the morning, but on the other hand the prospect of a warm shared bed after the day he’d had was too good to pass up.

Thomas wasn’t sure to what degree Janek comprehended the situation in his sleepy state, but he slid over, face almost to the wall, when prompted.

Thomas moved his backside further onto the bed, essentially wedging Janek in place with his back to make sure he didn’t roll back over to his previous position while he continued to undress.

The point where skin finally contacted with skin as he tugged his shirt off was soothing bliss and Thomas found himself unwilling to get up again to lay out his clothes on the bed opposite as he had intended. So, reasoning he could wear his other suit for the interview, he let his clothes drop ungracefully onto the floor as he swung his legs up to tug a little of the covers from Janek for himself.

He pressed his chest against Janek’s back, hugging his topmost arm around his waist.
This was a new sleeping arrangement for him, and one he found had a charm all of its own as he dipped his nose into the crook of Janek’s neck to breathe deeply the warming scent of his skin.

His own back felt a little cold, but he reasoned he could sleep quite happily like this, curled around the smoothness of Janek’s back and the firmness of his backside, with one hand resting over Janek’s stomach.

He congratulated himself at having gotten into bed without having unduly disturbed Janek into waking.

The congratulations rapidly fled when he felt Janek’s hand, slow but deliberate, taking hold of his hand and bringing it up from his stomach to his chest.

His fingers came to rest either side of one of Janek’s small nipples, which wasn’t an unwelcome situation in itself – in particular not from the perspective of having the chance to savour the silky soft and then coarsely firming nature of the thing against the sides of his fingers – but did rather indicate that the man next to him was now more awake than desired.

By way of test, Thomas withdrew his hand only to have Janek immediately retrieve it from its resting place and move it back to his chest.

‘I did try not to wake you.’ Thomas murmured into the back of Janek’s neck.

‘Good job you did.’ Janek replied in an equally lazy and reverberating voice, keeping his hand over Thomas’s to direct gently stroking motions over his nipple until Thomas got the message and began freely making those movements himself.

Thomas being Thomas, of course, he didn’t restrict himself to the small circle offered; instead alternating between stroking at the sensitive line down the centre of Janek’s chest and attending to the more intricate task of provoking the skin of his nipples.

By the sound of Janek’s breathing the vigour of the attentions was unexpected and very welcome.

‘I’m sorry about today.’ Thomas said, sighing against Janek’s skin. ‘About this evening. I’m sorry I was such a…sod.’ He concluded for want of a better word.

‘Mmmmm no you are not…’ Janek reached his arm back, up and behind his shoulder, teasing at Thomas’s hair. The move left his chest elongated and exposed, a veritable playground for Thomas’s skilful fingers. ‘…because you feel it my fault.’ He leant his head back against Thomas’s shoulder. ‘My fault you are here with no job. My selfish fault.’ He said languidly, mouth coming open again once uttering the last syllable as Thomas’s fingers crept up the line of his neck.

Thomas slid a finger between Janek’s lips. They closed lazily around it, allowing Thomas to withdraw his finger glistening with saliva.

‘Completely your damn fault…’ Thomas murmured. His finger hovered over Janek’s flesh until meeting its mark; making contact just barely with the raised nub of a nipple to gently tease it with moisture. He kissed firmly at Janek’s neck. ‘…bastard.’

They both laughed, Thomas into Janek’s neck and Janek into the pillow, as the one remaining candle chose that moment to give up the ghost, sputter, and go out.

‘At least I gave you three more weeks to…enjoy it.’ Janek teased, his voice less breathy after the interruption of the darkness, but no less enticing.
It took Thomas a moment to realise Janek was talking about the length of time between their first few days of meeting in Liverpool and their reunion at Downton.

‘Why was it three weeks?’ Thomas said, his index finger still circling around the now prominent nub of Janek’s nipple.

‘Hmmm?’

‘Why three weeks?’

‘Had to get the money together, didn’t I?’ Said Janek, shifting against the bed, and consequently against Thomas, as though to obtain deeper comfort.

The movement of Thomas’s fingers against his chest stopped.

‘What?’ Said Janek, craning his neck to attempt to meet Thomas’s gaze.

‘Nothing I…’ Thomas didn’t withdraw his hand but it remained perfectly still. ‘…I just think that’s the first time you’ve lied to me. Or at least I hope it is.’

‘Why do you say that?’

Thomas shifted back as far as he could go and raised himself up onto his elbow on his side, letting Janek roll onto his back to look up at him.

‘You spent bugger all.’ Thomas said, his tone of voice still light but with a distinct sense of finality behind it. ‘You didn’t spend out for the train, the bus, a room…’ Thomas’s voice trailed off. ‘It wasn’t Liam was it?’ He said suddenly. ‘Him getting married, that wasn’t why you suddenly…?’

‘Eh, eh!’ Janek exclaimed, raising a hand to cup Thomas’s cheek, resting his thumb at his lips to silence him. ‘Not that at all. He was always getting married since I met him. It was in the works for two years. And if you think careful, like…’ Janek lowered his hand to give Thomas free use of his jaw again. ‘…you’ll remember I moved him on ‘cause I thought you were staying…Then you didn’t.’ Janek added with a rare spit of venom.

‘I do.’ Thomas admitted. ‘I do remember. So…’ He risked replacing his free hand back at Janek’s chest. ‘…why so long?’

Janek swallowed, meeting his gaze for a long moment before speaking. ‘I just had need to think.’

As explanations went it was simple, satisfying, and understandable; so much so that Thomas chose to suppress the urge to ask why Janek hadn’t simply just said that in the first place.

‘And what did you decide?’ Said Thomas in mock wonder.

Janek raised a hand to the back of Thomas’s neck and curled the other around Thomas’s forearm.

‘To be very selfish.’ He said.

Janek tugged Thomas up and over, bringing him to rest firmly on top of him before abandoning his strong leadership as quickly as it had come; waiting patiently below Thomas for the moment their lips would meet.

‘Selfish.’ Thomas echoed the moment before his mouth found Janek’s, tasting him deeply and driving his head and shoulders down into the bed with the force of it.
‘Very…’ Janek managed between kisses.

A brief bit of shuffling, during which time their lips remained in contact, had Janek extracting his legs from under Thomas’s to bring them up to their increasingly regular position warming either side of his hips.

Thomas allowed himself a few more hungry kisses before raising himself off Janek, coming up to rest on his haunches.

Taking hold of Janek’s legs he raised them to lie flush against his chest, his toes to the sky.

‘What the…?’

Thomas smiled at the expression of befuddlement on the man below. Having forgotten for a moment, as was easy to do in the face of Janek’s unapologetic and unashamed enthusiasm for physical pleasure, that this was all highly new to him.

‘Well…’ Said Thomas dryly, by some miracle managing to keep Janek’s legs in their present position as he reached for a small bottle (that he had finally gotten round to placing in the bedside cabinet after their dry exertions that morning) got a good helping on his fingers and reached down between Janek’s backside and his own burgeoning erection to spread liberally. ‘…selfish people need love too…’

With that he was partially in.

And the only thing sweeter than the mix of bliss and discomfort on Janek’s face below was the sure knowledge of the unexpected sensations that the new angle would afford the man once he was fully seated.

‘Ugh…’

He had of course, forgotten the new feelings awaiting him as well.

Janek didn’t disappoint in his eagerness to accommodate Thomas, nor was his reaction to the sudden and potent feeling of Thomas far deeper inside than before anything less than spectacular.

Thomas felt Janek’s legs trembling against his chest, saw the tears mingled with ecstasy streaking Janek’s face.

But he wasn’t yet well versed enough in Janek’s mannerisms to be wholly sure that the experience was lingering sufficiently on the pleasure side of pain. His paranoia to that effect building to the degree that he halted after the first couple of full thrusts.

Janek’s shouts regarding all the horrible things he was going to do to him if he failed to continue soon had him moving again.

And ever harder and faster he continued to move.

The encounter needed to be brief, both from a sleep and muscle wellbeing perspective, and Thomas embraced the requirement with gusto; able to recognise when he had mere moments to go in enough time to push his torso forwards, forcing Janek’s strained legs against his chest, to ensure the man below saw sparks far superior to his own.

Janek’s face was a red and watery mess as Thomas extracted himself. But Thomas didn’t object one bit to the flutter of kisses Janek insisted on reigning upon him before allowing them both to collapse
down into sleep.
Chapter 38

Janek was long gone by the time Thomas woke up. At least if the cold bed was anything to go by.

Thomas had a mini coronary as he sat up and saw the sunlight streaming into the room. He couldn’t claim Janek’s near clairvoyant ability to read the position of the sunbeams on the stones by the fire as a measure of time, but he knew it was late. Much later than he intended to sleep and possibly much later than he had ever slept in his life.

He dove for the bundle of clothes he had dropped by the side of the bed and fished out his pocket watch.

He was intensely relieved to discover he had hours to go before his arranged interview, but panic about the upcoming judgement followed swiftly after.

He sprang from the bed, working out the kinks in his shoulders from whatever position he and Janek had settled into for sleeping, and stood beside it for a moment in all his glory debating his next move.

He didn’t feel hungry, despite having eaten nothing since the borrowed bread from yesterday’s lunch. He wanted to immediately get into the second suit he had carefully folded in one of the many sets of drawers lining the room under the windows, but he felt sticky and dirty. He wanted to look over the pristine new résumé he had laid out the night before but the thought made him sick to his stomach.

Stepping gingerly over to the other side of the room he saw a clean looking basin of water and a cloth under one of the windows, no doubt a parting gift from Janek.

Retrieving his soap from its metal case by the rest of his toiletries he endeavoured to sponge as much of the night’s activities as possible with the frigid water.

The activity rendered him awake enough to spy the pot of water on the lit stove.

Cursing his poor morning observational skills he used the hot water to shave, half his attention on his small circular mirror and half on the street below, to bring himself back to feeling human.

It wasn’t until he began the task of combing and slicking his hair that he realised he was still naked.

The realisation was an odd one.

Save for the brief (and by necessity, they were always brief) baths in the shared wash-room at Downton he had never attended to his morning tasks in such a manner. A dressing gown at the very least was involved. Or a half-assembled livery from the night before as he snuck out of a room at an ungodly hour. Or a fully-assembled livery as he attempted to shave in the brief window between the wake-up call and breakfast.

He thought he should eat something.

As he dressed he eyed the pot Janek had made his dinner in the night before, wondering if he could force himself to eat some of the leftovers.

He wasn’t sure his stomach would accept it. Especially since he was in that grey area of time that lingered between brunch and lunch in which he hadn’t eaten anything save for stolen biscuits off the tea-tray in a very long time.
But he reasoned he must eat something.

There would be little to be gained should he keel over in the street from hunger. Or worse, enter the interview room with his belly rumbling.

Newly suited he made up a bowl of food for himself, took a seat at the table, and spooned the cold mixture into his mouth.

It wasn’t good.

Heat may have improved it, and the stove was lit so heating before eating would have been easily possible, but he continued eating it as it was.

The vast expanse of the room seemed incredibly cold and lonely to him as he ate. Years of resenting having to make nice with others from the moment he awoke seemed suddenly redundant as he ate and wished for other faces about the table with him.

It seemed absurd to him. The notion that the vast majority of the country breakfasted alone or with at best one or two for company. He was used to a dozen. Granted for the most part the dozen included people he could have happily seen shipped off elsewhere, but still…

The slurping sounds of his mouth seemed absurd in the empty room.

He heard the odd noise in the corridor outside, no doubt the fellow housemates heading to and from the bathroom, and he considered in moments of fancy excuses he could use to step out into the corridor to put himself in their way.

He would have almost welcomed the alcoholic with ungodly toilet habits at the table were he to accidently stumble into the room.

It was partly arrogance; arrogance to have an audience to whet his wit on. He prided himself that there was much to be had of it.

But that required an audience.

And here he was. Alone.

Alone in a cavernous room with miss-matched furniture that barely filled the space.

Clattering his empty dish onto the countertop by the stove he let his body give over to an exaggerated tremor; hoping to shake himself back to the salient task of the day.

He took up his résumé, still unable to read it but reasoning he already knew what it said by heart, transferred his wallet into its special pocket, donned his hat and coat and bid the room adieu.

He ended up lingering in what he hoped was an unsuspicious manner outside the Bettle’s Legal Firm offices for almost an hour before his watch assured him was a time close enough to be two o’clock to enter.

The same woman as the day before greeted him warmly but oh so professionally from the front desk.

He was very grateful for the announcement ‘Mr Kelling will see you now’ when she returned from her brief sojourn upstairs to check on his interviewer; going into the interview and heartily greeting ‘Mr Bettles’ would clearly have been slightly inappropriate.

She escorted him up the stairs, to the third door on the left, and motioned for Thomas to enter before
Mr Kelling’s office was a maze of cabinets and shelves crammed into the tiniest of places, and quite dark as well if Thomas was honest. But it clearly wouldn’t be the room in which he would be based, given the solitary desk crammed into the end, so Thomas didn’t find it too off putting.

Mr Kelling was a trimly bearded man wearing a suit almost identical to one Thomas had noted on an Abbey guest two years before and wore a welcoming smile as Thomas entered.

‘Mr Barrow, delighted to make your acquaintance.’ He said, rising from his well-padded chair to offer his hand.

Thomas navigated the room and shook it gratefully, finding his hand in the grip of an unusually firm shake that lingered longer than one would usually expect.

‘Very pleased to meet you sir…Mr Kelling.’ Thomas quickly added, realising that entering the conversation as an equal rather than supplicant would likely win him more points.

‘Agnes, I believe I will take a coffee…’ Kelling said to the woman by the door. ‘…and yourself?”

It took Thomas a moment to realise Kelling was referring to him.

‘A coffee for me, please.’ He said quickly, finally able to take his hand back. ‘Milk and sugar, please.’

‘Sit, sit.’ Said Kelling as he did the same.

Thomas eased himself into one of the waiting chairs, feeling into his coat pocket for the résumé as he did so. He wondered if he ought to remove his hat, but reasoned that if the woman Agnes hadn’t taken it he was probably correct in keeping it on.

He had just withdrawn the piece of paper when Kelling jovially spoke again.

‘Ah yes, your credentials.’ He held out a hand. ‘Wonderful.’

‘This is my work history, Mr Kelling.’ Thomas said, his own smile faltering as he held out the sheet.

‘And your credentials?’ Said Kelling, still beaming at him pleasantly enough but not moving to take the offered document.

‘Well, my…’ Thomas said, swallowing heavily. ‘…my referee will be the Earl of Grantham.’ He said, having briefly debated whether or not to name Carson instead, but judging that Roberts renown was likely to be more impressive.

For a moment he thought he had done right; Kelling nodded his head and gave an eyebrow raise at the title he clearly found familiar. The look of pleased surprise was an added bonus.

‘I am of course happy to receive any words from the Earl of Grantham’s hand.’ Said Kelling, extending his hand expectantly.

‘I…’ Thomas said, staring at Kelling’s empty hand with a sense of foreboding. ‘I have arranged for the reference to be sent to you.’ He lied.

‘You don’t have your credentials, Mr Barrow?’

‘Not with me sir, no.’ Said Thomas, the hand holding out the résumé beginning to go numb.
Kelling sat back in his chair. The pleasant expression remained but the overall effect of his crossed-arm posture was one of closing.

‘Then it would appear you are wasting my time, Mr Barrow.’

Thomas felt his jaw go slack, adding insult to injury at the moment of damning judgement by making him feel both simple and out of place.

‘I can have it to you within the next two days…’ He lied desperately, knowing full well that the only way such a timescale could be accommodated would be if he were to forge it. ‘…if for now you would just look at…’

‘You are wasting my time.’ Said Kelling, looking at him with a highly reproachful expression.

For a moment Thomas’s jaw remained slack, unresponsive.

Then he withdrew his hand and rose from his seat.

‘So it would seem.’ He said, more to himself than Kelling as he rose from his seat.

He passed a highly confused looking Agnes in the hallway outside, making her way in the opposite direction with two coffees as he left.

Cheeks flaming, the thought of doing anything further in the cause of employment seeming an utterly impossible task that day, Thomas stalked his way back to the house with a sense of dark determination.

Bypassing the noises coming from Mrs Porter’s apartment, he thundered up the stairs.

Wrenching open the door and slamming it firm shut behind him he began to pull off his clothes immediately. They were witness to his embarrassment, and he could stand the well-cut suit (albeit with the odd stain) no longer; feeling like an imposter in his own clothes.

He shook out the ensemble onto the top of one of the trunks, making only a cursory effort at folding, before taking out his lighter and setting it to the corner of his résumé.

He threw the final piece of it into the embers of the stove before it could burn his hand.

Throwing his dressing gown about his shoulders, he scrambled manically for more paper and a pen.

He sat down at the table with force and addressed the back of one of the sheets to Phyllis Baxter, c/o Downton Abbey.

He got as far as the first two letters of the word ‘Dear’ before that too was shoved in the hot ashes.

Closing the stove door after it loud enough for the whole house to hear, Thomas left his robe draped over one of the chairs and bade a hasty retreat to the bed in the far corner.

Rest. Fuck it. He would rest.

Janek was saying it. And he was resisting it. But buggering fuck it was barely past three o’clock in the afternoon and he wanted bed.

That was it.
Chapter 39

Janek made no happy announcement when he opened the door and entered the room with a distinct air of caution, clearly drawing on the experiences of the previous evening.

‘Thomas?’ Janek said in confusion before halting in his tracks at spying the hump under the bedcovers. He gave a disdainful huff.

Seconds later Thomas found a firm hand wedged under each of his armpits and was tugged unceremoniously to his feet.

‘Come on. Up, up, up.’

Thomas muttered something darkly unrepeatable, even for him, but remained standing, minus the comforting cloak of the sheets, once Janek removed his hands.

‘Christ you’re strong.’ He said groggily, rubbing at his eyes.

‘I’m sure you could lift me to.’ Said Janek, giving Thomas’s shoulders a quick pat before weaving around the second bed and over to where Thomas’s clothes were laid.

‘Don’t think so.’ Thomas said, blinking back sleep. ‘And that wasn’t very dignified.’ He grumbled.

‘Ha!’ Janek snorted to the chest of drawers, gathering up the clothes in his arms.

‘Don’t you want to ask how today went?’ Said Thomas acidly as he watched Janek make his way back to him.

‘Think I need to ask?’ Said Janek, his eyes briefly flashing with cheek.

He shoved the clothes into Thomas’s stomach.

‘We’re going out.’ He said, giving the bundle of clothes another thrust in Thomas’s direction until he took them from him.

‘Oh are we now?’

‘Yes.’ Said Janek firmly, pivoting about on his heel.

He walked in the direction of the kitchen units, one hand fumbling in his jacket pocket as he did so.

Clothes clutched to his front, Thomas sat back down onto the mattress with a dull thud.

He watched Janek take money from his pocket with one hand and pull open one of the cupboard doors to retrieve two tins with the other.

Thomas had noticed those tins during his cleaning fervour earlier in the week; one with an old soup label still barely clinging to it with quite a considerable collection of coins, the other with no label and a far smaller amount.

‘Come on, get dressed.’ Said Janek over his shoulder.

Thomas’s brain hadn’t quite caught up as regards to forming an opinion about the suggested outing, but he reasoned he would rather be clothed in some manner however the immediate evening was to
progress.

‘Which one of those does the money I owe you for food go in?’ He said as he stretched his undershirt over his head.

Janek made a disgruntled clicking noise with his tongue, dropping the majority of the money into the more heavily laden tin and putting all but a few coins of what remained into the other.

‘This one.’ Janek said, holding up the label-less, more empty of the two.

‘Right…and the other tin?’

‘For my mother.’ Janek said simply, returning the tins to their original position on the shelf.

‘Your mother?’

‘Yes.’ Janek closed the door with a soft click. ‘I see her once a month to make sure she has what she needs.’

In spite of his dull mood Thomas gave a chuckle. ‘Mother…’ He said. ‘God I can’t imagine you with a mother.’

‘Most people have them.’ Janek turned to grin at him.

‘Is she as wide as you?’ Thomas said, watching Janek’s broad shoulders silhouetted against the window as he rose to his feet.

‘Oh much much wider.’ Janek said with a snort.

‘Christ.’ Said Thomas, finally done with his under things and working on his next layer. ‘Do I get to meet her at all?’

Janek paused at that. ‘If you like…’ He said sounding somewhat surprised. ‘…yes.’ He added in a stronger voice, smiling privately to himself at the notion.

While Thomas fumbled with his buttons Janek set his cap down on the nearest surface and uncapped the tin containing a dull-black substance he proceeded to slick his hair with.

The other side of the room, and behind Janek’s back, Thomas winced at the sight of the mucky substance reforming Janek’s tawny hair.

There were other kinds of products, far better products (and for that matter better styles) to suit Janek’s hair. But Thomas was feeling somewhat lifted by Janek’s presence in the room and had the memory of his sourness the previous night to atone for.

‘Who are you getting all gussied up for eh? You’ve already got me?’ He said mischievously, now near enough decent to move over and join Janek by the window.

‘So you will go out with your hair like that will you?’ Janek retorted without missing a beat, his grin growing infectiously wider across his sharp cheeks.

Thomas caught sight enough of a look at himself in the upturned shaving mirror to see half of his own hair was sitting a good inch or so higher than usual above his forehead.

He laughed and went to retrieve his own ‘gussying’ substance, one of the finest to be had in his price range at the time he’d bought it.
He’d gotten most of the way through sorting his hair before realising his partaking of the grooming ritual did rather suggest an acceptance of the offered evening out.

‘What’s the evening in honour of?’ He said, intentionally declining to phrase the question in a way that committed him to joining.

‘Wages.’ Said Janek with a wriggle of his brows. ‘We got paid today.’

‘Ah.’ Said Thomas, nodding to the window.

‘Mmmm, the lads are already at the pub.’

‘Bit keen isn’t it?’ Said Thomas, judging by the fact Janek had just returned that quitting time couldn’t have been long before.

Janek hummed dismissively. ‘Meh, it’s where they get paid.’

Thomas set down his comb. ‘They get paid in the pub?’

‘Yes, all the lads at our dock.’

‘But doesn’t…I mean, why?’

‘Easy arrangement.’ Janek said, tugging off the jacket he was wearing to replace it with the other; the ugly rust-coloured one. ‘Bosses don’t like keeping the money on site. Pub’s safe, and it keeps their business up.’

To Thomas it seemed like possibly the most stupid arrangement in the world, on more than one account, but for Janek clearly the matter was settled.

‘Right…’ Said Thomas slowly. ‘So, would I be having to pick up the tab for everyone this time?’ He spoke nonchalantly but made sure the words carried the appropriate bite of reproach.

Janek drew in a sharp breath, hissing between his teeth, with a sheepish tightening of his jaw.

‘No.’ He eventually offered.

‘Good.’

‘You will come, yes? I think you need it.’ Janek said, retrieving his cap. He then began to progress towards the door.

‘I suppose.’ Said Thomas absently, reasoning he could less use the drink and more use the company of people who weren’t prospective employers. ‘But tell me…’ He said, donning his own jacket. ‘…as far as the men at the dock go, who am I to you?’

‘A lodger.’ Said Janek, tilting his head forwards and peering at Thomas through his eyelashes as though Thomas had just asked a very foolish question.

‘Alright, but…’ Thomas trailed off.

‘But what?’

‘Is it…I mean…’ Thomas found himself in the, up until recently, fairly rare situation of being lost for appropriate phrasing. ‘…I understand…’ He wet his lips nervously with his tongue. ‘…that you’d… that you might have…’
‘Fuck’s sake, spit it out.’

Thomas almost laughed at the choice of words.

‘You’d…been with blokes before me in a…particular…’

From over by the door Janek pointedly thrust his tongue against his cheek to make an obscene dome shape and rolled his eyes.

‘Yes, that.’ Thomas said uncomfortably. ‘So…was that generally with your…lodgers?’

This time Janek’s whole head rolled along with his eyes.

‘Not all, no.’ He said. ‘And the men, they will not all assume; if you are worried they will think bad things of you. And those who might assume, they have knowledge of same and so can’t judge.’

Thomas grimaced; that wasn’t quite it.

Though Thomas had to admit that Janek’s assurances had kindled in him an odd sense of distaste at the notion people might assume – despite having spent most of his life wishing that circumstances allowed for his particular lifestyle to not be cause for judgement. Truth be told, now that the opportunity presented itself he found himself firmly feeling that he didn’t want others to know his private business in that way…or any similar way for that matter.

But no, that wasn’t quite it.

The question regarding Janek’s ‘lodgers’ or similar had actually been made with the intention of segueing into a slightly different line of enquiry.

‘No, I didn’t mean it like that.’ Thomas said. ‘What I was wondering was how it…worked?’ He said, leaning against the nearest piece of furniture in what was intended to be a casual manner but in fact came off as stiff and uncomfortable.

‘Oh, Thomas!’ Between Janek’s comically breathless voice and the sly glint in his eye Thomas could tell he would have to work harder for a serious response. ‘I cannot demonstrate now, there is no time!’

Janek concluded his intentionally infuriating response with a wink.

‘You know what I mean.’

‘No, Thomas.’ Said Janek, taking on a less jovial tone. ‘I don’t think I do.’

‘Well just…Liam…’

‘Yes, you are fascinated with him.’ Said Janek wryly.

‘He’s not…Well, he’s married.’

‘Yes…’ Said Janek slowly.

‘So is he…’ Thomas indicated between them. ‘…like us, or…?’

‘No.’ Said Janek, shaking his head. ‘Not like us.’ He said.

Thomas didn’t miss the sudden glow of warmth in Janek’s eyes as he uttered those words, and he
mentally filed the moment away in a very happy place in his head for future reference. But he was compelled to keep pressing the point for the present.

‘Right…and the others? I take it there have been others?’ He said.

Janek nodded. ‘Others.’ He confirmed. ‘And no. Not like us.’

‘So how the hell does that work?’ Thomas said, baffled rather than riled.

Janek shrugged. ‘Cold nights…drunk happy nights…late nights…there’s sleeping close and warm bodies…nice smells…’ He said, clearly somewhat losing his train of thought at whatever memories the initial list had invoked.

‘But…’

‘I like it.’ Said Janek, with an air of earnestness and maturity that seemed alien on the face that had been quite so cheekily childish moments before. ‘You know I like it.’ He said. ‘And there’s times when a little fun can be had. Lots of times when you’re here in this place…’ Thomas assumed Janek was referring to the docks and city in addition to the room. ‘…that warm joy is wanted.’

‘But…’ Thomas began again, realising he was playing like a broken record. ‘…how does it work? Not being funny but I’ve had some proper close calls after going after the wrong people.’

‘At your Downton?’

Thomas nodded.

‘Different life?’ Janek suggested. ‘We don’t keep the space between people so much. Remember how may were once in this room?’

‘What does that matter?’ Thomas countered. ‘It doesn’t matter if it’s one to a castle or twenty to a stable. The point is…’ Thomas eventually settled on the most abrupt means to convey it. ‘…how do these blokes not punch you?’

‘Maybe…’ Janek’s shoulders gave another shrug. ‘I serve them the way they are, not like how you would wish them to be?’

‘What?’

‘They are men who will have women. One day if not already. And I know that. They know I know. There is no question. But what I can do is a treat. A treat for both of us. So there is no problem.’ Said Janek.

Though Janek had broken down the issue with disturbingly astute brevity and clarity, it took Thomas’s mind a little while to process his words. They made a twisted sort of sense, though still did not speak to Thomas’s personal experience of such matters.

His highly doubted his most recent forays into that arena before Janek, back at Downton with Jimmy, would have gone any better had he instead approached with the words ‘You and Ivy will make beautiful babies one day but in the meantime let me get my mouth around your cock’.

‘But what if they are angry?’ Thomas said. ‘It must happen sometimes.’

‘Sometimes. Not often.’ Said Janek. ‘I am good with knowing people.’

‘True…’ Thomas conceded. ‘…but when it happens…’ He persisted.
Janek leaned lazily against the side of the fireplace. ‘They say ‘no’, I move on. They threaten fists, I laugh. If they do more…’ The fingers on one of Janek’s considerable hands briefly curled into themselves tightly enough to blanch the knuckles white. They remained clenched that way for a moment, then released.

Thomas watched the colour of Janek’s hand return to usual.

‘I see.’ He said quietly.

‘Good. No we go.’ Janek tugged the door open.

‘There aren’t others now, are there?’

Thomas would have liked the question to sound a bit less pitiful, but what was done was done.

Janek closed the door again.

‘No.’ He said, speaking to the side of the fireplace rather than Thomas. ‘I have not had this before. And now I have…this…I want for nothing.’

The admission was rendered all the more heart-easing by Janek’s odd style of speech and Thomas found he too, for a moment, was looking everywhere else in the room except for Janek’s direction.

‘Can we go?’ Said Janek abruptly.

‘There’s just…’ Thomas said quickly, taking a step forward. ‘…one more thing.’

‘What?’ Said Janek, his usual bravado returning as he fixed Thomas with a look that could curdle milk.

‘Exactly how many of the blokes that’ll be out tonight have you…you know…had?’

Over by the door Janek gave a very exaggerated sigh.

Abandoning his post he crossed back across the room to Thomas.

Thomas tensed defensively as Janek approached, realising belatedly that perhaps that wasn’t the most diplomatically phrased of questions.

‘Tell you what…’ Said Janek, taking firm grip of Thomas’s shoulders. ‘…if you guess them all at the end of the night; I give you a treat.’

And with an evil smile and an abrupt twist, Janek was away and out the door before Thomas could protest.
‘No.’ Thomas declared the moment he caught up with Janek in the street. ‘Are you bloody mad? I’m not going to go round a…’ He paused briefly, having to trot at pace to keep up with Janek, to tip his hat at a passing group of ladies. ‘Round a table…’ He continued, whispering hoarsely. ‘…and pick out the blokes you’ve…’

Janek paid him no mind. He continued to stride down the street, a grin on his face, hands in his pockets and his head lolling lazily from side to side with each step.

‘Janek are you…?’

*Listening*, was what Thomas intended to say. But now they were out on the main street and it was taking his full energy to keep close to Janek, weaving in and out of the others on the pavement.

In a short while Janek slowed, allowed him to catch up, and threw an arm about his shoulder, smirking triumphantly as he did so, to shepherd Thomas down the street.

Dusk was beginning to fall, and Thomas could almost fancy himself in London as they turned into a neighbourhood of the better sort, gas lamps already glowing as they made their way down past the grand old houses towards the junction at the end of the road.

‘Spose it’s too much to hope we’re going in one of these places?’ Thomas joked, eyeing the rich drapes of a restaurant as they passed.

Janek turned his head, still grinning in his irrepressibly young and toothy way.

‘Well maybe for special occasion we…Uh!’

Janek stumbled back a step, his arm dropping from Thomas’s shoulder. A well clothed man with a top hat, and cape over his cloak, had crashed into his shoulder.

‘Watch where you walk *dupa*! ’ Janek shouted at the man’s retreating back.

Thomas had winced at the sound of the impact but he couldn’t help but feel Janek was a little rich in his reaction; the two of them had, after all, been taking up the majority of the pavement.

The well clothed man didn’t seemed too troubled by the encounter. He simply kept walking.

Nevertheless, in the cause of avoiding further trouble Thomas decided taking hold of Janek’s arm and moving him on swiftly was the best course of action.

As Thomas turned Janek about he noticed Janek throw something over his shoulder onto the pavement.

Looking back he saw the unwelcomely unmistakeable shape of a leather wallet.

‘Janek…what did you…?’

‘He was an arse.’ Was the response.

‘But…’

‘I took nothing.’ Said Janek simply. ‘His fault, things fall out of pockets when people are careless.’
Behind them Thomas saw a scraggly child emerge from behind the raised steps of one of the rich houses. The child crawled rather than walked on spindly limbs to the wallet, took hold of it, and retreated out of sight.

‘I can’t believe you did that.’ Thomas said, turning back in the direction they were walking, feeling suddenly very conscious of his own wallet inside his waistcoat.

Janek said nothing, merely beginning to whistle as he continued to walk beside Thomas, Thomas’s hand still holding his wrist.

They were back to their previous arrangement, Janek’s hand about Thomas’s shoulder, by the time they reached a part of the city most definitely more geared towards the ‘working man’.

As they approached a crossroads Thomas caught sight of a young boy standing in the light of a street lamp, a stack of papers slung over his arm.

Wryly he pondered whether this was the lad who had sold him an out of date paper the day before yesterday.

But he didn’t remember the look of the boy well enough to know for sure as they approached. Truth be told most children looked alike to him, they always had, even when he had been a boy himself.

But as they drew close enough to hear the lad’s hoarse cries of the evening’s headline the newspaper boy became interesting for an entirely different reason.

‘Read it all, Janek Biel caught riding horse naked down Church Street. Read it all, Janek Biel…’

Thomas stopped in his tracks, turning to Janek with a highly incredulous expression. ‘What?’

But Janek had already left his side and was striding purposefully up to the newspaper boy.

The boy stopped shouting as he approached. Thomas watched as Janek took a coin out of his pocket, pressed it into the boy’s immediately upturned hand, and bent to whisper in his ear.

Janek turned and walked back merrily to Thomas as behind him the boy started shouting.

‘Gareth Black, caught drunk in privy with prostitute. Read it all, Gareth Black caught drunk…’ He cried, raising his papers up again to offer them to passers-by.

‘What in the name of…?’ Thomas began as Janek took him by the shoulders and pressed onwards down the street.

‘For a coin they say anything.’ Janek smirked.

‘But aren’t they worried that people will actually read the paper?’ Said Thomas, craning his neck to see the boy making a sale.

‘Ha! They even sell papers from day before.’ Said Janek. ‘Few coins means less papers to sell before home.’

‘I see…’ Said Thomas. And he did. The story quelling a little of his irritation at the out of date paper he’d received the day before last, replacing it with a grudging and unsettling sense of sympathy.

‘The woman from next door…’ Janek said. ‘…she had them announce her husband was away to sea.’ He snorted. ‘Shock for him when he heard, I think.’
As they moved on Thomas’s eyes and fairly refined sense of propriety were assaulted by the sight of the bustling street beyond. Everywhere he looked amongst the illuminated (or intentionally dark) shop fronts were people in either a state of inebriation or undress, or both, that was entirely improper.

And it wasn’t just the women, clearly touting for business.

It was the men too.

Thomas was familiar with the old adage regarding losing one’s shirt in a game of poker but he had never before seen it quite so distastefully re-enacted in real life.

And some seemed to have lost more than that.

Clinging close to Janek, who seemed to find his discomfort amusing as much as endearing, Thomas walked with him down the centre of the street past several unfortunate souls who had taken it upon themselves to sit with bottles in the muck of the gutters.

‘Here we are.’ Said Janek finally, indicating towards a large fronted building with long open holes where windows might once have been.

Thomas joined Janek in side-stepping another man sat in the gutter.

Together, they approached the pub.

The glow from inside and the emanating sounds of a fiddle and drums were oddly enticing in the dusk, promising a haven from the dark dirty street outside. But the place was, for want of a better word, rammed.

Thomas couldn’t quite see how they should make it through the door let alone find service at the bar. Or seating, for that matter.

But Janek took his wrist and pulled him after him as he pushed easily past the group propping up the door frame and into the melee within.
A roar of greeting sounded from seemingly half the pub once they had pushed past the crush at the door.

Bewildered, Thomas allowed Janek to pull him in the direction of the far corner where, amid the chaos, was a hap-hazard arrangement of tables, chairs, stools, a graveyard of bottles and tankards and a group of over a dozen men and several women crowded about.

Janek was tugged into several half-hugs, patted about the shoulders and loudly welcomed with shouts such as ‘me old cock!’ as he moved through the outer circle of standing revellers and towards the tables. Several of the men also patted Thomas’s shoulders and smiled at him as he entered. None of them were familiar so Thomas could only assume, in his overwhelmed state, that association with the evidently popular Janek had rendered him welcome also.

He also noted at least four men getting up to vacate seats as they approached.

Janek made straight for a man with shockingly bright blond hair whose neighbour had been one of those to get up.

The man grinned as Janek approached.

Thomas winced as Janek gave a sharp slap to the side of the man’s face. But the man merely laughed.

‘Naughty!’ Janek declared, taping the tip of the man’s nose with his fingertip.

‘Yeah, but you’ve got to admit that was a good one!’ The man replied.

‘Thomas, Gareth. Gareth, Thomas.’ Janek said, stepping back to guide Thomas down to sit on the short bench beside Gareth while he took the single stool beside him.

‘Ah.’ Thomas said, wondering if the newspaper boy would still be on the street corner loudly informing people of ‘Gareth Black’s’ exploits at the point when the man in question headed home that night.

He also wondered if their easy familiarity and mischievous banter meant that he ought to be chalking up a score for the chalkboard labelled ‘Janek’ in his head – but he reasoned he could hardly assume friendliness equated automatically to physical intimacy.

And besides, he absolutely was NOT indulging in Janek’s game. No sir. He was not.

‘Thomas!’ Exclaimed Gareth as Thomas’s side was firmly wedged against his in the cause of not falling off the short length of the bench. ‘Been hoping I could say me thanks in person!’

Thomas stared at his ruddy face in confusion, hoping Janek might come to his rescue to explain.

But the other side of him Janek’s attention had already been co-opted by two of the men standing immediately behind him.

‘Me trousers.’ Gareth said, drinking heartily from his beer mug, rendering it near empty in the process. ‘Didn’t know where I’d left ‘em and you mended ‘em so nice!’

‘Oh.’ Said Thomas, not having realised that Janek had returned some of the items in the ‘rags’ pile to
their previous owners. ‘My pleasure.’ He said tentatively.

‘Let me sort you a drink!’ Gareth snatched up the mug in front of him and sprang from the seat.

Thomas almost keeled over sideways, having been leaning so heavily into Gareth to avoid falling off
the bench that the sudden absence of him left a void for him to fall into.

‘Eh, up!’ Thomas was saved from falling by Janek’s hand clasped to his shoulder. ‘You haven’t
even had one of these yet!’ Janek laughed, tipping the beer-mug in his hands towards Thomas by
way of mock toast.

How Janek had managed to already obtain a drink from somewhere in the packed bar Thomas had
no idea. But he hoped Gareth wouldn’t be too long in fetching him one of his own.

The shouts and squeals about him near drowned the sound of the music being played the other side
of the room and he winced each time a chair or table scraped as someone bumped into them.

‘Hey! You again!’ A man from across the table called merrily, also tipping his drink to Thomas.

Thomas recognised him from his lunch at the docks, but wasn’t quite sure how to respond to the
rather inelegant greeting.

Thankfully at that moment Gareth made a miraculously speedy return from the bar carrying two
beers so full that the liquid slopped down onto his shoes (and several people’s necks) as he hopped
through the throngs about the table to take his place by Thomas.

‘Cheers!’

‘Cheers.’ Thomas responded with slightly less gusto. ‘Thank you.’ He added, taking a sip.

‘Eh, you’re so welcome!’ Said Gareth, leaning in. ‘Now I’ve been meaning to tell ‘im next door
this…’ He said, nodding to Janek whose attention had now been taken by another man leaning
across the table to shake his hand and pass him a bottle of something that definitely wasn’t beer. ‘…
but I want you to go to me dad’s place, fishmongers on Beck Road, and tell ‘im I sent you.’

‘I don’t understand…’ Thomas said, taking a slightly larger sip of beer, suspecting inebriation may
help him to translate what was going on around him with a little more clarity.

‘You sorted me trousers, now I sort you out.’ Gareth said, draining near half his mug in a single
swig. ‘He’s got in the best fillets this week, just round the corner from you, you know…’

Thomas didn’t know, but he thought he finally understood.

‘Thank you.’ He said, offering his mug to Gareth to clink his own against it.

That seemed to be appropriate protocol. Gareth enthusiastically returned the gesture.

‘Tell you the truth…’ Gareth said, leaning towards Thomas again as though to keep the conversation
private. ‘…didn’t think you were the type of bloke what could sew.’

That gave Thomas pause. He realised what kind of figure he must cut in the group; reserved,
impeccably dressed and still in the sea of rumpled, earthy motion around him. But it was odd to think
that to them he might appear to be from the same group of people that he’d spent near his whole life
cleaning up after, serving food, caring for their possessions; including mending their clothes because
those men absolutely would not and could not sew.
He decided against attempting to explain the strange half-way house between worlds that his previous job had inhabited.

‘Oh I can do a lot of things me.’ Thomas said with a small smile.

‘Good man!’ Came the response.

As the man the other side of Gareth said something to distract him away from Thomas, Thomas was afforded time to observe those about the table.

Most were from the group he had met at the docks.

He spied the young man Turner who had alerted him to the position at the ‘bunch of cunts’ office. He was sat beside two men who were evidently trying to teach him a trick with a set of small chunky bones and a rubber ball. But either through drink or just generally having more lithe hands than the gargantuan paws of the other two men, he didn’t seem to be quite getting it and seemed quite devastated at the fact.

Moving round further his attention was taken by a dark haired man with a very distinctive crooked nose. Thomas was all but certain he’d seen the man hovering by the top of the ladder, laughing, when he’d been making his slow, wet climb out of the Mersey the month before.

He quickly shifted his gaze lest the man make eye contact with him and decide to strike up a conversation.

By the second smaller table that had been jammed up against the larger one to accommodate more people he recognised Liam, partially hidden behind the dull brown bodice of the smiling woman in a lace cap sat quite daintily in his lap.

‘Miss Cathy’, Thomas assumed.

From behind the woman Thomas realised Liam had caught sight of him and was trying to get his attention.

‘Any luck?’ Thomas eventually realised the man was mouthing at him.

Thomas pursed his lips and gave a shake of his head, the memory of his unfortunate interview earlier that day still something of a raw wound.

He was surprised to see Liam emulate the pursing of his lips and give a sad nod that seemed to contain a genuine level of sympathy. He then turned and whispered in the ear of the woman on his lap who also twisted her lips and turned to give Thomas a sympathetic glance before turning her attention back to him.

‘Drink up!’ Janek said from beside him, tapping at Thomas’s still mostly full beer mug. ‘Let’s all drink up!’ He announced, loudly enough for the whole table to hear even in the surrounding din. Janek rose to his feet, mug held high. ‘To another sweating stinking month!’ He shouted.

Around him all those not already standing jumped to their feet also, to join him in pushing their drinks towards the centre of the circle in a messy but synchronised motion with a resounding cheer.

Slightly later than the others in rising, Thomas joined them on his feet also. Though he couldn’t quite bring himself to cheer.

Janek’s mug made the return journey to his lips, as did everyone else’s, and he continued to gulp as
he sat back down.

Beside him, Thomas felt compelled to do the same under the cheeky sideways gaze Janek directed towards him while he continued to drain his own drink.

He managed it and set his mug back on the table with a triumphant clunk, fighting hard to keep the belch that threatened to follow down in his chest where it belonged.

‘You alright?’ Said Janek, catching sight of Thomas’s uncomfortable expression.

‘Don’t think I could do that again.’ Thomas said. ‘Haven’t eaten much for a while.’ He added, finally having to let the gas in his throat escape with as little noise as possible from behind his hand.

Janek turned and grasped at the sleeve of one of the men behind them. ‘Eh! Sort us out with some food.’ He said.

The man immediately turned and vanished into the crowd.

‘So you from far away?’ Said the other man who was left behind.

‘Manchester originally.’ Said Thomas.

‘Me too!’ The man said as though it were the most joyous of news. ‘We’re brothers!’ He said, offering a pudgy hand to Thomas.

Thomas took it, shaking it somewhat dubiously but unable to resist returning the man’s happy smile.

‘Tony’s been with us a year now.’ Said Janek, tapping the back of his hand against the man’s stained waistcoat.

‘Yeah, still trying to figure out how to get rid of ‘im.’ Gareth chimed in.

Thomas joined them in a laugh.

Moments later the other man returned, balancing a plate of tiny pies, a bowl of hard boiled eggs with coarse salt sprinkled liberally on them and a bowl of nuts.

Thomas doubted if any of the establishments the Crawleys frequented in Mayfair could boast such fast service for their customers.

He grabbed up one of the pies, finding the cold pastry and pork stuffing surprisingly delicious chasing after the beer he had gulped.

‘Eat up.’ Janek instructed to the others seated about them and soon Thomas was joined in his snacking by several others.

‘Oh they do good fare here.’ One of the men heartily declared.

‘For those they like.’ Said Gareth wryly with a mouthful of egg.

‘How’d you mean?’ Said Thomas, realising belatedly that he had also spoken with his mouth full.

‘Put in a little extra for them that are rude to ‘em.’ Said Gareth with a raise of his eyebrows, leaning over to take another egg.

‘Spect that don’t happen where your lot eat.’ Said the other man.
Thomas laughed at that. ‘Well there was this cook…’ He said, taking another pie. ‘…who was worried she was going to be upstaged while she was away from the kitchen…’ He paused to chew. ‘…and had the kitchen maid putting soap and fig paste in the other woman’s food so they’d be happy when she came back!’

Snorts of amusement sounded from those about him as they continued to eat.

‘That’s like when Liam told Turner the rod stays didn’t have to run between both sides of the boiler ’cause he was afraid he was there to take his job!’ The food-fetcher declared. ‘Ain’t that right?’ He called over to Liam.

‘Aye, but he figured it out after Wellsley hit him with one!’ Liam called back.

The crooked nosed man that Thomas had noted earlier raised his mug in acknowledgement while Turner turned a dark shade of puce over by the knuckle-bones game.

‘Ain’t you glad I’m around now…’ Turner declared. ‘…to help you with all the heavy lifting old man!’

‘Oh I’ll old man you!’ Liam retorted with a grin. On his lap Cathy smiled as well, leaning to give Liam a peck on the cheek. Liam responded by capturing her mouth in a hearty kiss.

‘Isn’t it a bit odd.’ Thomas whispered to Janek as the others went back to their conversations. ‘To have his wife out with him in a place like this?’

‘Why?’ Said Janek, passing Thomas one of the full beer mugs that had just been set down on the table in a tray of half a dozen. ‘There’s no children at home to look after.’ He glanced over to where Liam and Cathy continued to be attached to one another’s faces. ‘Not long though, I imagine.’ He said, nudging playfully at Thomas’s side.

‘No.’ Thomas agreed with a roll of his eyes.

As the evening wore on there were multiple changes of seating about the table as the group ebbed and flowed to the bar.

At one point Thomas found himself next to the crooked-nosed Wellsley. The man annoyingly remembered full well Thomas’s little swim at the docks, but followed it up with such a fascinating story about how his father had been famous for swimming across the Mersey to escape a reformatory ship stationed out of the dock that Thomas found he didn’t mind too much.

He also didn’t mind the fond way the man spoke of meeting Janek when he had first come to the docks several years before. That was until Thomas’s treacherous brain decided Wellsley’s reminiscent smile had perhaps a little too much of a glow about it.

One for number? Shhh, no you are NOT counting…

Later, to Thomas’s increasingly drunken delight, someone produced a pack of cards and initiated a bastardised version of pontoon.

He loudly informed the other players that he could ‘cream them’ in the game and proceeded to do just that; winning the majority of the nuts they were using in lieu of chips or money.

‘To the victor the spoils!’ The dealer announced, indicating the large piles of nuts accumulated by Thomas’s hands.
Thomas accepted the congratulations offered by those about the table but was rendered slightly uncomfortable by the implication that he was now expected to eat the nuts that had passed through multiple men’s hands and been pushed back and forth through the spilled drink on the table.

‘Too much there for me to eat.’ He said in what he hoped was a nonchalant voice.

‘All the more for me!’ Janek happily declared, reaching over his shoulder to grasp up a full handful and tip them into his mouth.

A bottle of label-less wine made an appearance a short while later, and it was offered first to Thomas by way of celebration of his victory.

After a moment’s consideration, and upon realising that wine glasses were unlikely to be forthcoming, he drank the rest of his beer before pouring himself a helping of wine into his empty mug. The bottle was passed around the table, with most doing the same.

By the time the bottle had made its way back to Janek it was near empty and to the sounds of raucous encouragement he drained the rest of it directly from the bottle.

Thomas noticed Janek’s lips and then tongue lingering at the mouth of the bottle for a moment, delicately catching every last drop, and felt the sight do somewhat unwelcome things to his nether regions.

He also noticed that the food-fetcher’s gaze had lingered on the same view.

Another one to add to the Janek score board…

No, Thomas. NO. You are NOT playing this game! You’re NOT!

Later still one of the women standing by the side of the table was introduced to him as Miss Gallet, the woman behind the gravy-soaked rabbit pies he and Janek had enjoyed back at their house shortly after his arrival.

It emerged that she was renowned for doing ‘fair deals’ for the dock workers in her bakery and had two brothers who worked in the loading bays. It also emerged that she was far better at holding her drink than the majority of the men at the table, who were doing a poor job at remaining upright while she stood firm, straight as a board, without requiring a chair or wall for support.

Thomas couldn’t help but admire her as a finely featured woman, with a waist that required no corset or belt (Thomas could tell she wore neither with her checked dress) to keep in check. And it was no surprise that when the violin and drums changed their tempo to a jovial jig that near half the men at the table attempted to take her hand to lead her to dance.

Liam and Cathy jumped up also as a small dance space opened up in the centre of the pub, surrounded by happily clapping onlookers while the dockers unsuccessful in gaining Miss Gallet’s hand scoured about for other amenable ladies or simply took to the dance floor by themselves.

‘You going to dance?’ Thomas said to Janek.

‘No…’ Janek burped. ‘I must piss!’

Thomas balked at the loud announcement, even more so at the other men who gruntingly publicly conceded that they needed to do the same. And he didn’t care for the fact that almost the entire table not emptied, leaving him alone in the mess. But it was the fact they headed to outside of the pub to satisfy this particular need that had his eyes out on stalks.
Looking about the pub he realised that there were no doors leading out from the room besides that concealed behind the bar or the one leading to the street outside.

Just as he was making a mental note to curb his intake of beer and wine for the evening he suddenly found Liam dropping down heavily into the seat at his side.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Cathy was now dancing with one of the other lads.

‘Thomas…’ Liam said by way of greeting, the look on his face containing a hint of foreboding rather than just the usual sourness.

‘Liam…’ Thomas replied, his hand suddenly a little unsteady on his beer mug. He glanced round at the now empty table, feeling uncomfortably trapped by Liam’s presence.

‘You’re at Porter’s place, aren’t you? Janek’s place.’

Thomas nodded slowly. ‘Yes.’

‘You’re staying with…’

Liam suddenly looked up sharply as someone approached.

Thomas was highly relieved to recognise the shocking blond hair of the jovial Gareth.

But his relief was short lived when after a nod of acknowledgement to Liam, Gareth wedged himself the other side of him, effectively penning Thomas in between the two of them.

‘You’re staying with Janek?’ Said Liam.

‘Yes.’ Thomas replied, looking between the two men. ‘I decided to leave my job with Lord Grantham…the man I was with at the docks, you remember…and find a job here.’ He said, feeling more and more uncomfortable the longer the two men let him continue without interruption. He didn’t think he’d ever been more intensively listened to in his life. ‘And Janek knew I needed a place to stay when I came here so he…let me stay. Because there’s that big room, and…’ He trailed off.

Beside him, Gareth nodded sagely, looking towards Liam.

With a nod of his head, Liam indicated Gareth should speak.

‘Thing about our Janek is…’ Gareth began. ‘…he’s a little…unusual.’

‘Unusual?’ Said Thomas, summoning up a good impression of innocence. ‘Like how?’

‘Well he…’ Gareth began. But he was halted by Liam holding up a hand.

‘Just you be giving courtesy to him.’ Said Liam. ‘If he ever does anything that you think’s a bit…’

‘Unusual.’ Said Thomas from the centre, trying to keep his expression neutral.

‘Don’t be being unkind.’ Said Liam. ‘He’s a good man.’

Thomas nodded to both sentiments.

‘And know he’s a lot of friends.’ Gareth added, his usually cheerful voice suddenly cold and hard.

‘I know.’ Said Thomas. ‘And I wouldn’t…be unkind…to anyone.’ He said, looking from one to the
‘Not like that.’ He added, suddenly realising that he might have accidentally given away that he knew more than the men thought he did about what ‘that’ might entail.

‘Good. ‘Cause he is a good man.’ Liam said again.

‘Yes.’ Thomas agreed. ‘He’s very…’

‘Alive.’ Gareth interjected. Liam nodded his assent.

‘Yes.’ Thomas said quietly. ‘I think that’s actually a very good way of…’

‘What’s this?’ The three of them turned to see Janek standing behind them, ahead of the rest of the ‘bathroom break’ crew.

Gareth clapped Thomas on the back, beaming up at Janek.

‘Just asking Thomas here for his secrets at cards.’

‘Mmmmmmm…’ Janek hummed.

Liam and Gareth both made a hasty exit.

As Janek took his seat at the table along with the other men he shot Thomas a quick glance with the unmistakeable message ‘Later, tell me everything!’

Thomas winked in response.

At the end of the night the last bell had come and gone a good half hour earlier before the dockers began readying themselves to leave.

As Janek steered him towards the door, both taking equal parts of the task of keeping the other standing, Thomas realised he hadn’t paid for a drink all night.

They stepped out into the welcome cool of the night air together, the others following behind.
A man in a similar wool coat and bowler hat to his walked past them as Thomas stepped out into the street with Janek.

Thomas turned to watch him walk.

The coat the man was wearing was a style that he had considered buying and he was happy to note that it hung far less well than the one he himself was wearing.

The man in the gutter that he and Janek had side-stepped earlier in the evening rose unsteadily to his feet as the man passed. He walked towards him, putting himself in his way, hand outstretched.

The other man visibly flinched away from him, jutting out an elbow to shove him away.

The beggar fell back, down into the gutter slurry with a wet slap.

The man kept walking.

‘HEY!’

Thomas clenched his jaw.

‘HEY!’ Janek shouted again.

He wrenched his arm from Thomas’s and gave chase.

Thomas stopped walking, bit his lip and shook his head as he watched Janek go after the man. He imagined he himself would have a similar reaction to a filthy man accosting him in the street, but he could empathise with Janek’s outrage and wearily acknowledged he understood why Janek felt the need to give the man some harsh words.

But something about the way Janek approached the man; no longer needing Thomas’s support to walk, striding heavily down the street, arms held taunt, out away from his sides, that had Thomas a little…

‘Oh!’

In the near empty street the sound of the crack as Janek took hold of the man’s shoulders and smacked his face into his nose was resounding and sickening.

The man went instantly to the floor, hat falling off, coat askew, as Janek rained down on him with foot and fist.

Thomas took a step forwards, not consciously thinking about it but realising he had had some abstract notion about intervening.

Janek’s group of dockers, coming out of the pub behind, him took action faster and rushed easily past.

Good. Thomas absently thought from somewhere within his shock, hearing the man’s gulping cries as though from a long way away as Janek’s rage continued unabated. They can stop it, Thomas thought.
Staring at the preternatural speed and strength of Janek’s fury he could only conceded that he would be unlikely to be able to intervene effectively himself.

But they didn’t intervene.

Instead the metal toes of their boots joined Janek’s.

The sounds of the beating, the sounds of the street, everything grew silent to Thomas as he watched – unable to move, unable to think – in his mind no longer in the darkness of Liverpool but in the daylight of Ripon; watching himself be reduced.

Except the men in Ripon had used their fists. Some small mercy and nod to the ‘gentlemanly’ British pugilistic tradition.

These men used their boots. Rendering their target a silent, immobile, hunch of puffed skin and blood.

From somewhere behind Thomas a whistle sounded, cutting into his addled mind.

Then two whistles.

Thomas turned to see two men in uniforms approaching from behind the shocked spectators that had accumulated outside the pub.

His eyes widened.

Instinct compelled him forwards, his drunken feet found spongy purchase on the pavement; but he ran.

He shoved himself into the fray, grabbing at Janek’s shirt collar, tugging his face towards him.

For a moment Janek’s eyes were unseeing, a shining nothing behind their paleness.

‘We have to go!’ Thomas shouted over the repugnant noises of the exertion of boots on bone.

He saw no reason or response in the eyes looking back at him.

Beyond, the police officers drew closer.

‘Let’s go…’ Thomas said, at first at an absent whisper but growing more and more frantic. ‘Let’s go, let’s go, let’s…’

By some impossible strength he managed to get Janek’s head looking in the direction of the men running towards them down the street.

‘PLEASE!’

Janek’s collar tore as he wrenched himself out of Thomas’s grip.

Grabbing Thomas by the wrist he broke into a sprint, pulling Thomas behind him just long enough to know he was following before releasing; the two of them pounding the pavement away and down, into the darkness of the road below.

Drunkenness and adrenaline enabled Thomas to move past the limitations of his shoes and keep pace with Janek, following down two side roads and into an alley before they were well away from the chaos they’d left behind.
Janek halted in the blackness of the alleyway, his breathing deep and rough in the dark.

Thomas leant heavily forwards, hands to his knees, his own lungs struggling to remember how to take in air.

‘Do you have cigarette?’

Thomas gave him one.

Watched him light it with a match his fingers struggled to keep still.

‘Let’s go.’ Said Janek, exhaling smoke.

Thomas could only nod.

Janek led the way onwards, walking slowly, a slight sway to the whole of his body as he moved, only remembering the cigarette in his hands occasionally before it was spent.

Thomas followed behind, alternating between staring at Janek intently and being unable to look at him at all.
They entered the room in silence, Janek walking ahead of Thomas and Thomas following slowly behind.

Thomas closed the door behind him.

The room was dark but neither moved to light the candles.

Thomas over by the windows and Janek over by the wall, they began to undress.

Down to his trousers and underclothes, Thomas forcefully tugged down the covers of the second (as of yet unslept in) bed.

Sinking down onto it he turned, facing the windows, away from the bed by the wall, and pulled the covers up to his shoulders.

‘Thomas?’ A soft unsteady voice said from across the room.

Thomas tugged the covers up to his chin.

‘Thomas?’

Thomas stared blankly ahead at the cabinet under the window.

‘Thomas?’

‘Go to sleep.’

For a moment Janek’s breathing was the only sound in the room.

‘Thom…’

‘GO TO SLEEP!’ Thomas half-shouted, half-screamed, at him; turning briefly to see Janek cutting a pathetic figure, sat naked with his legs dangling from the edge of the other bed behind him before turning back to face the windows, grip tight on the sheets, cheek pushed heavily down against the pillow.

‘Thomas?’

That time was pleading.

‘Thomas?’

That time was reproachful.

‘…Thomas?’

That time was desperate.

Thomas’s grip tightened on the covers.

‘Go the fuck to sleep.’

From behind him he heard a dejected sigh.
“Thomas, please...”

“What?” Thomas jerked his head back in Janek’s direction. “Please, WHAT? Can’t you see I don’t want to talk?”

“What is it, what have I done?”

“You have to ask?” Thomas snarled back, unmoved by Janek’s wretched expression, or how cold he must be seated where he was above the covers of the bed, or how he looked so small curled in to himself compared to the amount of space he usually inhabited. “Really, you have to ask?”

“You saw what he did.” Janek replied in a small voice.

“I did. Yes.” Said Thomas incredulously, turning to lean on his other elbow as his neck began to twinge in protest at the odd angle it was being held at. “Yes I saw.”

“So then why...?”

“You crushed a man because he shoved a beggar out the way in the street. What obligation was that man under to have to deal with a filthy man getting in his way when he’s going down the street? And I didn’t see you stopping to help the beggar up before you went after him.”

Janek flinched at that last part, his hands jittering a little, clasped between his bare knees.

“It wasn’t what he did.” Janek said to his hands. “It was how he did it.”

“How so?” Thomas demanded, his hand coming down to slap at the top of the mattress of its own violation.

Janek’s shoulders curled further in on themselves, his head lowering.

“He pushed him like dog.” He said quietly. “He was nothing to him.”

“Of course he was nothing to him, he was a bloody beggar!”

Janek leaned further forwards, his elbows coming to rest on his thighs.

“You don’t understand.”

“I’m trying.” Thomas snapped.

“He treated him like a dog.” Janek said, his voice increasingly desperate. “Understand I cannot accept a man...” His body tremored. “…treating another man as anything other than a man.”

“I don’t...”

“To men like that...” Janek continued. “…we are nothing. We are all dogs. Unless we help them or serve them...Then, then we are tools. But both ways, we are nothing. Our lives matter nothing.”

Thomas was unsettled by the familiar truth in Janek’s words, far more so than the sight of him trembling as he spoke.

But he couldn’t allow Janek’s diatribe and the evening’s events to connect.

“That’s a lot to take from a bloke moving someone on in the street.” He said sharply.
Janek sniffed. Thomas saw the top of his head bobbing a little below his hunched shoulders, though he suspected it was more Janek acknowledging his words rather than agreeing with them.

‘Thomas I hate them.’

Janek spoke so quietly Thomas wasn’t sure he had heard the words correctly.

‘What?’

With another, more forceful sniff, Janek uncurled and got to his feet; going back to cutting his usual hulking figure, but his muscles were slack and his posture defeated.

‘I hate them.’ He said, standing between the beds, arms open, palms offered to Thomas as though they would explain for him.

From under the comforting warmth of the covers, Thomas looked up at Janek standing naked in the light from the street; finding him a pitiful rather than threatening entity in the moment, but still very much aware of how they had gotten to this particular moment.

‘Who do you hate, Janek?’ He said eventually, resigned to the fact that sleep would be impossible with Janek in his present state.

‘The ones like that. The ones who think we are nothing.’

‘Alright.’ Said Thomas.

Janek stayed where he was, again beginning to tremble.

‘And this is coming from where?’ Said Thomas wearily.

‘Where were you in the war Thomas?’

‘What?’ Thomas was thrown by the change of topic.

‘Where were you based?’

‘Near Souchez.’ Thomas replied somewhat dubiously. ‘In the north.’

‘We were near Albert.’ Janek said. ‘South of you, I think.’

‘I don’t see what this has to do with…’

‘Did you have enough food, Thomas?’ Said Janek.

‘What?’

‘Food. Did you have enough? And drink? Bullets? Good boots? Warm space to sleep? Dry space?’

‘Well…’ Thomas shifted to release some of the tension in his elbow, dragging himself up into a sitting position. ‘…not always. But we got by…’ He said. ‘And, remember, I didn’t use bullets.’

‘Of course, of course…’ Janek said. ‘…So for you were there enough bandages? Enough beds? Enough to help carry the hurt?’

Thomas was quiet a moment before replying. ‘No.’

‘There it is.’ Said Janek simply. ‘And because of this men died, yes?’
‘…Yes.’

‘And the men sending the piece of paper saying do this, do that, do you think they had enough food? Enough doctors when they were sick?’

‘I imagine they did.’ Thomas replied.

‘And do you think those men ever needed a bullet?’

Thomas gave a small laugh. ‘I shouldn’t think so, no.’

‘No. Because they had tools like us to use them for them. They think ‘I want to keep two feet of land to make point’ and they send paper to tell men to tell us to go in the way of guns. And what for anyway? The men at the table decided when it was over. Not what we did in the mud.’

‘Sit down.’ Thomas said, lost for anything else to add. ‘You look like you’re about to keel over. Please sit.’

Janek followed the instruction, sitting on top of the sheets at the side of Thomas’s bed, facing away from him.

‘There isn’t a person you meet here…’ Janek said dolefully. ‘…that hasn’t lost someone close, because men like that treat men like us as nothing.’

Thomas was lost for a moment in his own personal reflections, he and Janek both taking a moment for reverential silence.

‘Who did you lose?’ Thomas eventually said, tentatively speaking to Janek’s back.

‘Aleks, Leon and Marcin.’ Janek spoke the list slowly, lingering between each name as though the men in question might call out to answer.

‘Your friends?’

‘My brothers.’

‘Oh.’ Thomas said softly, finding the notion of Janek having brothers as odd as the idea of him having a mother given the strong self-sufficiency of the man. But this was not the moment to revisit his earlier jest.

Nor anymore could he pursue the issue of the evening’s events.

The logical part of his mind urged him to insist that the failings of the war office were no justification for beating a stranger half to death in the street. Or at least to reproach the man beside him that his actions that night would do nothing to recover the lives of his lost family.

But really at that moment there was no come-back. The admission of the loss of three brothers effectively putting an end to any other topics of discussion.

Though Thomas was very clear with himself that at some point the events of the night would be revisited.

Thomas raised a hand to press his palm against Janek’s back. His skin was cold to the touch.

‘Lie down.’ Thomas said, shifting back to make space in the bed.
Janek did, but he didn’t get under the covers; choosing instead to lie on top of them. He accepted the hand that Thomas reached out to rest on his arm but didn’t offer any touch of his own. Janek kept his hands clasped together at his chest between himself and the shape of Thomas’s chest under the covers.

‘Marcin was sick.’ Janek said, speaking vacantly as though recalling a memory of a forgotten place. ‘The food made him sick and then he choked. Leon was infected in the arm. A bullet.’ He said. ‘Aleks was shot also. He was out on the ground for I think three days before they brought him back. Birds ate his face…I don’t know where he was buried. Any of them. I don’t know.’

Thomas remained silent.

He let Janek rest his head against his cheek, despite the stickiness of his slicked hair, and squeezed the hand he had resting at Janek’s bicep by way of comfort.

‘Needed more men like you.’ Janek said into Thomas’s neck.

‘What were they like?’ Thomas said, perhaps a little too abruptly. ‘Your brothers?’

Janek shifted beside him. ‘Alek’s was the first. He was cheeky, like me. Marcin and Leon, they were always so serious. I think Aleks was happy when I came.’ Janek gave a small laugh.

‘You’re…You were the youngest?’

‘Yes.’ Said Janek. ‘And Aleks, he liked me because I liked to joke too.’ Thomas smiled a little at the happiness in Janek’s voice. ‘He had a big smile…’ Janek continued. ‘…like this…’ Janek raised himself up on his elbow to show Thomas, his lips stretched back to show both sets of teeth. Thomas couldn’t help but laugh at the sight and Janek laughed too. ‘He had gold teeth…here…’ Janek pointed at his teeth. ‘…here and here. He’d say he was ‘smiling his fortune’, all the time.’

‘What about your father?’ Thomas asked. ‘Was he in the war too or…?’

‘No. He died when I was small. Before we left Poland.’

‘Poland?’ Thomas said in surprise. ‘But…you sound like the locals when you speak. I thought you’d been born here?’

‘What does that matter, my family died for England.’ Said Janek with force. ‘I am English.’

‘Right.’ Said Thomas softly. ‘So…’ He said, searching to redirect the conversation. ‘I suppose Aleks took over from your father when he died?’

‘Yes.’ Said Janek, settling back from his impassioned moment and resting himself back down by Thomas’s side. ‘He looked out for the family well.’

‘Sounds like a man.’ Thomas said, running his soothingly up and down Janek’s arm.

‘He was.’ Said Janek absentely. ‘He was going to do amazing things.’

‘You still could.’ Said Thomas.

Chapter 44

Thomas had to work through some confusion when he woke the following morning.

Chiefly, why he had woken up across the room from the bed in which he usually slept in.

It took a moment to remember.

Grimacing, Thomas brought himself up groggily up into a sitting position.

He saw the residue of Janek’s greasy hair product on the pillow and on top of the sheet, not to mention feeling it on his cheek. If the depression in the sheets by his side was anything to go by Janek had slept beside him, above the sheets, all night.

‘Good morning.’

Thomas looked over to see Janek already fully dressed, standing by the stove, tending to something sizzling on the heat that gave off a slightly unappetising smell. He could see how far the sun had stretched across the stones of the fireplace and though he had no idea where his pocket watch had ended up the night before he knew the morning must be getting on a bit.

Scratching at his chin Thomas couldn’t help but marvel at how easily he’d slipped into the habit of sleeping late.

‘Morning.’ He offered. ‘You not at work today?’ He said groggily, wincing at the pain at his temples from the previous evening’s over indulgence.

‘We go in later Saturday.’ Janek explained, speaking quickly and moving quickly as he continued to work on the food.

‘Right.’ Thomas said.

‘It’s near ready. I squashed up and fried was left before.’

Thomas nodded and regretted the effect the move had on his head.

He dragged himself from the bed and located his dressing gown.

‘Are there eggs?’ Thomas asked. In his mind a hangover called for eggs. That and coffee.

In reply Janek quickly dove down to reach under the nearest surface to retrieve two eggs that he cracked to fry next to the round potato pancakes he was cooking.

‘Coffee?’ Thomas added hopefully.

Again, Janek responded immediately, pulling out a container that Thomas had noted smelt vaguely of coffee but had been too afraid to test when he had re-organised the cupboards.

They sat opposite one another in silence over breakfast; Janek evidently too grateful for the relatively convivial start to the morning to risk compromising it and Thomas too busy working through the pounding in his head and his attempts to keep Janek’s cooking down.

Clearly, with the potato cakes, Janek had a very different idea of what constituted acceptable food to recover from excessive beer to him.
‘Just leave that.’ Said Thomas as Janek went to wash the plates and pan. ‘You get off to work, yeah?’

Janek nodded quickly and immediately abandoned the task.

He paused briefly by the door, lingering as though unsure whether to speak. ‘I’ll see you later.’ He eventually said.

‘Later.’ Said Thomas, trying not to make the sentiment sound too ominous.

Janek nodded and vanished out the door.

Thomas soon regretted his offer to clean up. The blackened residue on the pan practically needed an industrial tool to shift it and there was so much grease left on the plates that Thomas had to take them to the bathroom to rinse before he would deign to put his hands in the same bowl as them.

He made a second batch of coffee in the cause of rendering himself human and treated himself to a properly warmed bath, behind a locked door, that took most of the morning.

As he rested motionless in the water Thomas stared up at the ceiling boards and contemplated his next move.

Inspiration eventually struck once he returned to the room.

He resolved to see if he could find the fishmongers that Gareth had mentioned. A few decent fillets for dinner would help rescue his stomach from the unappetising fare of the morning. And explaining the presence of the fillets to Janek would be a good way to segue back into a discussion of the events of the previous evening.

It took some time to decide which of his two suits was the less objectionable at that point in terms of wrinkles and smell, but he reasoned he would hardly outdo the fishmongers in terms of pungency.

He did, however, promise himself that laundry would be the first order of business upon his return.

Scoffing down a few crusts of the coarse bread loaf lodged by the eggs in the cupboard by way of lunch, Thomas donned his hat and coat and took himself off outside.

‘Just round the corner…’ He muttered to himself as he reached the end of the road, looking in both directions at the junction.

Perhaps he ought to have asked which corner.

Still, he had an afternoon to kill. And he wasn’t keen to return to the house to keep his own company (well, that and the laundry’s) for hours while waiting for Janek to return.

So he began walking in a randomly chosen direction and reasoned he could always try the other way later on.

The streets were bustling with the lunchtime rush, but he endeavoured to carefully read the fronts of all the shops he passed.

One made him stop in his tracks.

He recognised the olive green shutters beside the window but he couldn’t recall this particular shop ever having been open when he’d passed this way before.
A set of mahogany steps behind the glass supported a series of ornately fronted clocks, their exposed workings clicking and shining in the sun of the street. He watched them for a moment, mesmerised, before raising his gaze to read the crinkled gold lettering painted directly onto the glass that proclaimed the place as ‘Mr Cutters Clock Emporium’.

The discovery of the shop presented something of a conundrum.

On the one hand there was the need to conserve his limited resources for essentials, food and, at a stretch, clothing. But on the other he would really appreciate being able to wake up of a morning and actually read the time, without having to fumble for his pocket watch or use Janek’s fireplace as a sun-dial.

The clocks in the window, beautiful though they were, were undoubtedly beyond his means. But the part of him that cried out for a little sophistication (or at least utility) for his new living space reasoned that there might just be simpler, smaller pieces available within his price range inside the shop.

Steeling himself, Thomas pushed at the door.

A loud jingle of bells immediately sounded, setting his teeth on edge.

Any hopes of being able to browse unobtrusively were immediately dashed by the sight of a small elderly man seated behind a bench to the back of the shop.

‘Good morning sir!’ The man immediately exclaimed.

Thomas didn’t have the heart to correct him. The tiny metal pieces and half-gutted clock lying on the table that the man had been hunched over had evidently been taking his full attention as morning lapsed into afternoon. Besides, there was something amusing about a man surrounded by walls of clocks that didn’t know the time.

‘How might we assist you?’ The man said.

‘We?’ Thomas thought dryly, glancing about the otherwise unoccupied room.

‘Well I was looking for something…’

‘Cheap’ was what he wanted to say.

‘…small, for my bedside table.’ Was what he said.

‘Certainly sir.’ The man said, rising to his feet. Thomas tried not to be disconcerted by the lopsided expression on his face as the man’s right cheek remained contorted upwards to keep his mini magnifying eye-glass in place. ‘We have over here…’ He went to walk to one side of the shop before pausing, frowning with the spare side of his face, and turning in the other direction; scanning the shelves with quick movements of his face. ‘Ah…here.’ He said. ‘These are particularly appropriate.’

Thomas came to stand beside him, pleased to see several plain, wood cased clock faces ticking back at him from the shelf.

He was also pleased to note that the price labels were visible, and pleasantly reasonable.

No, it wasn’t an essential item. And he did have his pocket watch.

But…he wanted…needed, a proper clock. The room needed one, in fact.
He didn’t know whether to take it as good or bad omen that there was one in particular which reminded him of the small clock that had sat above the fireplace in his room at Downton – the one which had come to be a comforting companion over the years but which, as property of the house rather than his own, he had been compelled to leave behind when he had absconded.

‘I think it’s going to have to be this one.’ He said.

The man moved his finger questioningly along the shelf until he came to the clock Thomas had chosen.

‘Please.’ Said Thomas, when the man finally reached it.

‘Good choice sir.’

The man plucked the clock off the shelf and retreated back to his table with short, speedy steps.

Thomas followed.

‘If you’ll give me a moment sir, I’ll get this wrapped up for you…’

Thomas nodded.

The man retrieved scissors from the side of the table before tottering onwards, heading through a small door at the back of the shop, leaving Thomas alone.

Thomas looked round at the shining faces looking down at him from the shelves on all three walls and the polished backs of the larger clocks in the window.

From his dim recollection, one of those ornate clocks in the window alone would set a working man back a year’s wages.

And the man had just left them. Left him with them, out in the shop on his own, in a city where he had once felt the need to shove his wallet down his trousers to avoid theft.

It seemed a little foolish to say the least.

As he listened to the sounds of rumpling paper through the open door to the back room, Thomas’s attention strayed down to the cogs and screws laid out on the table.

The sight of them awakened a world of memories and he found himself wanting to touch even just a fingertip to one of the pieces, to make them tangibly real to him in the present.

As he stared down at them, he noticed something a little off about one of the smaller cogs.

One of the cogs he knew by sight, even without the aid of the map of pieces the man had carefully laid out around it, would be one of the first to have been removed once the clock-back came off.

‘Here we are, sir!’ The man declared, reappearing with a brown paper parcel tucked under one arm while he leaned heavily on the doorframe to remerge into the room with the other.

‘Thank you…Mr Cutter?’ Said Thomas.

‘Aye, the same.’ Said the man, taking care to set the parcel down away from the carefully arranged metal pieces on the table.

‘Mr Cutter…’ Thomas said tentatively. ‘…am I right in assuming you’re still taking that apart…’ He
nodded towards the largely empty clock casing. ‘…because you are still searching for the problem?’

‘And the sky is above…’ Said Cutter cheerfully. ‘…and the ground below. Ah, but this one is being a right bugger, if you’ll pardon me sir.’

‘I think it’s this…’ Thomas said, his finger hovering over the small cog. ‘…the tooth’s bent. That’ll be why it’s…’ He balked a little at the sudden intense attentiveness in Mr Cutter’s expression. ‘…sticking.’

For a time Cutter stared at him rather than the cog, but he eventually took up the cog in his hand and raised it up to his eye-glass.

‘Well bugger me. I’ve been at that all the morn!’ He exclaimed. ‘Thank you sir!’

It was a very obvious fault that Thomas felt he didn’t deserve any particular accolade for recognising, but he accepted the offered thanks with grace.

Cutter finally extracted his eye-glass, setting it down on the table along with the cog. ‘I wouldn’t have guessed you for someone in the trade Mr…?’

‘Barrow.’ Thomas replied. ‘And I’m not.’

He and Cutter both glanced down at the paper wrapped clock on the table between them, evidently both musing that someone ‘in the trade’ was unlikely to take it upon themselves to buy such a piece.

But then Cutter’s tiny grey-topped head snapped back up in surprise.

‘Not…not of Barrow’s of Gorton?’

Thomas winced internally, trying to keep his face neutral but sure some of his distaste must have made itself know in the twitch of his jaw line.

But Cutter’s enthusiastic expression persisted as he looked towards Thomas expectantly.

‘You could say that, I suppose.’ Thomas replied somewhat unwillingly.

‘Aaaah!’ The peal of delight rang out over the sounds of clicking mechanisms in the shop. ‘I remember Barrow’s! Went there once…’ Cutter clicked his fingers as though he had just announced a win at the fair. ‘…met the illustrious time merchant myself. He had some pieces I needed for my old Victorian gilt. Sorted me out a hard deal, I can tell you!’ He said somewhat ruefully, but his smile remained true.

‘I don’t doubt.’ Thomas said, unable to join Cutter in his enthusiasm.

‘I don’t suppose…’ Said Cutter. ‘…that I might once again be in the presence of the little black haired lad who was reading under the table?’

Truth be told, Thomas had absolutely no recollection of any of the faces that had passed into and out of ‘Barrow’s’ over the years. But he had to grudgingly concede it was possible.

‘Well bugger me!’ The man declared. ‘You haven’t half gotten tall.’

Thomas’s lips stretched into a thin imitation of a smile, thinking dryly to himself that most men must seem tall to the diminutive Cutter.

‘Tends to happen.’ Thomas said, his tone just hovering the right side of rudeness.
‘What happened to shop in the end?’ Said Cutter. ‘Last I heard the old man was living up with one of his daughters?’

‘There’s just the one daughter.’ Said Thomas automatically, not knowing what else to say in response.

He hadn’t known.

Not that he cared to.

‘And you didn’t take up the place?’ Cutter queried, his palms coming to rest flat on the table top to enable him to lean into it and take some of the weight off his legs.

‘No.’ Said Thomas. ‘I wasn’t…around…when it all happened.’ He said, technically truthfully, even though he didn’t know what ‘it’ was. ‘I was working at a country estate, out towards Ripon.’

‘I see…’ Said Cutter a little mournfully, but he perked up a moment later. ‘…Well clearly the knowledge didn’t leave you.’ He said, merrily taking up the offending cog again between his fingers.

‘Well I was doing a lot of servicing of the clocks at the estate.’ Thomas said with a shrug, eyeing the brown paper package on the table and wondering if there was any polite way he could convince the man in front of him to just hand it over, take his money, and let him get out of there in the very immediate future.

‘Really? Oh…wish my lad had your passion for the clocks.’

‘Passion’ was more than a stretch to describe Thomas’s feelings towards clocks. And he was sorely tempted to inform the man of the fact.

His feelings towards clocks were the same as those he harboured towards all things he knew he could do; glad to have the skill because of what advantages they might bring.

Nothing more.

Advantage…

…?

‘Your lad?’ Thomas queried.

‘Yes, my Chris. Useless bugger he is…and I can say that safe, like, because he’s not here. Again. Just like he wasn’t here yesterday.’

‘I wondered why the shop had always seemed closed since I moved here.’ Thomas said nonchalantly.

The man shrugged sadly. ‘He’s young. I know, I don’t look like a man who should have a young ‘un. But me and my lady were blessed late in life…Or at least we thought we were blessed at the time!’ He added, laughing cheerfully.

‘What if I could have a crack at training him?’ Said Thomas. ‘Some lads just don’t want to learn from their dads.’ He said, emulating Cutter’s laugh. ‘And perhaps you could use someone to mind this place, help you out a bit?’

‘Well I…’ Cutter said in surprise. Thomas surprised himself with how invested he suddenly became in the response. ‘…I wonder.’
‘Perhaps if you have a think about it?’ Thomas said, shrinking back a little, cursing himself for having once again put himself into the potential path of rejection – and in a bloody shop of all places.

‘You can service these? Fix these?’ Said Cutter indicating to the clocks about the shelves.

‘I’m…’ Thomas mentally totted up those he recognised. ‘…I’m not familiar with them all but I reckon I could learn.’

‘Yes, I don’t doubt.’ Said Cutter with a laugh. ‘And you think you could have a go with Chris?’

‘I’ve trained wilful lads before.’ Thomas said with a shrug, declining to mention he was largely referring to spoon placement as opposed to mechanics. ‘And perhaps…do you ever visit the houses around here to service clocks? You know, like the big Grandfather ones that are hard to move?’

‘No.’ Said Cutter, looking at Thomas in something akin to awe. ‘I can barely keep myself together to run this place.’

‘Well perhaps we might…’ Thomas said tentatively. ‘…mention that as a potential service extension to your clients when they come in?’

‘Yes.’ Said Cutter. ‘I suppose we might…’

For a moment Thomas and Cutter looked at one another in silence, both slightly stunned at the turn of events.

‘Six days a week, eight to six, forty percent commission on what you fix, extra compensation on days you sort the opening or closing of this place…’ Cutter said, pausing a moment before adding. ‘…and you’ll try to sort my blasted son out?’

‘Yes sir.’ Said Thomas, his hand shooting forwards with an abruptness that set his cheeks flaming at his over-eagerness.

‘Mr Cutter, or Ron, for goodness sake!’ Cutter said, shaking his hand.

‘So…’ Said Thomas, having difficulty speaking levelly. ‘…how much do I owe you for the…?’

‘No, no!’ Cutter exclaimed, picking up the parcel and offering it to Thomas. ‘I think I’ll be owing you a gift soon if I don’t already. Please, take it.’

‘Thank you.’ Said Thomas, wondering if he ought to protest as he took the package. ‘If you’re sure…?’

Cutter nodded his head happily.

‘Monday then?’ Cutter said to Thomas.

‘Monday.’ Thomas replied, wondering if he looked as shocked as he felt.

Seconds later he was back out on the street, a clock under his arm and job under his belt.

He decided he didn’t much feel like fish that evening.

In fact, fuck the fillets; they could wait.

Right now, he was on a mission for steak.
‘…What the *FUCK*?

Thomas’s lips curled into a smile as he nudged at the onions frying in the pan.

He knew Janek would object to the very large, very juicy, raw steaks sitting on the new chopping board by the stove. He also knew he would object to the new clock sitting ticking merrily away on the mantle above the fireplace. But most of all he knew Janek would object to…

‘What…is that *thing* doing in my home?’

‘Hmmmm…?’ Thomas said innocently, taking Janek’s appearance as a cue to add the steaks to the pan. The hissed and spat as he did so, almost immediately giving off a delicious hearty aroma as the fat began to brown.

He had, of course, taken it upon himself to find the whitest, crispest, most Janek-objectionable table cloth he could get his hands on for the occasion.

‘And…’ Thomas turned slyly to see Janek looking towards the steaks and then out of the corner of his eye catching sight of the clock. ‘…Oh my…Thomas, *what* have you done?’

‘Just a few home comforts.’ Thomas said breezily, turning his attention back to the steaks for a moment to turn them.

‘But…There is *cloth* on the table.’ Said Janek as though it were the most horrific thing one might find in such a location. ‘A *cloth*!’

‘Well I thought…’ Said Thomas, glancing over to check on the potatoes bubbling with broccoli florets before turning around to face him. ‘…that a little celebration was in order.’

Janek looked warily back at him.

‘Come on, go hang your jacket and hat, have a seat, and I’ll tell you.’ Thomas said, letting every bit of his amusement at Janek’s shell-shocked expression show on his face.

Under protest, Janek complied with the first instruction; kicking off his shoes as well in the bargain. But as he returned to the table with bare feet, in his shirt and trousers, he lingered upright, staring down at the offending fabric draped over it with intense disdain.

‘Sit you down.’ Said Thomas with a smile, speaking as though to an infant. ‘Or I’ll not say a word… And don’t you be thinking about protesting by getting a single stain on that.’

Janek grumpily took a seat, the cogs clearly whirring round in his head thinking how he might stage an objection to the table cloth while working within that particular parameter.

Thomas continued to smile at him from his position by the stove before looking away to turn the meat again, breathing deep of the rich smell as he did so.

‘Well?’ Janek demanded, undoing the top buttons of his shirt and leaning his head from side to side to ease out the day’s tension.

‘Well…’ Said Thomas merrily. ‘…I have got myself a job.’
‘What!?’

The annoyance and petulance on Janek’s face were immediately gone, to be replaced by a look of wonder that widened Thomas’s already considerable grin.

‘Mmmmm…’ Thomas said. ‘…you are officially looking at an employed man.’

‘My God…’ Janek said in shock. ‘You…really?’

Thomas nodded.

‘What as?’

‘Ah, well the clue is in this room…’

Janek glanced down at the table cloth. ‘A waiter?’ He said snarkily with a flash of his pale eyes.

‘Very funny.’ Thomas said with a toss of his head, giving the steaks one final turn.

‘Don’t make me wait!’ Said Janek with earnest eagerness. ‘What as?’

Thomas nodded to the clock on the mantelpiece. ‘Fixing those.’

Janek glanced to the clock then back to Thomas in confusion. ‘You what?’

‘I don’t think I told you this…’ Thomas said, taking up the pot with the vegetables in to strain them into the waiting bowl. ‘…but my dad was a clock maker…I used to work in his shop.’ He added, somewhat reluctantly, briefly looking darkly down into the steam from the pot.

‘You’re a tradesman?’ Said Janek in surprise, with the same reverence one might afford the announcement of a career as a doctor or a lawyer.

‘Could say that.’ Said Thomas to the potatoes.

‘You’re a tradesman?’ Janek said again as though it were simultaneously the most unbelievable yet delighting discovery in the world.

‘Like I said…’

‘…Your’re a tradesman.’ Janek repeated with an affectionate warmth.

‘Yes!’ Thomas shot back. ‘Just temporary, like.’

Janek sat back in his chair. ‘Where is my celebration kiss?’

Thomas looked back at him from the stove. His sly cheekiness of the moment before re-emerging as he made his way over to him.

He leant down as though to capture Janek’s waiting mouth, but instead travelled further south to nip at the base of his exposed neck; tugging Janek’s largely undone shirt front down from his shoulder to gain better access.

‘Ah!’ Janek half-laughed, half-grumbled as Thomas withdrew. ‘Well you are in good mood!’ He said as Thomas retreated back to the stove.

‘Oh yes!’ Thomas said, retrieving plates from the cupboard and piling them high with the boiled
vegetables before adding the fried onions. He laid the steaks carefully by their side and drizzled over the remaining juice from the pan.

It wasn’t until he set the plates down on the table that he realised he’d forgotten cutlery.

He quickly turned about to remedy this inconceivable oversight.

‘You sort that shirt out…’ He said over his shoulder as he scrambled for knives and forks. ‘…not the done thing to be eating looking so dishevelled.’ He said as he returned to the table, nodding at Janek’s exposed shoulder.

‘Your fault.’ Said Janek with a raised eyebrow as Thomas sat down. ‘Besides…’ He leaned forwards to rest his elbows on the table, exposing a deep view down the front of his shirt as the oversized garment billowed downwards. ‘…I’m finding this quite comfortable…You wouldn’t wish your guest to be uncomfortable now, would you?’

‘No.’ Said Thomas, realising he had also forgotten the wine and the glasses (both new) and marvelling at his sudden inability to manage a table setting.

He quickly jumped up to get them.

Janek’s sly expression didn’t falter at the sight of the additional extravagance.

Thomas knew him well enough to know that this was most definitely a sign that Janek had some as of yet unknown trump card hidden up his sleeve.

‘It’s just not right proper.’ He said as he sat down, still referring to Janek’s exposed skin.

‘It’s not distracting you is it?’ Said Janek sweetly as he scraped his chair across the floor to pull it in tight to the table.

‘No!’ Said Thomas contrarily, largely out of reflex to Janek’s smugness. The response would have carried more weight had he managed to avoid glancing down at the nipple barely exposed by the displaced fabric in the process. ‘By all means you be comfortable.’ He continued, raising his glass for Janek to clink.

Janek returned the cheers and placed his glass back down on the table with a smile that spoke of mischief yet to come.

‘Oh good…’ Said Janek.

Both his hands disappeared below the table.

Thomas blinked in surprise, wine glass halfway back to the table from his lips, hearing the rustling of fabric and watching Janek briefly bend down low over the table.

‘What are you doing?’ He said.

‘Being comfortable.’ Came the bright reply. ‘Be a dear and toss these over to the counter for me, will you?’

Thomas held his hand out automatically and moments later found himself holding Janek’s trousers, bundled in his hand, while their owner began to attack the steak with gusto.

‘I…’ Thomas said, staring at the fabric in his hands.
‘Hmmm?’ Said Janek innocently through a mouthful of food.

‘I…um…’ Thomas was quite unable to get it together to either comply with Janek’s wish for the discard of the trousers or to complete the sentence.

‘What?’ Said Janek, licking up a little of the juice of the steak that threatened to dribble from the corner of his mouth.

‘Nothing.’ Said Thomas quickly. He leant to toss the trousers vaguely in the direction of the furniture lining the underside of the windows, unable to stop his head inclining downwards a little as he did so in order to check on the under-table status of their owner.

Of course, because of the table cloth, the particularly large and crisp table cloth, he could see nothing.

‘Is it…nice?’ Thomas said unsteadily, taking up his knife and fork and attempting to cut his steak with fingers that refused to obey.

‘Very…’ Janek said through mouthfuls, punctuated with enthusiastic gulps of wine. ‘…very nice… Thomas are you quite alright?’

‘Yes.’ Thomas replied quickly, abandoning his attempts to cut the steak to shove a too-hot potato into his mouth. His face contorted as he did so and he was forced to quickly gulp down some wine to soothe the burn on his tongue.

‘You seem distracted Thomas.’ Said Janek breezily.

Thomas watched the side of one of Janek’s thighs come into view from below the folds of the table cloth as the latter spread his legs to enable him to bend down lower over the plate.

The sight incited something strange, delightful, yet deeply unsatisfied to arise between his own thighs.

He decided in that moment that he hated table cloths. Hated the blasted things.

Almost as much as he hated the cheeky nonchalant devil seated opposite him.

‘…No.’ Said Thomas eventually.

‘Good.’ Said Janek with a smile, continuing to demolish his food.

In the time it took Janek to clear his plate Thomas managed perhaps two or three mouthfuls, and each and every one of them was a heartfelt struggle through numbed fingers.

His plate empty, Janek drained the west of his wine and grinned across the table at Thomas.

Thomas looked darkly back at him, knife and fork still poised over his own only partially eaten food.

‘Oh no, don’t get up…’ Janek said, rising abruptly from his seat and taking up his empty plate and glass. ‘I’ll sort the cleaning.’

He walked slowly past Thomas, muscled thighs visible below the billowing of his shirt, along with a few fleeting glimpses at what nestled underneath the remaining fastened buttons.

Thomas watched, absolutely unable to not.
'Now then…' Said Janek, depositing his accoutrements into the bowl of water.

Thomas continued to watch, pulse hammering at his throat.

‘Hmmmhhmm…’ Janek hummed to himself, making a show of daintily pulling up his shirt sleeves in preparation for doing the dishes.

It was at the point when Janek flipped up the back of his shirt in the same manner that Thomas’s resolve cracked.

He rose from his seat, possibly knocking it over in the bargain, he wasn’t sure, and grabbed the infuriating man over by the basin by his waist.

By some as of yet untapped feat of strength he had him off his feet and across the room to the bed.

‘Off.’ Thomas demanded, working his own buttons furiously with fingers that knew they had better damn well comply, or else.

On his knees on the bed, Janek eagerly obeyed, whipping his shirt off above his head.

Thomas got himself stripped below the waist in a matter of seconds, regretting his clothed top half as he climbed onto the bed, directing Janek forwards onto his hands with a firm push to the back of the neck, but at the same time knowing with absolute certainty that he must be inside the man below him before the clock’s hand made another full journey about the face or there would be hell to pay.

On his hands and knees, Janek fiercely pushed back against the encroaching fingers and Thomas allowed the process to become a messy mix of insistent probing while rubbing his dart-straight self against anything he could reach of the exposed body until the job was done.

In the haze that followed his erection joined his fingers almost by accident in the waiting dock and seated itself there with abandon.

The development brought loud and throaty moans from the two of them and it was hard to say which was more hungry in the ensuing moments in the cause of bringing about the desired friction.

Janek cried out and ricocheted, back and back again, bouncing frantically, meeting Thomas’s body with decisive impact.

Thomas shouted in triumph; lost in all the delicious things the day had brought, and was still bringing, while Janek’s body, now propped by hands on the bedframe, challenged with strength and fervour his every thrust.

Thomas was consumed.

Praise be to the thick walls, praise be to the creature below him, praise be to glorious good fortune, and, most importantly, praise be to the solid implement that enabled him to engage in this furious, hot, exertion of pure…

‘Uh!’

Janek was pushed fully back as his fleeting resolve abandoned and Thomas released long and hard inside of him.

Both were caught in chocked breaths through Thomas’s deliverance.

Both moaned with the unwinding of the accumulated heat as the moment was spent.
‘Alright…’ Janek said, barely able to muster something resembling normal speech as he reached round with one of his hands to pat at Thomas’s backside. ‘…you can go finish your food now.’

With a breathless laugh Thomas collapsed into the warmth of Janek’s shoulders.

‘Told you you could lift me.’ Murmured Janek into the pillow.
Chapter 46

When Thomas woke up the next morning Janek was still soundly asleep.

Thomas watched him for a while, searching his face for signs that consciousness would come soon.

Janek’s firmly closed eyes, tensed chin and pursed lips put Thomas in mind of a stubborn infant and it was clear Janek was not intending to come round any time in the near future.

Gingerly Thomas eased himself off the bed. By happy chance Janek’s arm had ended up below rather than above him, which meant minimal disturbance to the sleeping man as he moved. Once his feet connected with the floor Thomas stood awkwardly, staring at the windows, scratching at his head, wondering what to do with himself.

Yes, clothes. That would kill a few minutes.

It ended up taking far longer than anticipated; just about everything Thomas owned was filthy (or had been worn so many times that Thomas’s mind was convinced it had to be filthy) and he stood for some time in the nude pondering what to put on.

In the end he settled for his pyjamas. They were relatively clean. And had the added advantage of being the one item of clothing he didn’t actually have a use for. That brought a small smile to Thomas’s face despite his disgust at standing about, in a room in need of dusting, in the nude.

All things considered, the pyjamas made perfect sense.

And once Janek was conscious, Thomas intended to pressgang the man into assisting him in dragging every item of clothing in the room to the bathroom for a damn good wash.

But in the mean-time?

Thomas looked at the clock. It was too late for breakfast and too early for brunch, which they would be eating at the Abbey in precisely forty five minutes; after they got back from church and finished sending up the tea trays for the Crawleys. That was unless something had changed. Was it possible they had varied the routine since he’d left? But it had only been a matter of…

Thomas forced his mind off that oddly panic-inducing topic.

No. No food yet.

He wasn’t hungry anyway.

Still, thinking of the Abbey had reminded him of a task he had yet to attend to. And it was one Janek would be no good helping him with anyway.

Thomas scrabbled about in the drawer that contained his miscellaneous effects and drew out a couple of pens and paper.

The moment he sat himself down he wanted a drink. Coffee, preferably, now that he had securely identified the container in which it was kept.

But that meant fire. Or more specifically the smell of fire, not to mention coffee, and now that Thomas had made up his mind to write he was rather hoping Janek’s slumbers might continue.
So he stayed where he was.

[Dear Phyllis.]

The effort of writing those two words had him lolling back in his chair, strict upright public posture all but forgotten, craving coffee again.

[I am writing as promised.]

He eventually added underneath; terse and to the point.

[I am employed in the city. I am keeping house in a permanent residence…] He felt disinclined to give details. He wasn’t sure if it was because of a lingering sense of dissatisfaction with his current situation or a stern wish to detach himself from all things Downton. Still, he completed the sentence with a feeling of triumph.

[…] with an acquaintance.]

He could imagine perhaps a little smile on Baxter’s face as she read it.

[If Lord Grantham is inclined to provide a reference, I would like to hear.] Didn’t hurt to ask, did it?

[Don’t tell anyone I have written…]

Thomas grimaced.

[…] except Jim James. He might want to write.] To have a go at me for taking off without a goodbye, Thomas added in his head.

Did he want anyone else to have the opportunity to write?

He’d be lying if he said some humorous or kindly words from Mrs Patmore or Mrs Hughes would go amiss, not that either had been particularly forthcoming from the latter as he had grown older, but to add anyone else to the equation introduced too many possibilities for Carson, or worse, Lord Grantham, to get hold of the address.

He sat staring at the remaining white space for some time. He thought about telling Baxter about his job; gave the matter oddly serious consideration in fact. It would be nice to tell someone. Someone outside the room.

His breaths fell into rhythm with Janek’s sleepy breathing from across the room.

No, he thought to himself simply. She would either gush over it or pity him for it, and from a Downtonian he would accept neither.

But the thought of the clock workshop and his brief conversation with Mr Cutter had him adding one final sentence before writing down the house number and name of the street at the foot of the letter.

[If you have my sister’s address please send it me.] A fast and relentless knocking at the door broke his concentration.
An ungodly grunting noise sounded from under the bed covers.

Thomas looked from Janek, humped under the sheets, then to the door, unsure of what to do.

The knocking continued unabated.

Janek’s top half appeared, hair looped above his head in all directions.

Janek shouted something incomprehensible, and no doubt obscene, to the door.

The person the other side of it took Janek’s response as their cue to enter.

Thomas’s knees slammed against the wood of the table as they made an involuntary curl up to his stomach, despite everything below the ribcage being hidden below the aforementioned table. His sensibilities panicked at his being attired only in pyjamas and Janek still wearing nothing at all.

To his despair it was a woman who entered, not a man.

It took him a few moments to recognise Mrs Porter. That went some way to relieving his panic. And she was swathed in so many embroidered scarves, hanging about her shoulders and neck, that Thomas couldn’t be completely sure that the lady herself wasn’t also in her nightclothes.

‘Who?’ Said Janek, his face scrunched up against the daylight.

‘Mr Timmins.’ Mrs Porter replied.

Janek nodded, face still contorted, and dragged himself up and out of the bed.

Thomas blanched at the sudden, complete, view of Janek.

Mrs Porter, on her part, gave a weary roll of her eyes at the sudden display of skin and sank gracefully into the seat opposite Thomas.

Their eyes met; avoiding looking at Janek.

‘Might I?’ She said, motioning to the half-empty cigarette packet sat near the table edge as though nothing untoward were happening at all.

Thomas saw Janek, thankfully now wearing trousers, stride past Mrs Porters back and out into the corridor.

‘Um…Yes, of course.’ Thomas said in bewilderment.

‘Much obliged.’ Mrs Porter said neatly, waiting until Thomas took the hint to click the lighter into flame before leaning forwards to light her cigarette. ‘My word, you've done a job. I can see the floor!’

Thomas practically jumped out of his seat at the sudden sound of a banging door and a throaty shout out in the corridor.

‘Hush dear.’ Said Mrs Porter, motioning him to sit back down.

‘But…’

There was a string of obscenities, an incoherent yell, and then a series of dull thuds.
‘Two months.’ Said Mrs Porter by way of explanation.

‘Mrs Porter I really think I should…’

The sounds of the thuds grew softer, sounding further and further away.

‘Two months.’ Mrs Porter repeated, flicking ash onto the floor. ‘And not a penny of rent.’

Thomas began to reply but an echoing shout from outside in the street had him rushing over to the windows.

Janek stood by the front of the house. Sprawled in front of him, Thomas presumed, was Mr Timmins. It wasn’t the same man he’d had the misfortune to meet in the bathroom shortly after he arrived; Thomas wasn’t sure if he should be glad or disappointed by that fact.

As he watched, Mr Timmins went to pull himself up.

A swift kick from Janek put him back down again.

Thomas saw Janek move out of sight. He heard the slam of the front door as Janek re-entered the house.

‘He’s a good boy that Janek.’ Said Mrs Porter from her position by the table, smiling over at Thomas.

Thomas wasn’t quite sure how to respond.

He heard the sound of Janek’s footsteps on the stairs.

‘I’ve been meaning to ask actually…’ Said Thomas quickly, seizing upon the opportunity that presented itself. ‘…how much is the rent?’

‘What?’ Said Mrs Porter. ‘You mean he’s…’ She indicated behind her with a jerk of a bony, bejewelled thumb. ‘…been paying your way? All of it?’

‘You don’t need to make it sound quite so bad.’ Thomas said, feeling his face redden as he returned to his seat.

‘No love. I don’t mean it a black mark on your part. It’s just…’ She leaned in to whisper as Janek came back into the room. ‘…he doesn’t pay for anyone!’

Thomas’s mind instantly went to the unlabelled ‘money for mother’ tin hiding somewhere in the cabinet, but he held his tongue.

‘You going to let him back in?’ Said Janek as he stomped back into the room, dipping to give Mrs Porter a quick kiss on the cheek. He winked at Thomas from behind her to indicate he might perhaps like to give him one also.

Mrs Porter considered his question for a moment.

‘In a week.’ She said. ‘If he comes back. He can have his room back in a week. But only if he pays his way.’

‘Right you are.’ Janek scraped one of the trunks over from the wall to make a third seat at the table and helped himself to one of Thomas’s cigarettes.
‘So when you going to let this one pay his way?’ Said Mrs Porter, nodding to Thomas with a cheeky twinkle in her eye.

‘I…’ Janek began before turning a look of grump in Thomas’s direction.

Thomas shrugged, hoping to convey in his nonchalant expression that Mrs Porter had somehow extracted the information from him by force or guile.

‘…I suppose now.’ Janek said through gritted teeth. ‘And then some.’ He added, giving Thomas a look whose significance Thomas dearly hoped was lost on Mrs Porter.

Mrs Porter chuckled.

‘I’d best leave you to your day’s plans…’ She said, using Janek’s shoulder to lever herself to her feet; having a good deal more trouble getting out of the seat than she had had setting herself into it.

‘Mmmm …Day of nothing. Day of rest.’ Said Janek languidly, rotating his neck about his shoulders to stretch out the Mr Timmins-induced tension.

‘Washing day.’ Thomas corrected with a half-smile.

‘Oh you’re welcome to use my lines.’ Said Mrs Porter on her way to the door. ‘You just go through two doors out to the back of the house downstairs and you’ll see the washing lines in the yard.’

‘How charming. Clothes pre-emptively stinking of the city.’ Said Thomas before he could help himself.

The snark earned him a kick under the table from Janek. But Mrs Porter took it well in her stride.

‘Isn’t he just the perfect la-di-da?’ She said to Janek.

Janek nodded ruefully.

Thomas returned the kick.

‘Fine, fine…’ Mrs Porter continued. ‘You hang whatever you want in here, but you get damp growing on my walls…’ She let the threat hang in the air.

‘I have noticed the odd discolouring.’ Thomas said, casting his gaze about the room. ‘Actually I was meaning to ask how you’d feel about us painting the…’

‘No!’ Janek cut in. He jutted out his chin and fixed Thomas with a glare. ‘No.’

‘It would be rather nice to see the room made up.’ Said Mrs Porter, emulating Thomas in glancing up at the ceiling and around the faded walls.

‘Perhaps a cream or olive colour?’ Thomas began.

‘I’ve always seen the place as more of a dark green…’

‘NO!’ Janek felt compelled to passionately interject.

‘How do you propose to stop me?’ Thomas said with a grin, directing his attention back to Janek. ‘I’d wager I’ll get in earlier than you most evenings…’
‘You want to challenge me with paint?’ Said Janek, his fingers pointedly running over the bunched up folds of the tablecloth. ‘After this?’ He leaned across the table towards Thomas.

‘What could you possible do with paint on walls?’

‘Depends if it’s still wet…’

‘I’ll be off then!’ Mrs Porter suddenly declared from the doorway.

Janek and Thomas drew back from each other.

‘Thank you, Mrs Porter.’ Said Thomas. ‘For the offer of the lines.’ The statement earned him an approving smile from Janek. ‘I won’t be taking you up on it…’ Thomas quickly added. ‘…but thank you.’

‘Anytime dear.’ Said Mrs Porter.
Chapter 47

Their clothes were slopped together in one of the bathtubs. Thomas had insisted on splashing cold water over Janek’s offerings before consenting to mix them in with his own, just as he had insisted they take the step of warming up water on the copper to go into the bath to make sure the washing powder did the proper business.

He had also insisted on Janek squeezing into one of the miscellaneous pairs of trousers left behind from the rag pile, so that they could wash everything, despite Janek’s protestations that the action was unnecessary given they would be operating in the privacy (give or take a half a dozen men – less Mr Timmins) of the house.

Janek was bare chested, upper arms-deep in the soapy water. Thomas didn’t mind that so much. He would have liked to be sans pyjama shirt himself. But the view of Janek’s slightly tanned upper torso, without so much as a pinch of independently moving softness, had him unwilling to appear similarly shirtless as he laboured opposite. The increasingly easy familiarity of the past week had Thomas giving barely a second thought to appearing in a state of undress while upright (or horizontal) but the idea of bending at the slightly doughy waist and letting his inferior arm muscles display their full glory while working was inadmissible.

Several times Janek had suggested he dispense with the top, especially after rolling up the sleeves as far as they would go proved insufficient to keep it dry. But Thomas persevered; replying with as much good humour as he could muster under the circumstances that he intended to keep it on.

He felt flustered as they scrubbed. Increasingly so the more pained his arms became and the more his left hand began to throb, while the brisk movements of Janek’s arms and hands continued in a tight rhythm without so much as a hint of heavy breathing. He had had the luxury of having the bathroom, and day, to himself during the previous wash and found himself increasingly wishing he had the same in the present moment.

Janek’s willingness to go along with the deep clean of their clothing soon manifested itself as an amusement at the undertaking rather than any earnest wish to engage in it. The attitude rapidly wore thin on Thomas, who had never once in his life imagined himself frantically ratcheting expensive clothing (and some not so expensive) around in a bathtub while wearing his pyjamas.

Janek took several stabs at conversation. He asked Thomas for more information about his upcoming job.

‘Won’t really know till I start will I?’

He began a story about Miss Galet and the source of the fine rabbit for her pies (Thomas vaguely registered something about poaching). ‘Her pies are alright.’

Janek then took a stab at rousing Thomas’s interest about a large passenger steam ship coming in to the docks in the coming week.

‘I went with his Lordship to America once.’ Came the dull reply, without Thomas looking up from the soupy mixture of clothes and murky water.

‘Right.’ Janek eventually conceded defeat. He did however take a short break from scrubbing to flick some water in the direction of the pink-faced man opposite.
Thomas blinked back against the unexpected wetness, most of which caught the tendrils of hair hanging down to his eyes over his damp forehead. He didn’t return the splash.

Reaching down, Thomas pulled the plug and let the water drain.

‘Finally!’ Janek declared, immediately beginning to bunch the wet clothes and bring them up to his chest.

‘No. Now we rinse.’ Thomas said, reaching across the bath to tug the clothes back down again.

‘But…’

‘Wash then rinse.’ Thomas said flatly, replacing the plug and turning the tap to begin to refill the bath with cold water. ‘Get the rest of the hot water, will you?’

Janek complied, filling a bucket from the copper and bringing it back to the bath, one arm taunt as he held it aloft at his side.

‘This is ridiculous.’ Said Janek with a laugh.

Thomas’s mood got the better of him, and wound up echoing Janek’s sentiments; albeit with a very different meaning.

‘I didn’t think it was possible to feel this ridiculous.’ He said to the bath tub, referring to a myriad of things all at once; his shoulders dropping, his hands gripping heavily at the rim of the tub.

The words came out with a lot more bite, and feeling, than Thomas had anticipated.

Even a person without Janek’s skills of perception would have read something dark, pained, far reaching, and perhaps even a tad accusatory, in the statement.

Silence was the response as Janek tilted the bucket to add the heated water to that slowly swirling in from the tap. The water entered the tub far more tentatively than Janek dumped the previous buckets of water in when they had first started.

Thomas was glad of the silence, and the unspoken acknowledgement, though at the same time feeling a touch remorseful as they resumed their agitation of the clothing to remove the lingering soap.
‘I’m going to have a bath.’ Thomas said, removing his hands from the water to signal that they were done.

‘Alright.’ Said Janek, looking up, briefly meeting Thomas’s gaze with a look of openness that had Thomas’s chest clenching a little at his earlier ill-humour. ‘So I will go and hang these…’ Said Janek, beginning to extract the clothes.

‘Yes.’ Said Thomas absently, moving around the tub to take up the bucket. He set it down in the empty tub beside them and began to fill the bucket with water.

‘What are you doing?’ Said Janek with a frown.

‘More water to heat.’

‘But…’ Janek’s hand dove into the water of the other tub as he grabbed up a handful of cloth. ‘…this is still warm.’

And just like that, Thomas’s mood returned.

‘Well I’m hardly going to get into that shit am I?’ He barked.

Janek made a show of rolling his eyes and plucking out the plug with more gusto than necessary.

Arms full of sopping clothes, trailing a line of water behind him, Janek stomped out; leaving Thomas alone with his rapidly filling bucket.

Of course, Janek really should have wrung the clothes out properly first.

Sighing the sigh of the eternally damned, Thomas lugged the water over to the heater and then returned for another half a bucket’s worth.

While he waited for the fire to do its work below the copper he eased himself down to sit by the wall. He looked up at the cracks in the ceiling, wilfully forcing his whole attention on them to avoid other deliberations.

In his mind’s eye he could see Janek flinging the clothes over the lines in their room. He gave an involuntary shudder at the realisation that his shirts were now most likely folded double, to crease, over the thin rope. There was little to no chance that Janek would have the forethought, or knowledge, to find the hangers Thomas had stuffed into his suitcase and use them to hang the shirts correctly. Or anything else for that matter.

It was a mark of the bleakness of his mood that he couldn’t broke the idea of getting up and going to see that Janek attended to the task properly.

After what seemed like an age the water began to steam and Thomas forced himself onto weary feet to refill the majority of the bath with cold water.

He added the hot water, filling the bath well over half-way, and was happy to note the temperature was still close to scalding when he tested it.

He was half-way through the buttons on his pyjama top before he realised that the door to the bathroom still stood partially open, and that he hadn’t brought his soap with him.
The soap he decided to give up; reasoning that the heat of the water would go some way to soothing him on its own. But the door needed attending to.

He made it part of the way over to it before the familiar figure of Janek appeared, clutching a soap in one hand and a pouch of tobacco in the other.

Janek offered the soap to Thomas with only the tiniest hint of cheek in his expression.

Thomas walked forwards to take it, raising his other hand ready to push the door closed when Janek made his way back across the hallway.

But Janek didn’t leave.

Instead he stepped neatly into the room and latched the door behind him.

‘You going to run yourself a bath too?’ Said Thomas. ‘Or…’ His nose wrinkled at the thought. ‘…you want to get in mine when I’m done?’

‘No.’ Janek said simply, moving past him. ‘I don’t like sitting in water.’

Thomas watched as Janek put his back to the wall beside the tub and slid down into a sitting position, rustling open the pouch of tobacco to begin rolling himself a cigarette.

‘Right.’ Said Thomas slowly, his thumb playing over the bar of soap in his hand.

He considered protesting that he wanted to be alone. Had Janek asked his permission to join him in the room he may well have done. But Janek was here now. And the wish to be alone wasn’t completely true. Mostly, but not completely. Especially not while twinges of guilt continued to play across his mind.

Thomas moved to the opposite side of the bath, wedged the soap behind the tap, and continued to undo his buttons.

Janek wasn’t exactly watching him, in fact the majority of his attention was on licking the side of the paper he had rolled tobacco into. But he wasn’t exactly avoiding looking at Thomas either.

Thomas maintained the pretext of the grump while he undressed, but it was largely for show. And Janek’s subtle smile showed he knew it.

Thomas eased himself into the water with as much dignity as he could muster and stretched his arms out either side of him around the rim of the tub. The water covered his chest as he reclined, and he was glad he had filled the bath up no further lest it overflow. That wouldn’t have done his ego much good.

Letting out a moan, temporarily forgetting he was not alone, Thomas leaned his head back against the porcelain by the tap.

He smelled smoke and glanced over to see Janek had lit his cigarette and was now lazily inhaling, one leg bent up to rest both arms upon as he leant his head against the wall.

Thomas returned his head to its former position and closed his eyes, breathing deeply of the warm, damp air.

It could have been one minute, it could have been ten, before Janek spoke.

‘Why do you feel ridiculous Thomas?’
Thomas opened his eyes to stare over the water that weighted down on his legs.

‘It’s nothing.’ He said.

‘Ah, ah!’ Janek tutted. ‘There is something, do not play.’

‘It’s a lot of things.’ Thomas clarified. ‘But it’s nothing I can explain.’

‘Think.’ Said Janek simply, blowing smoke to the ceiling. ‘I can wait.’

‘It’s nothing you would understand.’ Thomas replied, still staring towards his feet, speaking sadly rather than scathingly.

Out the corner of his eye he saw Janek move up to a crouching position.

He turned to see Janek crush his cigarette against the floor.

‘Janek I...’ Thomas said wearily.

Janek moved, half-crouching, half-crawling, to the side of the tub. He sat, facing towards Thomas, and raised his own arm to rest on the rim, his fingers coming to settle a few inches from Thomas’s hand.

‘Doesn’t mean you can’t say, does it?’ Said Janek, leaning his cheek against his forearm.

Thomas sighed in defeat. He closed his eyes briefly, his head feeling heavier against the back of the tub.

‘I miss things.’ He began, his eyes searching the empty air above his head for an answer. ‘I miss… feeling like…’

...Mr Barrow, his mind provided, knowing full well that the implications of all that form of address entailed would be lost on the earnest-eyed man leaning against the tub. But no, that wasn’t quite right. His feeling of loss went back further; to early days when pristinely turned out livery, wit, and determination were the unquestionable tools to a life far above anything his family could have ever offered. Before a sense of settling and finality had fallen over him like a shadow.

‘...Thomas.’ He said. ‘I miss feeling like Thomas.’

‘He is here, isn’t he?’ Said Janek gently, regarding him with a look that said perhaps he comprehended more than Thomas expected.

Thomas shook his head, temporarily unable to speak least he loose himself.

‘I miss…’ He began again, forced to sniff despite the indignity. ‘...having to care...really care…’ He emphasised. ‘...about things like proper…’ The memory of clothes in the bathtub and him labouring above them in rumbled nightwear with his hair askew loomed large in his mind. ‘...dress. Clothes. I miss having to care that other people care that things are pressed right, or that you have the right buttons, or that you have to be dressed right for your meals or that…’ He exhaled slowly. ‘That you have to change for different times of day. That your hair has to be just so…’ He momentarily raised his hands either side of his head, emphasising the importance of perfect styling with a twitch of his splayed fingers. ‘Because…’ He returned his arms to the rim of the tub, dimly registering that he had reached his right hand a little close to Janek’s. ‘...when people care about those things, they care about other things. And those things are special. They’re privileged. They’re...’
Every fibre of his being was grateful to Janek for not chiming in with ‘exclusionist’, ‘elitist’ and other such sentiments. Because he felt those sentiments also, and yet at the same time he pined for them. Pined for the place among them that he’d thought, one day, he would have.

He gave off speaking. He shifted about a little in the tub, giving another sniff, and settled himself back into his reclining position. He listened to the soft lapping of the water around him. His cheeks felt hot, and not because of the water. And again that word came into his mind. Ridiculous.

Janek shifted his position also, coming to sit up straighter. He let his hand drop from the side of the tub to the water. His open palm made small passes across the water’s surface as he spoke, carefully.

“You are right. I don’t understand.” He said. “I don’t see why…” Here Janek paused, evidently thinking better of whatever it was he had intended to say.

Why anyone would want that, Thomas’s mind finished for him.

“I think perhaps…” Janek tried again, tentatively, watching the movement of his hand across the water. “…it is a silly dream to think to be privileged, to be part of that world.”

The fact that Janek was willing to indulge him in the present conversation at all came as something of a surprise to Thomas. Even more so that the man was, temporarily at least, putting aside his feelings about all the deplorable things ‘that world’ represented to instead try to bring Thomas around to the futility of trying to be part of it; given what he was. And that was, by all logic, a highly realistic sentiment to vocalise; even had the person vocalising it not been quite such an anti-privilege firebrand.

Janek’s indulgence on his account actually managed to bring something resembling a smile to Thomas’s face. In fact it did more. It brought him back to feeling something like human again.

And with that came the desire to tease and to triumph.

“You know…” Thomas said, his smile broadening into something strong and cheeky despite his blotched cheeks. “…I could have spent my life with a Duke.”

“A Duke?” Janek repeated, taking his cue from Thomas and dispensing with his solemn expression. “A Duke is an important man, no?” He brought his hand back up to grasp the side of the bath, leaving his elbow dangling in the water, pulling himself up to lean closer to Thomas, listening intently.

“Very.” Thomas said theatrically. “One of the most important men in England, save the King.”

“And how is this possible?” Said Janek, grinning at him. “You served this Duke, perhaps?”

Thomas sat up to whisper. “I’d say he served me.”

“No!” Janek gasped.

Thomas belatedly considered that perhaps present company was not the most appropriate audience for specific tales of past debauchery, but Janek’s expression was delighted rather than horrified.

“Oh yes…” Said Thomas. “Many times.”

“How is this possible?” Said Janek, mouth agape.

Thomas shrugged and smiled a wicked smile.
‘Because I wanted him to.’ He said. ‘And I had him serve me well. We partnered a whole summer and then some.’

Janek continued to stare, open mouthed.

Thomas congratulated himself on having rendered Janek temporarily speechless. No surprise perhaps that Janek delighted in a story of inversion of the appropriate relationship between classes. Though perhaps a happy wonder at evidence of a long-standing relationship of an entirely different ‘forbidden’ variety also played into it a little.

‘So you see…’ Thomas continued. ‘…I might have still been in my uniform…mostly…” He added with a sly smile. ‘…but I was up there with the best of them. Above them, in fact.’ He concluded dryly. ‘And there was good times to be had. He had the best foods brought to his room, best silk on the bed…had champagne in his box at the Opera House while I was meant to be minding his Lordship.’ Thomas chuckled. ‘I was taken care of better than any of the girls they shoved his way…better than his wife most likely, whoever she ended up being.’ Thomas’s bravado dropped somewhat at that last part.

‘He left you to be married?’ Janek said, his own sense of wonder palpably evaporating also.

Thomas opened his mouth to answer, but it hung open a while as he considered his response.

‘Yes’ was an answer. But was not perhaps the truthful one. A wife had been part of their plan after all, rather than an impediment to it. A mutual distrust might perhaps be closer, fostered by an extreme miss-match in power and class. The power imbalance, in real terms, being an insurmountable obstacle. Perhaps. And then there was the other thing. But Thomas was loath to voice such a possibility to Janek; a man who had climbed up his own class rung to tug at Thomas's heels to be close to him, without fear, hesitation or guile.

Besides, Thomas had always wanted to believe, as he believed was also a newfound hope for the man by the side of his bathtub, that the practical problems of life could be overcome for their particular situation if there was sufficient inducement.

‘We didn’t care for each other enough.’ Said Thomas, briefly raising his shoulders in a small shrug against the head of the bath. ‘In the end, it wasn’t…love.’

Still caught up in the tale, free from Thomas’s dark memories of the matter, Janek’s face broke into a small smile. His cheek still rested against the side of the tub, his arm was still hooked over its rim. And he was looking to Thomas with a silent something.

‘For him, I imagine it might have been.’

Thomas’s lips parted of their own accord.

He covered the infraction by coughing, raising himself into a sitting position and splashing water on his face.

He then grabbed up the soap and began lathering it between his hands.

Simultaneously Janek blinked, as though rousing from a stupor, extracted himself from the side of the bath and busied himself scratching a sudden itch to the back of the head.

‘I…’ Thomas said, searching for something to say before settling upon a sudden, unforeseen, issue. ‘I didn’t bring my towel in here.’
‘Oh you didn’t, did you?’ Said Janek, rising to his feet, still scratching at his head. He didn’t sound quite like himself but when he spoke again it was with the usual bite of cheekiness. ‘Well I’d say you are in a pickle then, hmmm?’ He shot Thomas a grin and made for the door.

‘Please!’ Thomas called after him.

Thomas wasn’t entirely sure Janek would return with his towel, but he was intensely grateful when he did.
Janek left Thomas alone to attend to his preliminary towelling off (after a cursory soap lather and rinse) in the bathroom, but he was waiting for him the moment he stepped back into their room.

‘Oh come on I’ve only just…’ Thomas began to complain, only half joking, as Janek pushed the door shut with one hand and directed Thomas’s bare back against the wall beside it with the other.

‘Janek…’ Thomas tried again as the man in question closed in.

Janek answered with a kiss. Thomas tolerated it, the air from his nose sighing against Janek’s cheek as he let his lips play over Janek’s; neither wholly rejecting or engaging with him. There was a time and a place. This wasn’t it. The bath had proven oddly exhausting (though it could have been the hour or so of scrubbing clothes beforehand) and Thomas’s mind was on the mess of creased shirts and jackets that he had no doubt would be in need of his attention. Also, he was clean.

It was only the second, gloriously hot bath he had been able to take since he’d arrived, and he was in no hurry to lose the rare feeling of total cleanliness. He liked being clean. It gave the illusion of personal pride and control.

But here was a handsome, slicked, still half-naked man in too-tight trousers trying to get himself all over him.

Thomas’s brain did momentarily consider the possibility that his priorities had gotten a little skewed.

But…Clean. He felt clean. Or at least he had.

And much as he eagerly darted his tongue out to lick at the errant Janek-tasting saliva that had escaped from the bow of his lips, he was counting the seconds until he could politely extract himself and savour that feeling of pristine personal hygiene for a few hours longer. And attend to the pressing matter, no pun intended, of his shirts.

Lips still moving in tandem with Janek’s, Thomas glanced sideways out of the corner of his eye towards the washing lines strung up about the room. The muscles in his chest pre-emptively clenched in anticipation of the discomfort he would feel at seeing his shirts draped improperly over the lines. Janek’s fingers twitched a little at his chest in answer, evidently assuming the work of his lips had finally drawn more of a reaction from Thomas – or trying harder to gain the latter’s attention.

Janek was finally forced to abandon his efforts when the movement of Thomas’s lips stopped entirely.

‘What?’ Said Janek, a little gruffly.

But Thomas’s attention was elsewhere. His gaze had settled on the chairs around the table, the backs of which Janek had ‘dressed’ in Thomas’s shirts to keep them from creasing.

No Janek hadn’t used the hangers, no the shirts weren’t likely to dry properly in that position and yes there was most likely a thin film of dust on the chairs that he would need to brush from the inside of the shirts but still…

‘Thomas…?’

Thomas turned back to Janek. One side of his lips curled upwards in a tiny smile. This ghost of a
smile was not enough to wipe the concerned (and slightly peeved) look off of Janek’s face but Thomas soon fixed that with a soft grip to the chin that brought Janek’s lips back to his.

Janek made him work for it, but soon the kiss broke out from the realm of lazy exploration and entered the territory of messy hunger.

And just as Thomas was about ready to lose himself in it, Janek broke away.

Thomas’s head tried to follow his. A pathetic whining noise 

may have emitted itself from the back of his throat in the bargain. But Janek evaded him.

Janek’s mouth crushed against the firmness between Thomas’s throat and chest then travelled lower.

‘Fucking filthy…’ Thomas muttered to himself, though his words were more designed to reproach Janek for depriving his swollen lips of the kiss; rather than a genuine complaint regarding the saliva slick making its way down through the hairs under his belly-button to the fibres of the top of his towel.

This time his brain, or some other part of him capable of thinking, had no trouble reproaching him for his muddled priorities.

Thomas let Janek attend to the work of unfurling the towel himself, but he took over custody of it when Janek let go. Unwilling to lose contact with it, though it now covered practically nothing, Thomas held a hand either side of his hips and pressed his buttocks tightly against the wall to hold the towel up behind him.

Having his hands occupied (or at least having the illusion that they were) added a new twist to the proceedings; leaving him feeling perhaps a little more vulnerable to Janek’s attentions (something which gave Thomas an unexpected and potent tingle of pleasure) than usual. Also the inability to grab at Janek’s head for support or to guide a rhythm left matters very much in the hands of the man on the floor, and that was both thrilling and exasperating in its unpredictability.

Janek had his hands loosely rested against Thomas’s thighs as he concentrated his attention wholly on Thomas’s freshly-soaped erection.

That Janek expected Thomas to enjoy the encounter for some time was evident in the lack of pressure in the running of his lips and the swills of his cheeks; enough to send Thomas’s nerves singing but not enough to pop.

At first Thomas leant his head back against the wall and closed his eyes, oddly enjoying the feeling of the air across his exposed front in tandem with the firm wetness of Janek’s mouth.

Soon a feeling somewhere between curiosity and perversion got the better of him and he decided to instead lean his chin down to watch the proceedings.

Janek had settled to a fine rhythm, and Thomas’s buttocks and thighs clenched with each repeat journey as he watched himself disappear again and again.

Very nice.

His hands stayed where they were, pressed to the wall, and he forced himself to remain relatively static as Janek did his work. Doing so brought a different feeling of warmth across his body than usual and he was determined to see this deliberate lack of participation through to the end.

Having little to do save for enjoy had Thomas’s mind wandering. And in its wanders Thomas’s mind
decided it wanted Janek’s lips and tongue between his legs, on the inner skin of his thighs, among other places.

The closest Janek came was slipping a hand between Thomas’s thighs to keep him all the more firmly in place as he made his final few swallows. Even that was enough to send electricity up Thomas’s spine.

After, Thomas darted back across the hallway to have another cursory wash. When he returned he found Janek lying on the bed, tossing a small ball up to the ceiling.

Thomas dressed and began to attend to the task of properly hanging the laundry. Janek didn’t comment throughout. In fact several times Thomas forgot Janek was there, his mind learned to zone out the sound of the slap each time the ball came back down into Janek’s waiting hand. The silence was welcome to Thomas, in as much as it enabled him to get on with things, but at the same time he wondered if he ought to say something.

A glance over at the bed confirmed that Janek seemed perfectly content with the present situation (and that he was happily basking in the after-glow of second-hand pleasure), and didn’t feel the need for conversation at present.

Still Thomas’s brain continued to churn.

‘You want coffee?’ Was about all he could think of, and by the time he said it Janek was in a deep enough doze not to respond.

Thomas made himself a coffee and sat at the table, watching Janek sleep, before beginning the task of planning dinner.

Janek didn’t wake until Thomas prodded him with a spoon and announced that dinner was ready. Nor did he seem particularly perturbed to have wasted away the whole afternoon sleeping.

‘So…’ Said Janek slowly as Thomas finally finished setting the table, adding the food, and took his own seat opposite.

Thomas winced in anticipation of a question regarding his upcoming employment on Monday. He recognised that look on Janek’s face. That look that meant some deep and most likely uncomfortable topic was about to be raised.

‘Yes?’ Said Thomas ruefully.

Janek gave an exaggerated sigh and looked to Thomas in all seriousness.

‘…I think my bollocks are about to drop off.’

Thomas snorted gravy while Janek gave a triumphant wink, his face breaking out in to a broad smile.

‘True though!’ Janek continued as Thomas struggled to get himself under control. ‘My boys are better friends today than ever in their life.’

‘Yours’ll be dry soon enough.’ Thomas said, his shoulders still shaking a little with remnant giggles. ‘I’m surprised you’re still in that pair to be honest.’ He said, embarrassing himself with how hopeful he sounded. Darkness had fallen, and they were definitely settled for the evening, and the memories of the previous night had Thomas feeling that perhaps trouser-dispensing time had come.

‘Think you’re going to have to have at these with a kitchen knife.’ Janek said, puffing out his cheeks.
to feign suffocation.

Thomas chuckled back.

‘But first, pub?’ Said Janek merrily.

‘Pub? But…’ Thomas’s eye-line immediately went to the clock on the mantelpiece. His brain went back to the beaten man in the gutter.

‘Never mind.’ Janek said quickly. ‘You’re best getting your sleep tonight, aye?’

‘Yes.’ Said Thomas, grateful for the suggestion to be dropped and sincerely hoping that was as close to a conversation about the upcoming day as they would get.

In the end it wasn’t necessary to take a blade to Janek’s borrowed trousers, but Janek did insist on ripping them up once off so that Thomas couldn’t petition him to wear them ever again in the future.

They settled into bed in a fairly subdued manner, Thomas sliding in behind Janek after making the rounds about the room to blow out all the lights.

He rested against Janek’s back, breathing in the scent of his shoulders, but soon found Janek shifted about, guiding him to lie above him.

They had a quiet, slothful session. Warmth and closeness and a kind of luxurious shared laziness were the order of the night, rather than a race towards anything more palpable. In fact neither was entirely sure at which point the encounter ended and sleep took over.
Chapter 50

Thomas was up and out of the house before Janek even pried open an eyelid the next morning.

Thomas had woken early, seen the time, and initially decided he had plenty of time to settle back down against the warm space between Janek’s shoulder and neck. But then he considered that he actually didn’t know precisely what time Janek had to be at work that morning and perhaps Janek might be intending to wake much later than Thomas needed. What if he were to sleep in? Hell, what if both of them did?

The idea of commencing work flustered and tardy was such an anathema to Thomas that he practically jumped off the bed (no mean feat given he was wedged between Janek and the wall) and immediately commenced his morning routine even though he had hours to spare.

He dressed and spruced himself up, peering carefully into the shaving mirror to ensure a clean and well put together appearance.

He skipped breakfast, largely due to lack of hunger but also because lighting the fire would almost certainly wake Janek (and if that didn’t the cooking smells would) and his nerves were rather enjoying having some time for quiet, solitary reflection.

He couldn’t relax though. Paranoia about lateness had him out the door still several hours before he needed to leave.

Of course when he reached the shop front it was still boarded up. As was everything else in the street.

Thomas managed to kill some time finding somewhere to post the letter to Baxter, though he seriously considered holding on to it for a while until he knew more about what was what. In the end he let it go into the post box. He reasoned that any communication from Downton would be better than none, especially now his world had grown so much smaller.

There was freedom, yes. But he didn’t seem to have many people to share it with.

He made his way back to the shop. It was still shuttered. A few of the surrounding businesses had woken up and opened their doors to trade, but not Mr Cutter’s Clock Emporium. No sir.

Thomas checked his pocket-watch (taking care to keep a close watch on the scruffy, dirty children propping up the wall nearby as he did so). It was barely past seven thirty.

He shoved the watch back in his pocket, shooting a dark glance towards the children who had most definitely taken notice of the shiny object in the early morning light. It really was a little early.

He stomped off down the road in what he hoped was an authoritative manner and continued until his nose picked out the aroma of brewed tea over the muck of the gutters. He bought himself a cup, took up a sugar biscuit, and took a seat at the tea-shop window; staring out into the street at people going about their morning business.

Despite knowing he had all the time in the world, Thomas gulped down the cup of tea in a matter of minutes.

He forced himself to buy another and to take the time to savour every sip. The extra time spent savouring allowed him to notice the favourable glances he was receiving from three young ladies sat
about a table by the shop counter and by a slightly older woman as she took her leave of the shop shortly after he started his second cup.

Thomas curled his fingers about his tea cup and smiled at his reflection in the window as he lifted it to his lips.

He bid the ladies at the tea-shop ‘Good day’ and was on his way with a reassured spring in his step. He paused momentarily to slick back a bit of errant hair he could feel working its way out from under the brim of his hat, but otherwise made solid progress until he reached Mr Cutter’s shop.

The wooden shutters were still closed.

Thomas grimaced, aware others were around him in the street but unable to keep the undignified annoyance off his face.

It wasn’t that far off nine in the morning. Surely Mr Cutter opened the shop by then? Or perhaps he took the time in the early morning to do some of the fixing before opening the doors to the shop?

Thomas’s breathing became a little more erratic at the thought that perhaps Mr Cutter had been inside the whole time; waiting for him to knock.

Hating how stupid he must look, Thomas stepped forwards to the dark, shuttered shop and rapped smartly on the door.

‘Mr Cutter?’ Thomas managed to force out of his mouth despite his growing embarrassment at the looks he was getting in the street.

There was no answer.

‘Fuck.’ Thomas spat, unable to stop himself.

He glanced sideways and was glad to see that the loitering children from earlier had moved on, but that didn’t change the fact he was now loitering himself, looking lost, in an increasingly crowded road.

He wondered if there might be an entrance round the back. The little workshop room had been behind the shop front, so what if there was a door to it at the back?

Thomas balked at the thought. He had no intention of poking around anywhere secluded and unfamiliar, not with the way his day was going so far.

He sighed and stared at the olive green shutters as though to pry them open with his eyes.

A little impish voice inside his head teased him that even if he could he would most likely just find a sign saying ‘Thomas I’ve changed my mind’ tacked to the window.

He swore again.

‘Morning!’

Thomas wasn’t entirely sure he hadn’t imagined the voice.

‘Morning! Morning, morning…’

Thomas turned to see Mr Cutter’s short figure shuffling unsteadily towards him down the pavement.
The man’s hat was askew and his shoulders stooped low at the weight of the large paper-wrapped box he had clutched tightly with both arms.

‘Sorry.’ Was the next word from Mr Cutter’s lips once he was close enough to speak at a normal volume. ‘Oh Mr Barrow, what you must think of me!’ He declared, trying to shift the weight of the box onto one arm, propped up against the wall, while he fumbled for his keys with the other.

Thomas reached down, over Mr Cutter’s shoulder, to lift the box out of his grip.

It was bloody heavy, but Thomas tried to bury the worst of it into a mere twitch of the side of his cheek as he took it.

‘That is good of you Mr Barrow…’ Said Mr Cutter, evidently having trouble with the twin tasks of simultaneously talking and sorting out the correct key. His key chain jangled uselessly in his hand for a moment, then fell to the floor. Thomas began to bend at the knee, despite having nary a hand free to help, to retrieve it but Mr Cutter managed the task himself.

‘Here we are!’ He announced when the door was finally open, he swayed a little on his feet as he motioned Thomas inside as though still recovering from his speedy swoop to the floor to rescue the dropped keys.

Thomas bobbed his head in gratitude and swiftly moved into the shop’s interior, desperately seeking a surface to deposit the parcel on.

He spied Mr Cutter shambling out of view, past the door, to open the shutters at the front.

‘No!’ Thomas called out, quickly setting the box down on the counter at the back of the shop. He darted back out into the street and gently but firmly snatched the keys out of Mr Cutter’s shaking hand. ‘You go in and find a chair. I’ll deal with this.’

Thomas expected an angry response. Most any man, regardless of his need, would balk at such an overt insinuation that he wasn’t up to a task. And even the smallest hint of pride would have a man objecting that a near complete stranger couldn’t possibly do as good a job as he could.

It was a testament to Mr Cutter’s exhaustion following his morning journey that he accepted Thomas’s offer gracefully, and retired immediately into the shop.

Thomas had no idea which key did what. But even with a bit of trial an error he was satisfied he had the job of opening up the shop front done far faster than Mr Cutter would have been able to; and unlike the man in question he was in no danger of keeling over afterwards.

‘Blasted boy…’ Mr Cutter mumbled to Thomas, his mouth partially muffled by the handkerchief he dabbed across his face. ‘…he left me with that…’ He motioned to the box. ‘…to bring back…’ His words were punctuated by raspy breaths. ‘…and he hasn’t even finished it. Didn’t even look at it…’

A clock, Thomas surmised, must be concealed in the packaging. No wonder the damned thing was so heavy.

‘And is…’ Thomas began, his ears tuning in to the sound of the clock mechanisms ticking and clacking all around them. ‘…the boy expected today?’

‘Aye, hours ago. I was waiting for him at home.’ Mr Cutter’s handkerchief found itself stuffed unceremoniously into his top pocket where it puffed out messily at his breast. ‘But he hasn’t been back.’
‘What, since…’

‘Last night.’ Said Mr Cutter with a sigh.

‘How old is…er…Chris?’ Said Thomas.

Mr Cutter considered the question for some time. ‘Eleven, perhaps twelve…Oh I know, I could be his grandfather.’ He added without prompting, evidently used to people commenting on the age disparity. ‘My wife and I weren’t *blessed* for some time.’

He put an uncharacteristically dark emphasis on the word ‘blessed’.

‘And out all night.’ Thomas said in wonder, more to himself than to Mr Cutter. The idea of roaming the streets as a child (without fear of loss of money or despoiling of expensive clothing) was oddly thrilling. He could dimly recall memories of sitting by the window of the room he shared with his sister, staring down into the street outside in the hopes of seeing people capering about in the night. The thought of joining them was never entertained as a possibility. Lesser transgressions than larking about when one was supposed to be in bed brought enough unhappiness for him to refuse to risk tempting fate.

He suddenly realised that a twisted admiration for Cutter Junior’s nocturnal exploits was probably no the most appropriate reaction.

He quickly hid the look on his face. But he needn’t have worried, Mr Cutter was overtaken by a coughing fit shortly after.

‘Buggeration…’ Mr Cutter muttered. ‘I’m supposed to be…’ He took a deep breath and tried again. ‘…I’m supposed to be welcoming you and…’

‘Why don’t you go into the workshop at the back…?’ Said Thomas, motioning to the partially open door behind the counter. ‘I’d wager you can sort out whatever mess your son’s made with…’ He picked up the parcel again. ‘…this. And I’ll mind the shop.’

He took the parcel into the back room, glad to find that yes, it was indeed a workshop. He set it down on the nearest flat surface.

Mr Cutter had followed him in, breathless again but waving his hand in what seemed to be a gesture of gratitude.

Thomas left him to it, closing the door softly behind him.

He trusted the old man would take the opportunity to sort himself out in the privacy of the workshop. He rather hoped the chap would take a nap. Thomas had noted undertones of exhaustion when he’d first met Mr Cutter, but the state the man was in today he could hardly believe it was the same person.

Poor sod.

Thomas turned about, dozens of little round faces glinted at him from shelves both sides of the room. Straight ahead were the ornate backs of the window display clocks, and beyond them a view into the street.

He spied a young man in a tan coloured suit bending down to look more closely at the one furthest from the door.
Thomas smiled. He glanced about him at the shop that was, temporarily at least, and let out a deep breath of satisfaction as he surveyed his little empire and the world beyond. A world full of potential customers and clients that he was ready and waiting to attend to should they cross his threshold.

The entrepreneurial excitement dissipated fairly rapidly when some time went by without a single person entering the shop. But the sense of satisfaction remained as he first busied himself with checking if any of the clocks needed winding and then took his place in the seat behind the counter to watch the world go by.

Presently he decided he really ought to go and check on Mr Cutter. He hadn’t heard anything for a while and it would reassure him to know that the man was still breathing.

No sooner had he jumped from his seat than the bell tinkled above the door.

He turned, thankful he hadn’t had time to plaster on a welcoming smile at the sight of a grumpy youth standing in the doorway.

The boy was short but stocky in stature, shapelessly dressed, and had straight wisps of dark hair sticking straight up from his hat-less forehead.

“You stealing something?”

Thomas balked at the shrillness of the words. The boy’s voice clearly had yet to morph into that of an adult male and his decision to speak at such a loud volume didn’t help matters.

Without responding Thomas turned to look over his shoulder.

“Mr Cutter, your son’s here.” He called out to the workshop.

Thomas waited until he heard a stirring behind the door to turn back to the boy with a neutral smile.

The boy, Chris, stared back at him. There was a sudden flash of realisation in his eyes when he placed the strange man and realised why he was in the shop.

Thomas was relieved at the evidence that Mr Cutter had informed his son of his new hire.

Chris’s look of personal realisation rapidly shifted into a darkly mordacious look shot firmly in Thomas’s direction. The look on Chris’s pudgy face carried the unmistakeable question that didn’t Thomas have anything better to do than to lurk around an empty clock shop to keep an eye on him?

“Oh I really don’t.” Thomas replied smartly, out loud.

He enjoyed the look of surprise on Chris’s face for a moment before Mr Cutter emerged.

“Don’t what?” Said Mr Cutter.

“Nothing Mr Cutter.” Thomas said sweetly.

“Ron, please.” Said Mr Cutter.

Thomas nodded, though he was nigh on sure he would never be able to comfortably refer to the old man by his first name.

“Chris…” Said Mr Cutter. Thomas could practically feel the undertones of disappointment in Mr Cutter’s voice. “…I believe I told you Thomas would be joining us. He’s to be your tutor!” He said, as though announcing a treat.
Both Thomas and Chris winced at that.

Thomas managed to recover first and shot Mr Cutter a reassuring smile.

‘Now I really must get Mrs Sandford’s clock delivered back…’ Mr Cutter continued.

Thomas glanced past him to see a complete clock sat on the counter in the workshop, amid bits of the packaging it had been parcelled in. Evidently Mr Cutter hadn’t taken the cue to relax.

‘…so I shall leave you two to get acquainted…’

‘Whoa, wait!’ Thomas couldn’t quite stop himself exclaiming. ‘Shouldn’t…’ He began, indicating towards himself as the one in the room most likely to be able to get the clock back to its intended destination without breaking it (or keeling over).

‘No, no. You’ve more important work to do!’ Declared Mr Cutter heartily, much to Chris’s chagrin.

Thomas had to admit the man did seem more like himself than he had done that morning, but he still wasn’t convinced by the idea of him waddling off across the city with such a heavy parcel.

But Mr Cutter was determined. And soon he was bidding Thomas and his charge adieu from the doorway of the shop.

No sooner had the shop door swung shut behind Mr Cutter than Thomas heard the workshop door slam shut behind him.

Turning, he saw that Chris had vanished.

His lips curled into a pained grimace at the sound of a key in the lock, the other side of the workshop door.

His dignity would absolutely not stand for trying the knob, or for calling out to the little sod that his father was busy half-killing himself to give them time together to begin some sort of teaching.

Instead he slumped down into the chair behind the counter, pondering his next move and wondering how much longer it would be until Mr Cutter re-appeared with his set of keys.

As luck would have it, it was at precisely the moment when his mind was the most distracted and his posture the most unbecoming when the bell rang over the shop door.

A woman entered. She left a young man lingering on the pavement outside, enjoying the last of his cigarette. The woman was in a fashionably cut claret suit but Thomas quickly spied the ermine muff hanging off one wrist (entirely for show, it wasn’t that cold out) and noted she was likely less affluent than she was trying to make out.

Still a prospect was a prospect.

Unfortunately this particular prospect was not interested in purchasing a new clock. Nope. She was there to collect a clock she had brought for mending the week before.

Thomas’s smile just about managed to remain intact as he asked the woman to describe the clock she had come to collect (while apologising profusely for not having it waiting on the counter for her). Every fibre of his being hoped it was one of those sitting on the inner shelf, just above the foot well of the counter, rather than one of those left in the locked workshop behind him.

He didn’t particularly fancy having to attempt to besiege the workshop in the presence of a lady,
however little of one she might be.

‘Well it’s a little silver-plated…’

Thomas had to reign in the urge to shout in triumph as he spied a small silver-plated mantle clock among the ones concealed under the counter.

‘Would it be this one Madame?’ He said, bringing it out with a flourish.

‘Yes, perfect…’ She replied.

Thomas’s smile grew broader with the smug satisfaction of a job well done (despite the odds).

‘…how much?’

Thomas’s smile fell.

He had absolutely no shitting idea. He didn’t know what Mr Cutter had done to the clock, didn’t know how long he had taken to do it, didn’t know what the going rate was for small silver-plated mantle clock maintenance, and most importantly had absolutely no idea how to procure this information.

‘Well, ah…Madame…’ He said, in what he hoped was a confident manner. ‘The truth is Mr Cutter was not expecting you until later on today, and he’s asked me to give this beautiful piece…’ He continued, laying it on as thick as he dared. ‘…a proper polish for you. It’ll really make that casing shine.’ He said, feeling like a door to door floor-polish salesman. ‘I don’t suppose you’d be willing to leave this wonderful clock with me a little longer? I can guarantee to deliver it to your residence by this evening.’ He concluded, vowing that even if the mare lived in London he would still make sure the damned clock made it to her that night – after he’d had the chance to have a little chat with Mr Cutter about the going rates.

‘Oh my…well I…’ The woman seemed a little flustered, and Thomas made a mental note to dial back the charm a little in future. ‘I suppose that would be wonderful.’ She said, giving a coquettish curl of her shoulders as she took up her ermine muff in both hands.

With that she was gone, taking the man lingering outside the shop with her, and Thomas could breathe again.

Behind him he heard the door to the workshop creak open.

‘That was so stupid.’ Came the laughing evaluation from Chris, his hair even more dishevelled than how it had been when he’d come in from sleeping on the desk.

‘Did you know the answer?’ Said Thomas. ‘Do you know how much your dad charges for repairing these things?’ He nodded irreverently towards the little silver clock.

Chris took a sheepish step back and shook his head.

‘Well then I say I did pretty well.’ Thomas said briskly.

Chris didn’t contradict him.

Thomas began to rifle through the drawers of the counter looking for polishing accoutrements. The last thing he ever thought he’d find himself doing after his bid for Downton freedom was polishing bloody silver, and the haste of his hand movements betrayed his annoyance at the situation.
‘It’s in the third drawer.’ Squeaked Chris, as though Thomas should have already known.

Thomas pulled it open, half expecting a snake to pop out, and was relieved to find a waddle of rags with smears of polish on next to some tins containing the stuff. There were also a few folded, reasonably clean dusting clothes.

Thomas took these out with one hand as he took out the polishing rags with the other; semi-seriously debating using one or both of the wads to gag the smug little sod before him.

‘Well your dad says you’re to learn about clocks. So I reckon…’ Thomas held out the polishing rags to Chris. ‘…you’d do well to get started prettying this one up.’

Chris snorted. There was no other response.

‘Oh well volunteered!’ Thomas thrust the other hand, holding the dusting clothes, towards Chris so quickly that the latter took them before having a chance to think about it. ‘The clocks round the shop do need dusting don’t they?’

And with that Thomas bent over the counter and began attending to the task of delicately coaxing the silver casing of the clock back to life. Beside him stood Chris, motionless in shock, staring down at the dusting cloth in his hand as though at a complete loss as to how it had gotten there.

He wanted to protest. That much was obvious.

But so attentively was Thomas polishing the little clock that Chris was unable to see a window to reproach him.

Thomas smiled secretly as the bewildered Chris passed by his peripheral vision and actually began to make a cursory effort to chase away dust from the clocks and shelves.

When Mr Cutter returned he was so shocked by the sight of Chris, on his feet, in the shop, seemingly…working…that Thomas feared for a moment he had given the old man a heart attack.

Thomas turned his smile on Mr Cutter and an expression of pure awe and gratitude looked back.

It was a little overwhelming. And a little pathetic, if Thomas was honest.

The damned boy was only dusting after all.
Chapter 51

Thomas made it home before Janek that evening. It was still relatively early when he entered the room but Thomas made haste to get into his pyjamas and dressing gown to preserve his relatively wrinkle-free suit for the next day. He then immediately set about lighting the small fire in the stove and found some fresh candles for distribution about the various surfaces of the room.

The wind had gotten colder throughout the day, and the breeze that blew him home had been positively chilling. The gathering clouds promised darkness would descend sooner than usual and Thomas planned to be prepared.

The cavernous room was never going to be fully warmed by the tiny stove. Thomas doubted that even the original mangled fireplace next to the kitchen units could do the job convincingly. But lighting candles at strategic locations around the room at least gave the illusion of warmth as the paper and dried sticks in the stove kindled the fire to life.

The wind was howling outside and the sky almost fully dark by the time he heard the door open.

‘Alright there?’ Thomas called. He was crouched by the stove, nudging a few larger chunks of wood in.

‘Oh thank fuck!’ Janek took in the sight of the glowing candles and stove, skidding across the floor in his work clothes to huddle by Thomas at the open stove.

‘Well fook me…’ Thomas declared, taking the merciless mick out of Janek’s accent. ‘…You’re freezing!’ He pushed Janek’s shoulder a little way away from him, only to find the man glued back to his side with a vengeance, cold cheek to cheek.

They both laughed, during which interlude Thomas became aware of the aroma of gravy and pastry.

‘I’ll call you a genius if you brought one for me and all?’ He said, indicating down to the paper wrapped parcel Janek had unceremoniously dropped as he had scuttled over to Thomas.

Janek smiled cheekily at him and made a show of unwrapping the paper, slowly, to eventually reveal two slightly smoshed together pies, with all the flourish of a stage magician.

‘And if I want different reward?’ Janek said as Thomas opened his mouth.

Thomas responded by leaning to close the short distance between their faces, mouth still open, to offer a soft kiss.

‘Mmmmm alright…’ Janek said, feigning a deep sigh. ‘You can have one.’

‘I’m starving.’ Thomas said, cradling the bundle of tasty smelling warmth with both hands and bringing it to his mouth for a large bite. He was forced to puff out several breaths of steam to cool his mouth immediately after. ‘Didn’t stop for no lunch today.’

‘But you had a good day.’ Said Janek, taking a more cautious bite out of his own pie. It wasn’t a question.

Thomas wondered for a moment at Janek’s certainty. But he supposed the lack of barking (or sullen silence) the moment he entered the room might have been a clue. Added to that a genuine joy at being sat on the floor by the stove, sloppily eating pie beside him, must have made the matter quite
‘It was good.’ Thomas agreed.

‘Do you think you will have a lunch tomorrow?’ Janek said, exceeding Thomas in the speed of food consumption now that the filling had cooled down. ‘There’s a big ship coming in. We are all going to watch.’

Thomas twisted his mouth and pondered. ‘Not sure, to be honest.’ He said. ‘Early days, ain’t it?’

‘Just after midday.’ Said Janek, through a mouthful of meat. ‘Come if you can.’

Beside him, Thomas nodded.

They continued to eat, Thomas bundled up in his nightwear and Janek still in his work clothes (including his coat and hat) pressed beside him, taking as much advantage of the small triangle of warmth immediately in front of the stove as possible.

‘So…’ Said Janek, stuffing the now empty paper wrapping into the fire. ‘…how was the day?’

‘Mmmmm…’ Thomas attempted to reply with a mouth still full of pastry. ‘…little shit went and locked himself in the workshop.’

‘No!’ Janek laughed. ‘The son, yes?’

‘Yes, Chris.’ Thomas took another bite. ‘Right little wotsit.’

‘I’m sure you handle him well.’ Said Janek, he moved his arm around Thomas’s back, wrapping around to clutch at the tie of the dressing gown at the side of Thomas’s waist.

‘Again, early days.’ Thomas said ruefully. ‘Just need to figure out if he’s got a brain under all his podge or if he’s just…’ Thomas shrugged and ate more of his pie.

‘Well he knew to avoid you…’ Janek said giving Thomas’s waist a squeeze as he grinned at him. ‘…so I say smart.’

‘Very funny.’ Thomas retorted.

‘We locked ourselves in a warehouse once.’ Janek said, leaning his head lazily against Thomas’s shoulder. ‘There were riots in the city. Lots of men not working. Solidarity with the seamen and all that.’ He gave a deep sigh. ‘Our foreman said to everyone “You lose your place if you don’t work”…We locked ourselves in a warehouse for a week and told him to do one.’

‘Nice.’ Said Thomas, deducing that the ‘we’ referred to was likely of similar make up as Janek’s current work mates. ‘You know I locked a Lord in a cellar.’

Janek’s hand released its grip at Thomas’s waist to enable Janek to pull himself up into a more attentive position. ‘You what?’

‘This Lord, young lad really, he was on a visit to the Abbey with his mother and got slaughtered on wine. He stumbled down to the servants’ area and found his way to the wine cellar. We locked him in for about an hour.’ Thomas snorted, temporarily distracted from the dwindling remnants of his pie. ‘When he came out he asked what day it was.’ Thomas took another bite. ‘We told him it was the day after and he set off crying worrying what his mum would think.’

‘Oh I like.’ Said Janek, bobbing his head. He sat up on his heels and dispensed with his hat and coat
as Thomas continued to savour the last chunks of meat.

‘Mmmm, there was a lot of mischief round that cellar,’ Thomas said. ‘One time Grantham ordered this really posh bottle of red…wine…’ He added in case Janek wasn’t quite following. A quick glance to the side of him alerted him to the fact that Janek hadn’t stopped at his coat and was in the process of tugging his trousers down his legs. ‘When Carson had it poured into the bottle for serving I went and swapped it for some of the plonk they serve up at fetes.’ Thomas decided to hasten towards the end of the story. And his pie. ‘And…’ Thomas stuffed the last mouthful in with gusto. ‘…there they were all waxing lyrical…’ Thomas made a show of being unaffected as his free hand was curled around the warmth of Janek’s inner thigh. He quickly leant forwards to throw away his pie wrapper with his other hand, sneaking a few extra inches higher with the otherwise occupied hand on his return. ‘…about the special wine they were drinking, when really I’d drunk the lot and they had the cheap rubbish they inflict on the poor sods in the village.’

Janek hunched his shoulders and head towards Thomas’s chest in what seemed to be a genuine show of hysteric; his shirt, the sole article of clothing remaining, rumpled up messily about his middle. Thomas squeezed lightly at Janek’s thigh, enjoying the warmth of his skin, feeling the muscles twitch underneath his hand.

Janek was still shaking in amusement as he eventually raised his head.

‘Evil.’ Janek said. ‘Well done.’

‘You have no idea how many stories like that I’ve got to tell…’ Thomas said, leaning sideways to keep his side in contact with Janek.

Janek lost a breath as Thomas’s hand delved higher, and deeper between his thighs.

‘…Another…another time?’ Janek asked hopefully.

‘God yes.’ Thomas just about managed to get out.

Grabbing hold of the back of Janek’s head with his free hand, Thomas tugged Janek towards him.

Janek spent a brief time perched precariously above him before they made an about turn into the floorboards.

By the time Thomas had processed the fact that they were flat out on the floorboards - despite having a perfectly good bed, two in fact, on the other side of the room - he was already without his dressing gown and hastily rendered bare-backsided to the ceiling with Janek’s legs gripped around his waist.

Janek mumbled incoherently into his mouth as they remained locked at the lips, his body squeezing and shaking at the work of Thomas’s fingers, which had now travelled up far enough to disappear.

With Janek rendered largely immobile between his weight and the equally unyielding hard floor, Thomas took it upon himself to make the most of being the full arbitrator of the rhythm once inside. All of Janek’s preternatural skills with his mouth, Thomas fancied he could match with his entire body; taking his cues from every breath and twitch of the man below to bring him slowly, and deliberately, to a special kind of insanity.

The heat from the fire passed ‘warmingly pleasant’ and became a furnace against their skin, sweat beading on all exposed surfaces as Thomas continued to tend to Janek’s enjoyment.

Thomas took every reaction as a personal victory, and thus was soon melting in a glow of deep self-satisfaction as much as torturous physical labour.
By the time he came, several minutes before Thomas, Janek’s attempts at communication were a mess of obscenities and words Thomas didn’t understand. However much Janek tried to keep his attention on Thomas, he was forced to close his eyes and roll his head back against the boards to stand the second rush of pleasure.

He soon recovered though. And when Thomas leant fully on him to release Janek refused to let him go; keeping him in place with a firm grip as his swollen lips sought more lazy kisses as the fire died down beside them.
Chapter 52

Thomas was up before Janek the next morning, again. Although he made no effort to avoid waking him as he rolled to the edge of the bed this time.

Thomas neatly dodged a pillow thrown in the direction of his head, laughed with the perpetrator, then got his stiff feet on the floor to make his way over to the kitchenette.

On the way he retrieved his dressing gown from the floor and glanced out the windows long enough to register that the sky promised a clear day. The temperature was better too. Were it not for modesty he wouldn’t have needed the gown at all. As it was he threw it about his shoulders and belted it firmly at the waist, glancing back over his shoulder at the shamelessly sprawled lazy sod still on the bed.

‘So…’ Thomas hummed as he crouched to open the cupboard doors. ‘What do we fancy?’ He and Janek (mostly Thomas) had provisioned the cupboards to bursting over the previous few days. And escapades like eating freshly cooked pie from a shop instead of cooking food from scratch meant a large amount of it had sat untouched, and in danger of spoiling.

To compensate, the two of them ate their way through a King’s helping of food for breakfast.

They shared a quick, sloppy, and oddly spontaneous kiss that surprised the both of them before heading out the door and parted ways at the end of the street. Janek refused to let go of Thomas’s arm until he promised he would extract himself from work for lunch. And that he would use the time to come and join him and the dockers to watch the much hyped ship come in to port.

Thomas went to protest again that it was early days in his new job, and that his ability to slip out would be entirely contingent on ‘the little shit’ not causing trouble, but he heard himself promise anyway.

He watched Janek make his way away, shoulders bobbing, hands thrust in his pockets, stomping the pavement with the speed of a jackal as he made for the docks.

With a sigh that was caught somewhere between deep contentment and a strange feeling of mournfulness, Thomas watched until Janek was out of sight in the crowds.

When he reached the shop Thomas found the shutters already open and Mr Cutter perched jauntily on the stool behind the counter, coat already off and clock already in pieces in front of him.

Thomas smiled at the tinkling of the bells as he entered.

‘Morning.’ He offered.

Mr Cutter looked up, smiling broadly the moment he recognised Thomas. He briefly lowered the small tools in his hands. ‘Well aren’t you looking well this morning! True sight for sore eyes!’

Thomas bristled slightly at that. He hadn’t thought he was looking particularly bright that morning, but he could tell the comments were made kindly.

‘Where’s Chris…?’ Thomas asked, peering past Mr Cutter and through the open door of the workshop.

‘Indisposed.’ Mr Cutter’s mood immediately dropped. ‘Bed rest, on his mother’s orders.’ He
explained, for once sounding as old as he looked.

‘Ah…’ Thomas said wryly. ‘Perhaps I ought to have started him off on something a little less
demanding than waving a rag at the shelves.’ He came to a stop in front of the counter, risking a
wink at Mr Cutter’s dour expression.

Mr Cutter immediately perked up. He joined Thomas in a raucous laugh, though in his case the
laughter was cut short by a cough and almost overbalancing off the stool.

‘There must be something I can be doing anyway.’ Said Thomas as the laughter died down.

‘Yes…’ Mr Cutter eased himself down off the stool, sounding distracted but motioning for Thomas
to follow him. ‘…Yes, yes. There is. Yes.’ He lead Thomas into the workshop and pointed him
towards three clocks lined up on the farthest shelf. ‘If you could service just one of these for me…
The clients are all expecting completion today and I just don’t have the…’

‘Of course.’ Said Thomas easily.

‘And of course you will have your cut from the fee.’ Mr Cutter said.

‘Of course.’ Thomas said with a smile. He eyed up the prospects. Logic suggested he take the
largest, oldest and most ornate as it was likely the fee would be larger. But he’d never seen a model
like it before and suspected he couldn’t do it justice. So instead he took the most expensive of the
other two clocks. ‘I’ll sort this one.’ He said.

Cutter gave a nod of approval, holding Thomas’s gaze a moment longer than necessary. ‘I see you
eyeing this one…’ He said, pointing to the largest of the three. ‘…You work on this one…’ He
pointed to the clock Thomas had picked. ‘…in the morning and I teach you this one…’ He gestured
to the larger clock. ‘…this afternoon.’

‘Th…thank you.’ Thomas mumbled, cheeks warming a little.

‘Oh don’t be vexed!’ Cutter declared, patting what he could reach of Thomas’s shoulder before he
ambled back out to the shop. ‘That one’s near two hundred years old. French.’ He concluded, as
though that in itself were an explanation for strangeness. ‘I’ve only seen two others like it my whole
working life.’

Thomas nodded in gratitude and went to set himself up on the work bench.

‘Wait…’ Thomas licked his lips awkwardly before continuing. ‘…I don’t suppose if I get this first
one done in time to deliver before midday, that is if I fix it and its tested correctly and…’

‘While I am this side of the ground please Thomas…’ Said Mr Cutter. Thomas could hear the grin in
his voice even though the man was now out of sight by the shop counter.

‘Could I go down to port for a bit in the middle of the day?’

The level of trepidation in Thomas’s voice was enough to bring Mr Cutter back from the counter to
stare at him from the doorway of the workshop.

‘Yes…’ He said slowly, clearly anticipating more.

‘That’s it.’ Said Thomas.

‘Of course you may. I wonder why you think to ask me?’ Said Mr Cutter with a shrug as he
shambled back to his post.

Thomas stared after him and gave a small snort of relief before shaking the tension out of his own shoulders and settling down to work.

As it was he finished the job earlier than anticipated, and was out collecting his fee at the owner’s town house with plenty of time to spare to join Janek and the others, as ordered, by the waterfront.

The normal midday crowds thickened alarmingly as he made his way down, so much so that he thanked good sense all the more for the secret pocket inside his waistcoat for his wallet, but he could do little for his watch except keep the chain wrapped about his fingers and hope for the best.

The din was appalling. Children laughing individually could be considered charming; as a group the sound was ear splitting. The odd car attempted to travel down the same road as the spectators and was reduced to inching forwards in the crowd, pumping their horn the entire time. Dogs barked, men shouted, women called out for missing family members in the crush. From somewhere in the distance a deep booming horn sounded from the port.

Thomas was thankful he was travelling with the crowd rather than against it, but so swiftly were people moving that he was nearly carried straight past the group of dockers waiting by the wall for him as promised.

Janek all but yanked Thomas out of the chaos, risking several altercations in the process, and Thomas had to restrain himself from throwing his arms out for a grateful hug; so shell shocked was he by the madness of the crowds.

‘Come.’ Janek ordered simply, motioning for the others to lead the way with a nod of his head as he took tight hold of Thomas’s arm.

Thomas’s head swivelled back to look at the direction the thunder of feet was taking the rest of Liverpool as he was tugged in the opposite direction.

‘But…’ He tried, but his words were lost in the rush to keep up with the dockers who were all but running up ahead. They lead this way then that, around a curving pathway that seemed to climb upwards forever until they emerged out on a high ledge a good ten meters or so above where the rest of the crowds had ended up.

‘Oh good God!’ Thomas damn near went over the edge when the other all stopped suddenly. He quickly tried to cover his misstep by gushing about the good view.

The others gave a few laughs but otherwise let Thomas’s brush with death go. The dropped to sit down in two rows. Thomas, like Janek, sat at the front, right by the edge of the ledge. Others arranged themselves behind or next to them.

Gareth Black, the man who a large chunk of Liverpool probably now thought regularly did questionable things in privies, while drunk, with prostitutes, was sat beside Thomas. Young Turner was beside him.

Thomas was slightly nervous about having Liam and the crooked-nosed Wellsley sat behind him, not that he thought they would try to pitch him over the edge, but Janek’s proximity, pressed against his side, alleviated his worries nevertheless.

Thomas regarded the crowds below, hundreds of little bodies bustling about, before raising his eye line.
His jaw dropped.

The sheer size of the thing being guided in by tiny tug boats was impossible. Thomas felt he was looking at a picture from a book, stretched in size tenfold, it looked so unreal. The boat was colossal.

And all along the railings he could see little matchstick people, moving and waving, connecting with the throngs out to meet them on land.

It was thrilling.

A hundred handkerchiefs, a thousand hats, waved in the ship. Faint strains of music of entertainers along the waterfront reached Thomas’s ears from his perch high above them. The air was thick with excitement and smoke.

“You see?” Janek shouted to him over the din.

“I see.” Thomas conceded. He hoped Janek could hear the unspoken ‘thank you’ and ‘this is spectacular’ in the ensuing silence.

A few barked orders later and sticks of bread, pieces of toad in the hole and several bottles were making the rounds.

“Yes!” Turner suddenly exclaimed from along the ledge. ‘He’s there! You see him, he’s there again!’

‘No!’ Janek declared, excitedly leaning forwards to stare in the direction Turner was pointing. Most of the others did to.

‘Who?’ Thomas said, but he realised he was talking to himself.

They were all staring down to one of the main walkways where a barely visible man in a pale grey suit was standing.

‘Cunt’s back!’ Janek exclaimed, leaning excitedly forwards, green eyes flashing, looking every bit the pixie in the sunlight. ‘What fool is he!’

The other men laughed. But Thomas noted an undertone of something akin to respect or affection in Janek’s voice as he spoke, and the laughter was not nearly as cruel as he imagined the men were capable of.

‘Who is that?’ Thomas said, tapping on Janek’s arm to get his attention.

“You met him.” Janek said. ‘Fergus.’

Thomas raised his eyebrows and shook his head, a little offended by the insinuation in Janek’s tone that he was stupid for asking. ‘Don’t think so.’ Said Thomas.

‘He helps the poor people and such. You took his leaflet.’

‘Oh!’ Thomas grudgingly conceded that perhaps he should have remembered the man. But in his defence he had had a lot on his mind the day he’d demanded a leaflet off of Fergus in the street, and how the others had been able to recognise the young man from so bloody far away was beyond him.

‘He’s always here.’ Gareth leant around Janek to explain. ‘He tries to tell the immigrants where to stay. You know, to avoid the knock shops and not let anyone take their luggage and such…’

‘That’s…good of him.’ Said Thomas uncertainly, waiting for the catch.
‘But every time…’ Janek took up the story from Gareth, indicating back in the direction of Fergus. Thomas peered down to see that Fergus and several gentlemen with him were being…approached…by some other far less neatly dressed men.

‘Those men run the knock shops…’ Said Janek with a twist of his lips. ‘…and they offer to carry bags.’

‘I see.’ Thomas said, pre-emptively wincing on behalf of the near-stranger as an altercation broke out. ‘Why don’t they just…’ The men proceeded to rough up the small group, not enough for the few scattered police officers to intervene, but enough that they couldn’t do their job. ‘…bar the others from the walkway?’ Said Thomas, vaguely recalling the bruise he’d noticed at Fergus’s wrist the day he’d gotten the leaflet and now no longer wondering what had caused it. ‘Why aren’t there more police or…?’

‘You’d think there would be.’ Gareth agreed, again bending to lean round Janek. ‘His dad’s connected to everyone in the police and the courts.’

‘Like how?’ Said Thomas.

‘Like he’s peopled half the prisons.’ Wellsley’s gruff voice sounded from behind him. 'And fed most the gallows.'

Some grunts of agreement and anger sounded from the group around them.

A quick squeeze to his thigh from Janek had Thomas leave off the subject.

‘Just look at that.’ Said Janek, shooting a quick smile in Thomas’s direction as the side of the ship caught the sun.

‘That is quite amazing.’ Thomas agreed, watching the ship edge closer. The little stick people were close enough to make out now, dresses and coats billowing in the breeze. He could practically feel their hopes and enthusiasm radiating out from the decks of the ship. For their sake he himself hoped for one wild moment that the ship wouldn’t dock.

Fergus was still there somewhere in the crowd, but Thomas had a feeling the con men would win the day. How could they not, given the confusion? He could only wish that the crowd contained families and friends, among the spectators, that would see the new arrivals right.

Unpleasant realities aside however, the sight was wonderful. And Thomas was wholly swept up in the atmosphere as they watched the first passengers begin to disembark.

‘Oi! You see what I see?’ Turner nudged Gareth.

‘I do, I do!’ Gareth replied gleefully.

In the time it took Thomas to blink, both men were on their feet, toes to the edge of the ledge, and they were unbuttoning their trousers.

‘What the…? ’ Thomas glanced down and saw a group of men walking immediately below them. By their appearance he could have sworn he recognised them as management from the docks…which would explain why two of the dockers, safe on high, were preparing to piss on them over the ledge.

More than two, in fact, as several others, including Janek, moved to join them.
By chance, Janek happened to glance down at Thomas’s horrified expression.

Seconds later he was back on his backside and clicking his fingers briskly at the others to instruct them to do the same. They grumbled, but the men sat back down again without real protest.

The management passed by un-wetted. Janek gave Thomas’s leg another squeeze, though this time more by way of apology than warning.

Thomas’s face grew red, feeling the eyes of the others on him.

He tensed, ready to spring up and run, anywhere from the edge of the ledge, as he felt fingers at the back of his head. But instead of pushing, scratching or the like, the fingers, which Thomas correctly deduced belonged to Liam, merely ruffled his hair where the hair line met his neck under the brim of his hat. The fingers withdrew as quickly as they had come, leaving Thomas feeling somewhat violated but at the same time validated by the gesture of teasing approval.

Time pressed on, and they were obliged to abandon their prime viewing spot before the unloading of passengers was complete.

Thomas and Janek walked ahead of the group this time, leading the way back down to street level at a brisk pace; neither eager to leave one another’s company but, on Thomas’s part at least, gripped with the awareness that afternoon work should have started some time earlier.

He was worried that Janek might attempt to commandeer him for longer and refuse to let him get on his way when they reached the street.

However the question of how to get rid of Janek in a hurry was solved when the limping pariah otherwise known as Payton ambushed them seemingly out of nowhere to heartily greet ‘his boys’.

‘And you!’ Payton declared, his voice was every bit as haughtily drawling as rumours had led Thomas to believe. ‘I don’t believe you are one of my boys…I do believe I’ve seen you before, down at the docks…’

Thomas took the offered hand and shook it.

As he did he felt Janek’s hand quickly pat him on the back. Moments later Janek slipped quickly past his peripheral vision, escaping from Payton as fast as his legs would carry him.

‘Yes…’ Thomas said, having to extract his hand somewhat forcibly when Payton failed to release it. He felt each docker in turn pat his back in the same way Janek had done, though some cheekily ventured a little further south, thanking him, in their way, for ‘taking one for the team’ and allowing them to escape being caught in conversation with Payton. ‘The name’s Barrow. I sometimes come to meet with…friends…at the docks.’ He offered a noncommittal but pleasant smile, hoping the man would be on his way.

To his disappointment, Payton shifted his weight, leaning heavily on his good leg, as though settling in for the long haul before speaking again.

‘Friends.’ Payton repeated.

Thomas couldn’t help but feel a little twinge at the sorrowful look in Payton’s eyes as his beady eyes swept the area around them searching for eavesdroppers.

Finding none, Payton continued. ‘I wondered…’ He looked around again to be sure. ‘…I don’t
suppose you might be inclined to…’

Thomas fiercely resisted the temptation to check the time on his watch.

‘Could you help me?’

Thomas blinked. The plea was pitiful. And from a stranger it was simultaneously repulsive and heart-breaking.

‘Could you help me get to know the men a little?’

‘I don’t know that I’m really the man to be asking.’ Thomas said, attempting to be delicate. ‘I’m really just acquainted with Ja…Mr Biel…and it’s a very loose acquaintance at that…’

‘But where he goes, the others follow.’ Payton asserted, his little eyes flitting about Thomas’s face in naked hope. ‘Could…could you help me?’ He repeated, evidently distressed at having to repeat the humiliating request a third time.

Thomas swallowed. He knew the man had more chance of forming a friendship with the Dowager Countess of Grantham than with Janek. But he felt compelled to throw the poor thing a bone.

‘He likes stories.’ Said Thomas.

‘Stories?’

‘Yes.’ Said Thomas. This time he did pull his watch from his pocket to check the time. ‘He likes stories.’ It wasn’t as late as Thomas had thought it was, which was a relief, but he still tried to look harassed as he made eye contact with Payton in the hopes the man would take the hint. ‘He especially likes ones where you’ve gotten one over on the boss, on the man in charge of whatever.’ Thomas said. ‘Those he likes.’ He smiled apologetically at Payton in preparation for taking his leave but he couldn’t help but notice that Payton’s posture had gotten even more lopsided and his face increasingly pained. ‘Do you…’ Thomas said, hating himself already. ‘…need me to walk you to a chair or…something?’

‘Oh no, no! No I can hardly notice it these days.’ Payton quickly declared, shifting so that he looked more presentably upright. ‘No you have been…’ He grabbed up Thomas’s hand again and shook it vigorously. ‘…a huge help already.’

‘You’re most welcome.’ Said Thomas with a smile. ‘Good luck to you.’ He concluded pleasantly, once again wrenching his hand away from Payton as politely as possible.
Chapter 53

It was Saturday and Thomas was feeling a tad murderous.

Because of the little shit.

The little shit that refused to put his hand to anything resembling work.

Of course Thomas couldn’t entirely blame the little shit, otherwise known as Chris. Technically speaking Thomas still had yet to issue a direct order to the boy (trapping him into doing the dusting didn’t really count), so he couldn’t really conclude with certainty that he was dealing with a little shit. Thomas debated the reasons for his reluctance to order the boy about as he walked, heavy-boned, home from work.

He settled on an explanation somewhere between not wanting to bark at the boy like his own father, Mr Barrow senior, and having noticed that the boy’s own father never seemed to issue overt orders himself. Thomas wasn’t sure Mr Cutter would take too kindly to him shouting at his son.

Of course, there was a third consideration - Thomas was by no means certain that Chris would follow his orders. And while Thomas’s pride may have resigned itself to bathtub laundry, the permanent smell of grime and a starkly diminished social circle, he doubted it would survive the indignity of a child refusing to comply with a direct instruction.

Thomas stopped on the corner of his street, stretching out his fingers from the particularly trying position they had been contorted into for most of the day. He debated walking a little further to replenish his supply of cigarettes before heading home. There was a strange pall over the city that evening. The mist had come down early and Thomas fancied he could see his breath in front of him despite the temperature being quite warm and muggy – hence his mind turning to cigarettes.

He shook his head, as though the people passing him in the street gave the slightest toss whether or not he intended to shop that evening.

There was still half a pack in his coat pocket and he tugged them out and treated himself to one while he pondered the seemingly impossible feat of standing about on a street corner without feeling in imminent danger. Clearly in some ways the week had settled him. Into his place and into his routine.

And from his perspective it had been a good week. He’d had three commissions (and had the money in his pocket to prove it) and Mr Cutter had continued to make an effort to introduce him to the workings of clocks either too old or too new for Thomas to have encountered them in his youth.

Thomas had managed to turn Mr Cutter’s tutorials into something resembling a win as far as his duties to Chris went. Thomas made sure that either he or Mr Cutter, heads bent together over the desk as though examining the crown jewels in the lamplight, spoke aloud all that they were seeing or described in detail all that was being done to the clock in question. Chris being in the shop (though for a blissful day and a half he had been absent entirely) couldn’t avoid hearing the words of wisdom spoken, however much he might try to absorb himself in whatever beaten up, and most likely scandalous, book he had rested in his lap.

The only other success (if so grandiose a word could be used) came earlier in the week when Thomas had managed to engage Chris in sorting out tiny screws into boxes of their correct size by musing aloud that he could accomplish the task faster. Chris had worked hard, tongue sticking out the side of his mouth, pudgy cheeks puffed in concentration. But the moment he caught sight of the
expression on Thomas’s face he’d sent the entire tray of boxes flying with a look of deep betrayal.

Thomas, feeling numb more than anything else at the display of petulant rage, had no idea how to react. Were he Mr Barrow senior a verbal tirade would be the very least Chris could expect, were he Mr Cutter he had no doubt he would be creaking his arthritic knees down to the floor to quietly pick up the pieces while Chris glowered above him.

He didn’t know what to do.

So he did nothing. He got of his chair, little screws crunching on the floor under his feet as he did so, and left the workshop; closing the door behind him.

When he checked on Chris a few hours later he found him on his hands and knees quietly picking up the screws and a rudimentary attempt to organise them taking shape on the desk.

Thomas chose to count it as a victory. Though if he was honest it probably spoke more of Chris’s underlying character rather than any particular skills on his part in managing petulant children.

The day after Chris made up for this small breakthrough by not turning up in the morning. Of course.

Thomas turned to walk the final street to his house, trailing smoke lazily behind him.

It was ridiculous. Hard working men, including himself for a time, wandering the streets in search of work and Little Shit doing absolutely nothing but sit on his behind secure in the knowledge his father (and mother, no doubt) always had a warm meal waiting for him of an evening after a hard day of doing sod all. For money.

Actually, maybe Chris wasn’t paid. He certainly wouldn’t get anything if he were on the same arrangement as Thomas. Thomas smiled to himself at the thought of the three pieces he had managed to fix that week, all by his lonesome, and the handsome reward they had netted him. He wondered if Chris had ever actually touched a clock (apart from when making deliveries) in his life.

Still, the little shit had a shop, a business and most likely a family home as well to inherit in under a decade or so. Possibly less than a decade. Thomas couldn’t help flinch a little at the sound Mr Cutter’s breaths made in between his frequent pronouncements of ‘bugger’ while working on a particularly challenging piece – he wouldn’t be around long. And naturally the little shit did nothing to ease his workload.

Thomas paused on the step outside his house.

Was he most angry at Chris for disrespecting (or at least being disinterested in) his authority? Was he more angry for the lack of regard Chris showed to his little falling-apart father? Was he just pissed at himself in general for having shrunk his own world down to this tiny little microcosm where he could count the number of people, customers included, that he had spoken to that week on his fingers? A shitty little shop housing silly little people, that had him feeling about as useful and fulfilled as...no one. He imagined even the men who went around sponging the city grime off the fronts of the town houses every morning (only to see it back again by the evening) felt more fulfilled in their employment than him.

But then there were moments, like when Mr Cutter had shown him the antique French clock, that Thomas had glanced at the time after what had seemed like minutes to find that hours had gone by. And he was still content to remain, by Mr Cutter’s side, surrounded by the clicking tinkling machinery while the rest of the world passed him by.

He had a treat to look forward to early the next week. He’d managed to wrangle himself an
appointment to discuss ‘management of the household clocks’, which he suspected equated to negligence in the cleaning and winding category on the part of the staff, at one of the large town houses to the west of the city. Sadly he couldn’t look forward to licence to snoop about the house of a rich merchant as much as he rightly should have because thinking about the week to come also necessitated trying to come up with some new approach for Chris. And Thomas didn’t want to think about Chris. He didn’t know how to solve Chris. In fact it would be a marvellous thing were Chris to suddenly take it upon himself to disappear.

Sighing the sigh of the damned, Thomas chucked the cigarette, opened the front door and clomped up the stairs.

There was no Janek. No surprise there. Thomas had beaten him home almost every evening that week. And most evenings he had concocted something resembling dinner in anticipation of Janek’s return.

He didn’t that night though. Nor did he get immediately into his dressing gown and attempt to catch forty winks before the hurricane that was post-work Janek swept in through the door.

He was too tired. Or too awake.

Still, it was just as well he didn’t. Because a mere half an hour later Janek poked his head round the door to ask the most welcome of questions.

‘Pub?’
Chapter 54

Thomas felt drunk the moment he walked in.

The sweaty, muggy and highly alcoholic air smacked him in the face with the same amount of force that several hands smacked his back by way of greeting.

The pub was tiny, by all accounts. Janek’s crew made up over half the three dozen or so occupants crushed together into a space no larger than a Lady’s dressing room. If there were tables they weren’t visible, the bar was a small hole in the wall at the far end. Above the heads of the standing, pungent men, Thomas could make out a bare staircase to the right of the doorway. That was it. Just bodies and beer and loudness and cheer. And when a drink magically manifested itself in Thomas’s hand (from somewhere in Gareth’s direction) Thomas decided he could quite happily suffer the overwhelming ambience provided the drinks kept coming.

The light from the lamps gave everything an orange glow and there was constant movement and sound, and contact – up until the third drink Thomas was keeping close track of his wallet – and it was a welcome world away from the quiet coolness of the little clock shop or the large barrenness of his shared room back home. His mind went off on a tangent imagining the improvement that could be made to his accommodation if a new wall colour could be painted and if perhaps the original fireplace and chimney could be opened and…

Two men went down, having gotten tangled while passing one another, and took a good four or so others over with them. Loud barks of laughter and jeers broke into Thomas’s chain of thought as he looked around wondering where the others had gone – and how long he had been standing, like a ninny, on his own thinking about decorating.

He found the group hogging the small space under the stairs. There must have been a low bench hidden there because some of the dockers had managed to achieve something resembling sitting, however it was hard to tell as each man had another perched on his knees or leant heavily against his shoulder; so for all Thomas knew they could have been sitting on the unconscious body of one of their fellow drinkers.

Janek was occupying the almost non-existent middle ground between the dockers and the rest of the pub’s revellers, he repeatedly paused just long enough to drain a drink, throw his head back, laugh like a child and then vanish back into the throng in search of another when his co-workers were too slow on the uptake to refill his tankard before thirst set in.

Conversation was impossible in the din. Laughter, as frequently engaged in by Janek and the others (apart from Liam, whose sour face withstood peer pressure resolutely) was the sole means of communicating. Amused or approving of something a man had just drunkenly done in front of you? Give a laugh. Caught someone rolling their eyes in recollection of something funny that had happened that week? Give a laugh. It was an unsatisfying level of connection, as far as Thomas was concerned. Especially since what little conversation was shouted was either said in too thick an accent or too niche a slang (or technical) language for him to understand; much less join in the resulting laughter. He couldn’t help but think that the pathetic creature of Payton would be most disappointed were he to be lurking outside the window and taking notes on how to make friends with ‘the lads’ from his example.

And he could have sworn Janek was paying an undue amount of attention to drinking and very little to him. In fact none to him. Barely any to his group either; unless one of them happened to have a drink for him. Thomas was not particularly bothered about attention paid to the group (or attention
from the group) but he did feel a little petulant about the lack of attention Janek was paying to him. True the moment he’d stepped in the pub Thomas’s attention had been completely taken with the task of drinking away the rotten week, but he had rather assumed that once he’d quietened down his head Janek would be there with a smile ready to at least attempt a conversation. He couldn’t really complain though. The tiny pub was clearly an establishment with one purpose, and that purpose did not include conversation.

‘Do you trust my cock?’

Thomas looked down into his cup and pondered if the brown liquid he had just drunk had perhaps tipped him into auditory hallucination.

‘T’s alright, I spose…’

Behind Thomas the two men continued their very loud conversation while Thomas frowned at the wall and couldn’t quite permit himself to accept what he was hearing.

‘Depends on the other, don’t it?’ A third voice joined in.

‘You talking cocks?’ Liam’s suddenly booming voice demanded, leaning round Thomas to catch a look at the man who had originally spoken.

Thomas stayed where he was, still staring at the wall, wondering if perhaps he ought to curb the drinking in future.

‘Aye.’ Came the response. ‘There’ll be game tonight.’

Liam perked up, snapping his head sideways to whisper (cupping his hand against the noise of the surrounding conversations) into his neighbour’s ear before turning to do the same to the neighbour to his left. The whispers went round the group, each man reacting with delight, until the familiar voice (and slightly less than appealing breath) of Gareth was playing over Thomas’s earlobe to announce that there was to be a ‘game’ upstairs that night.

Thomas was glad the apparently exciting news was delivered by Gareth as he wasn’t sure he would feel comfortable admitting ignorance to anyone else (apart from Janek, who’d disappeared again).

‘Cock fight.’ Gareth explained, forced to speak loudly but at the same time trying to avoid the whole pub hearing. ‘Upstairs. You ever seen one?’

Not on account of them being illegal for the last eighty odd years, Thomas may well have replied if he’d had a bit less to drink and if he hadn’t needed to keep his response to the bare minimum to avoid shredding his vocal chords to be heard.

Instead he just shook his head.

Two drinks later and a highly conspicuous ‘secret’ re-locating to the upstairs (which near emptied out the entire pub), Thomas was standing behind an upturned crate looking at a small penned in area of floor sprinkled with sawdust.

He felt a bit sick. ‘Bit’ being an understatement. It was mostly the drink, but being squashed on all sides didn’t help and he was taking shallower and shallower breaths to spare his nostrils from the stench of the enthusiastic workers all around. He wasn’t entirely sure how he was feeling about the prospect of squawking things trying to scratch and peck one another to death a couple of feet away from his face, but his vision was giving out a bit in favour of a fuzzy kind of trance so he couldn’t get
himself up to feel too strongly about it. Nevertheless, he craved the night air (and the potential to have a cigarette without setting fire to his neighbour), and resolved to take his unsteady legs back downstairs to at the very least hang out a window to get some respite.

But then he recognised a familiar flick of hair and realised that Janek had somehow (no doubt with a large amount of shoving) managed to slot in beside him. Thomas turned his head towards him and was rewarded with a cheeky smile and a wink. The devilishness in Janek’s bright eyes, emphasised by his portly red drunken cheeks, had Thomas forgetting that he had spent a large part of the evening thinking up ways to get back at him for ignoring him.

‘I think blue.’ Janek announced.

‘Bet on it did you?’ Thomas said above the din.

Janek shook his head vigorously. ‘No!’ As though it were the most absurd question one could ask of a man at an illegal sporting event who had just stated a preference as regards the contenders. ‘But I think blue.’

An angry screech (and resulting cheer from the audience) drew Janek’s attention from Thomas as the contenders were deposited into the makeshift ‘ring’.

Thomas watched absently. It was only in the most abstract sense that he was able to quietly follow each attack, injury and retreat that had the punters around him, including Janek, baying with glee. He imagined that if he hadn’t been quite so drunk he would have been horrified. Possibly.

But he was next to Janek, and that was worth staying for even if everything else was…

A kiss landed on his lips.

Thomas pulled away, finding himself staring into the glazed but ecstatic eyes of Janek.

The noise around them faded as Thomas’s flesh froze about his neck and face. He looked, in a daze, to see that the ‘blue’ cockerel had indeed taken victory over the other. And all around them men were celebrating.

There were claps on the back, there were hugs, there were shouts, and there were kisses. On the cheeks, on the lips, clearly the fight had been of sufficient quality that even the most vicious of brutes felt the need to celebrate in such a way as they would never act in normal life.

He and Janek didn’t stand out for better or for worse; save for the way that Thomas was now staring at Janek in abject terror.

Janek clearly knew it. The smug and playful smile said as much. Clearly he took a little pleasure from playing the situation in a way that granted a little naughty victory for the two of them.

Thomas on the other hand was of the opinion that he was drunk, Janek was drunk, the whole damn room was drunk, and reeking, and he was ready to go home.

He broke away from Janek, who pouted and went back to watching a man clear up the remnants of ‘blue’s’ opponent, and managed to push his way to the stairs.

‘Look after him.’ He said a little sourly to Gareth as he passed.

Gareth gave him a perplexed look but also nodded, so Thomas considered his duties discharged.
He stalked out onto the street, his mind a jumble of alcohol and an unsatisfied feeling of fear that had proved to be unfounded (or at least no one had immediately attacked them) but that lingered on; making him feel numb.

He considered, as he lit a much needed smoke on the dark empty street, that perhaps he was the one who needed ‘looking after’. Still, he was able to swagger through the streets and gutters with enough gusto to keep those who would otherwise have bothered him at bay.

The moment he entered his room he stripped off. He drank all the water in the basin by the sink before pondering whether that water had been used earlier for washing, decided he didn’t care, then fell into bed without combing his hair.

He was woken quite some time later by incoherent but impossibly loud singing, followed by equally loud shushing, in the street outside.

He screwed up his face against the pillow, head pounding, hoping deeply that the owner of the voice wasn’t heading for his room.

As luck would have it the next sound he heard was the front door, followed by the banging and shuffling of a whole group of feet on the stairs and the angry yelling of neighbours to ‘shut the bleeding hell up’.

At a rapping at the door Thomas rose from bed, forgetting he was in the nude, and groggily staggered to open it.

He blinked in the light from the corridor and registered what was happening just in time to stop an incredibly drunk and heavy Janek from flooring him as he lurched forwards.

‘Sssshhh!!’ The two men either side of Janek quickly regained their hold of his arms while Thomas pressed against Janek’s chest to keep him upright.

Thomas realised at that point he was naked, but reasoned that blokes who take their daily wash with several hundred others probably wouldn’t think much of it. At least he assumed they were dockers. He didn’t recognise them. But the sudden appearance of the familiar face of Gareth behind them in the corridor confirmed it.

‘Here…’ Said Gareth breathlessly, reaching over the men’s shoulders to pass something to Thomas.

Thomas risked letting go of Janek, trusting the other two men to keep him up, to take it. It was a shoe.

Thomas glanced down. Yes, Janek was missing a shoe.

He looked to Gareth with an expression of apologetic gratitude. Gareth rolled his eyes.

‘Oh I’m used to it.’

‘Really?’ Thomas said before realising that the two men holding up Janek were having a bit of a time of it. ‘Just chuck him down there…’ He said, indicating the bed he’d been sleeping in, before quickly adding. ‘I’ll sleep in the other one.’

The men moved past him to comply.

‘Oh aye.’ Gareth said, leaning against the door frame, giving no reaction whatsoever to Thomas’s current state of appearance. ‘Don’t think anything of it.’ He said to Thomas. ‘Once a month or so.
Just ‘appens.’

‘Well thank you.’ Said Thomas, still partially squinting and not entirely convinced he wasn’t still asleep. But grateful to have the wayward drunk safely to bed.

Gareth rolled his eyes again and motioned the other two to follow him.

‘Night Janek!’ He pointedly yelled over at the bed before going.

On the bed Janek groaned and hit his head against the wall in an effort to squeeze his ears against the pillow tightly enough to block out the sound.

Thomas grimaced from his position by the door.

He closed it and tossed Janek’s shoe somewhere over by the chests of drawers. Fumbling in the dark, and more than a little gone himself, he absolutely could not muster the effort to get Janek undressed. He merely sank down beside him, awkwardly, given the way Janek had fallen, and attempted sleep. He mused on the dangers of Janek needing to divest himself of all the alcohol he had consumed at some point during the night, but the warmth and sound of his breathing kept Thomas in place. Truth be told, Thomas wasn’t entirely sure he could sleep alone anymore.

He feared what state his head would be in the morning, but amused himself with the assurance that Janek’s would most likely be much worse.
Chapter 55

Thomas woke up to a Janek sized smear on the bed and the distant sounds of retching.

With a snort Thomas turned his head to see that the door to the room was flung open. He looked just in time to see one of their neighbours making his way down the corridor to the bathroom, hear the sounds of vigorous purging, and abruptly turn around and decide his need for the bathroom was not as great as he had previously thought.

Taking care to avoid the dirt on Janek’s side of the small bed (evidently the man had gone ‘swimming’ in the gutters on his way home) Thomas dragged himself up into a sitting position and clicked his head side to side to wake himself up before rising. He put on his dressing gown, set some water boiling, and gingerly stripped off the bedsheets and replaced them with the ones on the spare bed.

The noises from the bathroom across the hallway continued as the water boiled and throughout Thomas’s efforts to make coffee.

Thomas gave his hair a cursory slick, tightened his dressing gown, and tiptoed across the hallway, coffee in hand, to the bathroom.

He paused to take in the comical sight of the considerable figure of Janek, still in the previous night’s clothes (minus one shoe), bent double over the toilet bowl.

Thomas crossed the room to lean against the sink beside him, sipping his coffee nonchalantly.

‘You know the thing I love most about drinking in moderation…?’ Thomas said sweetly, smiling down at Janek as he inclined his head a little to identify the owner of the pair of legs which had appeared in his peripheral vision. ‘It’s that feeling of waking with a clear head…’ He took another sip of coffee, gazing over Janek’s head as though inspecting the room. ‘…dignity…ready to face the day…’

Janek hurled up what was left in his guts by way of reply. ‘Oooh ooh, fuck you.’ His voice echoed round the bowl of the toilet.

‘I was just thinking back to last night you know.’ Said Thomas breezily. ‘All those bits of blood and gizzard just seeping out on that sawdust…’

‘Mmmmmph!’ His head still in the toilet bowl, Janek blindly extended an arm in an attempt to swat Thomas’s legs. He merely succeeded in knocking about the hem of Thomas’s dressing gown before abandoning his efforts.

Above him, Thomas continued smiling.

Thomas had finished his breakfast and was halfway through his second coffee and third cigarette of the morning before Janek finally emerged from the bathroom.

‘Hello.’ He said sheepishly from the doorway.

‘Hello!’ Thomas replied brightly, shooting him a wry smile.

Janek nodded, grimacing as he stepped into the room.
Yes, perhaps he had *slightly* overdone it the previous evening.

‘Want coffee?’ Thomas said charitably.

Janek winced and quickly shook his head. ‘No. Nothin’ for me.’ He looked down at himself, seemingly for the first time. ‘Where’s me shoe?’

‘By the bottom of the bed.’

‘Good.’ He kept looking down at himself. ‘What’s this?’ He said.

Thomas could only assume Janek was referring to the filth clinging to his clothes. ‘Can’t help you there I’m afraid.’ He said.

‘Ooooh…’ The state of his clothes seemed to have Janek disproportionally upset. ‘But I need clean…’ He didn’t finish the sentence, instead being taken by inspecting the damage. He tugged at his shirt with one hand, peering at the dirt, and scratched miserably at his head with the other.

Thomas pondered this for a moment before deciding to put the man out of his misery.

‘Do you remember Thursday this week?’ He said, rising lazily from his chair.

‘Mmm?’

‘Thursday.’ Thomas repeated. ‘That day when you came in raving about Turner getting his arm stuck in the crane mechanism…?’ Janek squinted his eyes at him, lost. ‘That day…’ Thomas continued. ‘…when you had to duck under that line of washing I’d done when I’d gotten back from work…?’

Still nothing.

‘Janek, I washed your other clothes.’

‘Yes!’ Janek immediately brightened and made a lunge for Thomas.

The moment Thomas realised he meant to kiss him Thomas quickly brought a hand up to shield his mouth. ‘Christ no!’ He declared.

Janek recoiled, hurt.

Thomas nodded over towards the open door and the bathroom beyond.

‘Ah.’ Janek grimaced, and quickly went to clean his teeth.

Thomas retrieved the clean clothes for Janek and went back to his seat at the table, lazily watching Janek attend to the tasks of washing, dressing and general preening.

‘What’s all this gussying up for?’ He said with a frown when he realised that Janek was using his mirror for shaving rather than relying on dumb luck and muscle memory.

‘Sunday.’ Janek replied. ‘Told you I see mother once a month on Sunday.’

‘Oh!’ Thomas sat up sharply. ‘Did you still want me to come with you?’

Janek removed the razor from his cheek for just long enough to nod vigorously and tentatively check. ‘If you still wish to, of course?’
‘Yes.’ Said Thomas quickly. He hastily dispensed with the cup in his hand and jumped up from his seat in search of clean clothes for himself.

His shave finished, Janek chuckled as Thomas whirled about the room making himself presentable.

‘Is this…’ Thomas began, half buttoning up a shirt he had already worn once that week but that he judged the cleanest of the lot. ‘…Is this one alright?’

Janek lowered his head and cocked an eyebrow as if to say ‘you’re asking ME?’ but eventually nodded as he crouched down by the kitchen counter to empty the coins from the more well-stocked of the two money jars into what looked like an old sock.

Janek took up Thomas’s seat at the table and rested the pouch of money on its surface.

Thomas tugged the shirt about for a little longer before frantically unbuttoning. ‘I’ll try one of the others.’ He declared.

Janek propped his feet up on the spare chair, laughing to himself as Thomas bent down once again to rummage through the drawers.
‘Would you like me to put that in my pocket?’

‘No.’

They reached the end of their street and rounded the corner.

Thomas glanced down at the heavily laden sock hanging from Janek’s hand, tell-tale cylinders of coins pushing at its seams as it clinked as it swung.

‘Are you sure you don’t want…’

‘Where we are going they know what I bring.’ Janet replied briskly, leading the way down the street.

Thomas caught a look at the slither of a grin creasing Janek’s cheek.

The sod.

Thomas considered protesting that, be that as it may, the people they were likely to encounter between their current location and where Janek’s mother lived didn’t automatically know he was carrying a large amount of money. Of course they would know now, given the money-sock Janek seemed determined to swing carelessly about.

Janek’s silence (and grin) suggested he was waiting for Thomas to bite back. Pushing away his nerves, Thomas refused to give him the satisfaction.

Besides, it was unlikely anyone would attempt to cross the hulking mass that was Janek…even when he wasn’t carrying something heavy and easily swingable.

Janek led the way, not touching him but walking far slower than usual to ensure he kept up. It was a long walk and a huge relief when Janek slowed to a stop beside a small alleyway.

The route Janek had taken them had been so convoluted that for all Thomas knew they might just be the other side of the houses that lined the familiar main roads. But something about the smell of the air, most likely down to the mouldy stone of the empty buildings beside the alley, told him this was a part of the city he hadn’t seen before. The dark space between the buildings was foreboding, and not just because of the smell. Sounds echoed from somewhere beyond it and they sent the muscles at the back of Thomas’s shoulders twitching in discomfort.

Janek paused a moment. He shook out his shoulders and sniffed.

‘Come.’ He jerked his head towards the dark.

Thomas immediately fixed what he hoped was a secure, and in no way disturbed, expression on his face and nodded.

Janek’s attention lingered on him a moment too long for comfort, prompting Thomas to force something resembling a reassuring smile.

Satisfied, Janek nodded back. He turned and led the way.

Thomas grimaced as he followed, hearing slopping wetness under his shoes.
‘WhowwhooooOOP!’

Thomas’s heart leapt to his throat at Janek’s sudden, manic screech.

‘What the fu…?’ Thomas whispered to himself under his breath, for the sake of pride trying to mask how much the sound had made him jump.

He listened to Janek laugh as the sound faded away in the alleyway and pondered whether he should point out that a man carrying money should try to make as little of a spectacle of himself as possible while travelling down a dark alleyway.

They came out into a dimly lit space, a square courtyard surrounded by high buildings. Any cobles that might have been underfoot were blanketed by filth that had become packed earth and the squabbling chickens and dogs gave the space the feel of a medieval bailey. Thomas counted no fewer than a dozen doors leading into the surrounding buildings at floor level, and rickety staircases led to widened windows that served as doorways above.

The smell was…Death, if Thomas was perfectly honest.

From the dark corner beside them a little face appeared.

Thomas’s heart did another jump at thinking he’d been confronted by some supernatural creature, but closer inspection revealed it was a child. A tiny one and a dirty one. But not altogether uncomely; with its over-large nose and serious drawn little mouth somehow rendering it sweet rather than ugly.

It looked curiously between him and Janek.

Janek bent his knees, jutted forward his head, and snarled.

Janek’s sound was animalistic in the first degree, low and unnatural, his teeth bared like a dog’s.

Thomas could only watch in stunned silence as the child wisely beat a hasty retreat to the safety of a nearby doorframe. An arm extended from just out of view to cup the child in and usher it into the house.

Thomas wondered if the other occupants of the yard, unlike the child, had taken Janek’s whooping on entry as fair warning to scuttle.

As if to confirm, Janek followed his snarl with sharp burst of barking, delighting in filling the space, before declaring loudly.

‘I see you there Charlie!’

Thomas turned in time to see a grey-shirted shoulder vanish into a doorway across the yard.

Janek settled down. ‘I see you.’ He repeated, almost affectionately, before directing Thomas to turn about and stand in front of the first door to the right.

‘I told you…’ Janek said softly to Thomas. ‘…they know what I bring.’

‘So you…scare them half to hell?’ Thomas replied, reasonably nonchalantly under the circumstances.

‘Mmmm.’ Janek said, with perhaps a little too much enjoyment for comfort.

‘So this is where…?’ Thomas began, nodding to the door and trying to pretend he wasn’t aware of
the dozens of eyes spying on his back from the yard.

‘Yes.’ Said Janek.

‘Right.’ Said Thomas. He took in a deep breath and noticed Janek doing the same beside him.

With a moment’s hesitation, Janek reached out a hand to rap at the door.

‘It’s me.’ He called loudly. ‘Of course.’ He added slightly sourly under his breath, giving Thomas a wink.

Thomas took another bolstering breath.

‘Come on now!’ Janek went to bang at the door again, but the inner occupant got there first.

Thomas almost choked on the lump at the back of his throat. Dear Lord, Janek hadn’t been lying about the width of her. She was an extremely broad woman.

She was overweight, indeed, but Thomas could see even through her coarse brown dress and apron that her plump figure had none of the softness one might expect in such a rotund woman. Her bosom blended with her belly into a single mass above her apron strings, her arms were thick and threatening. Her cheeks and forehead looked like they might burst from her face at any moment, her lips were all but invisible.

She was shorter than her son, much much shorter in fact. Thomas judged the top of her head must barely come up to his chest.

But he couldn’t quite shake the feeling that he was the one looking up at her.

For such a comically proportioned woman there was a presence there that stole away his urge to laugh (or rather, choke) the moment their eyes met. Or perhaps it was the effect of her appearance on Janek that had Thomas realising this was a person of whom to take note.

‘This is Thomas, my friend.’ Said Janek, narrowly avoiding clonking Thomas with the sockfull of coins as he hastily gesticulated towards him.

Thomas managed a smile, still unable to quite get over the impropriety of introducing a male stranger to a lady without using his full title. But it was not the time for corrections. Janek had gone from a barking dog to a nervous wide-eyed puppy in a matter of seconds and Thomas couldn’t quite bring himself to complicate matters.

‘Thomas, this is my mother.’

And no correct title for the lady either…

He waited for her to extend a hand, but she did not.

Her attention moved back firmly to Janek, whose attempt at a chipper expression was now looking dangerously unsteady.

In the end Thomas settled on a small bow that most likely went unnoticed by both of them.

‘Thomas has moved into the…’

‘Wchodzić.’
Janek’s mother spoke so abruptly that it took Thomas a moment to realise he hadn’t understood the word.

The meaning was made clear however as she took a step back and motioned inside with one of her substantial arms. Without waiting to see if they complied, she turned her back and vanished out of sight.

Janek went immediately to follow her.

‘Wait!’ Thomas whispered frantically. ‘Doesn’t she speak…?’

‘Shhh…’ Janek quickly cut him off, flashing a brief glance of intense discomfort (and was there a hint of apology there?) in Thomas’s direction before grabbing him by the coat lapels and tugging him after him.
Chapter 57

The room was a thin, compressed thing. It was only one room. No amenities to speak of or doors leading off from it; which raised several practical questions regarding the toilet facilities (among other things) that Thomas really didn’t want to consider. Floorboards were bare, not altogether unexpected. But the unplastered, friable bare brick walls crossed that line from acceptable frugality to unhealthy poverty. Barely half a foot of space was between the few pieces of furniture. The walls looked like they might shed grit at any moment (at the slightest touch) but the floor was clear. Obsessively clear. It was clean.

The low bench that no doubt served as a bed was carefully made up, fabric and pillows tightly in place. The small round table, not unlike the one Thomas had bought himself for his own flat, was clear of debris save for a set of skilfully crocheted mats stacked in the centre.

Heat flickered from a small alcove in the wall to the right of the door. Thomas suspected its chimney emptied itself out into whatever accommodation was above, rather than reaching the sky. But the pot hanging above the fire had been scrubbed to within an inch of its life. There were cups, plates, bowls, utensils (some wood rather than metal) stacked neatly on stools next to the fire.

It was poor. Nothing beyond the bare bones of living, blended with the pride of cleanliness and skill with a needle and crochet hook.

This made the chaotic sight to the other side of the door all the more alarming and unexpected.

Thomas’s first thought was of church. Only in church had he ever seen that many candles before.

A tiny bench, table and series of shelves melted together with candlewax held up a staggered display of over three dozen candles. Some swaths of grey fabric were atop the altar-like table, by the largest of the candles.

The large candles were unlit, but most of the small ones were despite it being day.

Though he knew the candles cost less than a farthing for a box-full (or two) Thomas couldn’t help but judge the woman for such wasteful consumption – the thought overrode his confusion and discomfort at the strange display.

‘Usiąść.’

Thomas joined Janek in sitting down at the round table. They had small milking stools by way of seats, and Thomas was briefly lost in debating whether he ought to bother undoing a button on his jacket to create a smoother line in his clothing as he sat.

Janek’s mother remained standing.

‘Work has not been interesting.’ Janek spoke into the silence. ‘There is little to tell about…’

‘What about…’ Thomas chimed in, willing his voice to gain a little more steadiness. ‘…that bloke. The young one?’

Janek turned to him with a confused look.

‘You mentioned he got his hand stuck in the crane…or something of the like.’ Thomas offered.
‘Aye! Yes!’ Janek declared, seizing upon the opportunity to create a genuine conversation. ‘Mother you would not believe the…’

‘Czy przyjaciel herbatę?’ She said, dismissive but unhurried.

‘Yes mother…’ Janek began, visibly deflating. ‘…herbata.’ He added quietly, almost apologetically.

Thomas looked quizzically to Janek but Janek’s attention was now firmly fixed on the table top.

The mother – Mrs Biel, Thomas reminded himself – turned about to face the small alcove in the wall. She retrieved the pot, a tin caddy of leaves of miscellaneous smell, snatched up some handle-less beakers of ceramic and poured them each out a helping of the leaves mixed with hot water.

Tea, then. Thomas thought to himself. *Any chance of some sugar?*

*Or milk?*

*Or an exit strategy…?*

Mrs Biel joined them at the table.

She watched Janek. Janek watched the table. Thomas’s gaze flitted between the two of them and the unappetisingly odd colour of the tea in his beaker.

‘Twoi przyjaciele.’ She said slowly. Deliberately. There was no confusion as to whom she was speaking. ‘Jak są twoi przyjaciele?’

‘Matka…’ Thomas knew he wasn’t supposed to see the quick sleight of hand indicating in his direction. ‘…Angielski…’ Janek sighed deeply before adding almost at a whisper. ‘…proszę.’

Whatever the request, Mrs Biel’s response was merely to repeat. ‘Jak są twoi przyjaciele?’

Thomas heard Janek sigh again.

‘Tak.’ Janek said softly. ‘Wszechście są dobrze.’

Thomas was now no longer sure which of the two of them was making the bigger effort to pretend he wasn’t there.

‘Czy Anna dobrze?’

‘Matka…’

‘Powiedz mi.’

Thomas was surprised there was enough air left in Janek’s lungs for him to reply.

‘Nie wiem.’

Thomas busied himself with drinking the tea.

It wasn’t bad, just unfamiliar. And rapidly he came to realise that his chief pleasure in cups of tea previously had been in the excess of milk and sugar he had added to them.

He gulped the entire cup down in a matter of minutes, watching Janek shrink before his eyes the whole time. By the time he felt flecks of tea-leaf touch his lips from the bottom of the cup, Janek had
reduced down to the size of the urchin they had encountered out in the yard.

Thomas set his empty beaker down on the table; half hoping to impress Mrs Biel by his gratitude since he couldn’t do it in words, half hoping that now the tea was gone the sooner they could leave.

In a matter of seconds his cup was refilled to the brim.

Thomas fixed a smile in Mrs Biel’s direction and burnt his lips attempting to take an immediate sip by way of thanks.

It was a wasted effort. Somehow she didn’t look at him the whole time.

Thomas settled down to his tea as the unintelligible conversation continued beside him. Mrs Biel asking, Janek answering.

Once, and once only, he suspected they were talking about him. But if they were, Mrs Biel had deliberately mispronounced his name. Thomas only suspected because Janek had worked hard not to come out and correct her on something, his body language awkward and agitated, deliberately avoiding alerting Thomas to the problem.

Without thinking, Thomas emptied his second cup.

It was immediately refilled.

He smiled again, but internally wished the woman would bring the meeting to an end. It was clear Janek wasn’t going to be the one to do it. And if they remained much longer he would be reduced to urinating out of Mrs Biel’s window and carrying what was left of Janek home in his pocket.

‘Matka…’

Thomas recognised that tone of voice, even though he could only make an educated guess at the meaning of the word. It was that of an embarrassed, unwilling child.

But Mrs Biel persisted in whatever it was she had asked.

Thomas was taken aback in surprise when both of them rose from the table. He went to get up too, thinking it was finally time for release.

But no. Janek pushed him back down with a firm hand to the shoulder before following his mother across the room.

Thomas watched as the two of them knelt in front of the candles; Mrs Biel lighting the large pillar candles in the centre before settling back on her heels like Janek.

Placing both hands clasped in front of her breast, she began to speak, melodically and unrelentingly. Janek repeated her words each time she stopped for breath.

Though Janek had said nothing, hadn’t even looked at him, Thomas was acutely aware of Janek’s discomfort and embarrassment.

He endeavoured to look past Janek’s shoulders and occupy himself with the candles and fabric beyond.

This was a mistake.

On closer inspection the fragments of cloth revealed to be pieces of clothing, boys clothing if not a
man’s. And the glint of gold fragments pushed directly into the wax of one of the three large candles at the centre had Thomas almost bringing up the contents of his stomach over the table.

In the end he bowed his own head, reverentially and in the cause of affording Janek privacy, and said his own prayer to be on his way soon.
Chapter 58

The two of them said goodbye with words Thomas couldn’t understand.

Having suffered through what seemed like an hour of the strange happenings at the side of the room, another cup of tea and the embarrassment of rising from his seat too early, Thomas was desperate to get gone.

Mrs Biel, perhaps sensing this, lingered by the door for some time before she finally opened it to let them out.

He gave Mrs Biel a weak smile by way of goodbye. He was too well schooled in manners to snub the woman, and there was still the abstract notion of somehow getting into her good graces to strengthen his future with Janek. But there was still part of him that just wanted to snuff her out.

The thought of unpacking the day’s events with Janek, back in the sanctuary of their flat, was every bit as refreshing as the sudden rush of cool air as they stepped outside.

‘Goodbye.’ Thomas said, redundantly, as Mrs Biel swung the door rapidly shut.

Thomas huffed at the closed door and turned to make his way towards the alley.

Out the corner of his eye he saw Janek take a few long striding steps to terrorise a boy who had been unlucky (or bold) enough to put himself out in the courtyard in Janek’s way.

Thomas huffed again, shook out the unsettling numbness in his arms, tapped out a cigarette and made his way into the darkness between the buildings.

He heard Janek’s heavy footsteps slopping through the muck of the alley behind him.

Thomas’s first puff took near ten seconds, and he relished the satisfaction of flicking off the burnt out ash as he retraced their steps; keen to put as much distance between himself and the round woman with the firmly shut door as possible.

It took him another ten seconds or so to realise he was walking the street alone.

He turned, cigarette clutched inelegantly between finger and thumb (a habit from Janek), to find the man in question had barely made it out of the alley.

Janek had just about made it round the corner; an extra few inches of brick that shielded him from sight of the black alley and the courtyard beyond.

Then he’d sunk.

He was near half his usual height. One leg bent under him, the other stuck out straight across the cobbles. He leant heavily against the wall, the side of his head and the bones of his curled shoulder propping him up. His face was contorted.

It was the kind of shock that called for a swear word, but Thomas couldn’t muster one.

He discarded the cigarette entirely and quickly trotted back to the heap of a man.

‘Hey, hey…wait…’ Thomas quickly hooked a hand under each of Janek’s arms and attempted to pull him up and away from the wall. He felt something give in his own arm in the process, Janek
really was a heavy bastard.

Thomas checked over Janek’s shoulder and then his own. They were alone for now. But he didn’t fancy lingering long enough for that to change.

‘Come on.’ He whispered urgently. ‘Come on.’

Janek took a stiff step forwards with his right foot, followed by a lurch and a second shorter, barely there, step with the other.

‘Come on.’

Thomas’s shoulders and biceps were heaving. He could feel the sides of his neck straining fit to snap.

He was stunned by Janek’s state, the hulking man having suddenly gone out like a candle, but there wasn’t time to be shocked and practical in that particular moment.

He needed to get Janek off the street. And there was only one safe way to do it.

With a desperate sigh, Thomas set them in the direction of home.

For Thomas, every step of the journey was agony.

Every fucking step.

And he rediscovered the entirety of his foul word repertoire and his hatred for the streets of Liverpool as he shunted and shuffled Janek through the city.

The looks of disgust and sympathy on the faces of those they passed suggested they assumed Janek to be drunk or in intense physical pain. That was fine.

Just so long as they didn’t twig that the intimidating colossus was crying over his bloody mother.

‘Come on…’ Thomas was at the end of his endurance, end of his breath even, as they lurched up the steps to the house.

‘…please.’

Thomas was sat at the bottom of the stairs, sweat spiked pieces of hair irritating his eyes, his strength all but gone.

Janek was a short way away, propping up the wall of the hallway, mouth hanging open, staring at Thomas with dead eyes.

‘Please.’ Thomas said again, trying to calm his heart with heavy breaths. ‘Just a little further.’ He said.

Janek blinked. He lolled his head against the wall. He slipped as though about to fall but caught himself with the flat of a hand slammed against the wallpaper. Then he nodded.

‘Alright.’ Thomas breathed. ‘Alright.’

Thomas dragged himself up. He took hold of Janek’s arm and swung it over his shoulder. Using near his whole weight to counterbalance Janek’s bulk, Thomas wrapped his other arm around Janek’s waist and somehow managed to get the both of them up the stairs.
He paused for a moment on the landing, his shoulders and lungs crushed under Janek’s weight, debating his next move.

In the end the cups of tea decided for him. He shuffled them quickly over to the bathroom, dumped Janek on the floor by the tub, rushed over to the other side of the room and for an extended amount of time lost himself in a merciful stream of release.

He allowed himself the indulgence of a face wash along with his hands before turning back to Janek. Janek hadn’t moved.

He sat motionless like a rag doll, back bent forwards, head almost touching his outstretched legs.

The odd sniffle told Thomas the man was still breathing, but there were few other signs.

‘Janek…’ Thomas tentatively approached. ‘Can I…get you anything?’ He finished. The words sounded sufficiently lame to bring a blush of red to his cheeks, but there was still the small matter of the unresponsive man before him. He searched for inspiration as to how to bring Janek back to himself. Or at least back to something resembling consciousness. The man’s eyes were open, that much Thomas could see when he crouched down to check, but there was no one home.

Thomas sat back on his heels, one arm raised to rest a hand on Janek’s hunched back.

But he didn’t lower the hand enough to make contact. It hung in mid-aid while he thought on how to proceed.

In the end the bath tubs provided an answer. Not literally – Janek had made his feelings about baths perfectly clear – but there seemed something pleasantly calming about the idea of washing away the residue of the previous hours.

Thomas sat Janek in front of the small stove in their room and did the best he could with a cloth, warmed bucket of water and soap.

Janek did nothing throughout. He let himself be maneuvered and washed, only occasionally leaning in to Thomas’s shoulder; leaving strips of damp on Thomas’s shirt. His breathing began to sputter through the silence, as though he was preparing to finally let loose with whatever emotions lurked behind the deeply wrinkled and contorted muscles of his face.

Thomas dressed Janek in his own dressing gown, wanting to get something around him as his skin remained clammy cold despite the heat of the fire and water, and walked him to bed.

Thomas made it a short way back across the room, meaning to tidy up the mess of soap suds soaking into the floorboards by the stove, before the real tears started.

The noise was sufficiently odd and unexpected to have Thomas briefly imagine he might turn around and see a different person in the bed. Someone smaller. Unfamiliar.

Whoever was there, Thomas deemed they needed their privacy.

He continued on with his work. He cleaned up the floor. Then he took to clearing up the remaining debris of breakfast that lingered on the counter tops.

He got out of his clothes, hanging them neatly ready for the morning. He donned his pyjamas and stoked more fuel on the fire; wishing he had a second dressing gown.
Wails roused him from in front of the fire.

Thomas took three steps towards the bed. Then two back.

He watched Janek shaking on his side.

He’d never felt so unsure.

A man needs his…time. Of that much Thomas was sure.

But still…

Another doleful whine and Thomas was across the room.

At first he sat, then he lay, his hand firmly resting on Janek’s shivering arm.

‘Shhhh…’ He said, foolish though it sounded. ‘Hush there.’

Janek gave a watery gurgle that might well have been a laugh. Clearly he found the platitudes as foolish as Thomas.

Still the noises from the back of his throat decreased in volume, eventually stopping altogether as Thomas persisted with gentle comfort.

‘Hush…’ Thomas whispered, almost too soft to be heard, as Janek’s crying settled to watery-eyed silence.

For a while they just looked at each other.

‘So…’ Thomas eventually said. ‘…that was…I mean, how are you?’

‘I’m alright.’ Janek said.

‘Once more with feeling.’ Thomas said, cracking a smile.

Janek gave a grin also, though it vanished as quickly as it had come, leaving behind a dull mouth and wide pale eyes that seemed to look right through Thomas to something far away.


‘Does that mean I can be pissed with you now?’ Said Thomas, forcing joviality.

‘Hmmm?’

Thomas settled his spare arm under his head, resting down on the pillow.

‘You could have told me she didn’t speak English.’

Janek’s face screwed itself up again, as though about to laugh or cry. But he did neither, merely allowing his face to relax again while he muttered.

‘She can.’

‘What?’ *That* had Thomas propping himself up on his arm.

‘She can.’ Janek repeated with a nod. This time he did laugh; lazily smiling at Thomas when he was done. ‘She can.’
‘She…’

‘She just didn’t want to talk to you.’

‘What the fuck did I do?’ Thomas exclaimed.

Janek gave him a dull look. A look that said he was being very very stupid indeed.

Thomas got it. And the moment he did he resented Janek’s coldly authoritative look. Thomas twisted his head a little. ‘You don’t look at me like that.’ He said. ‘I’ve been in this land a lot longer than you.’

‘Can I leave?’ Janek said. His voice was small. A laugh followed. But there was a hint of pain there that set an ache in Thomas’s chest.

He reached his hand up to push his fingers through Janek’s hair, attempting to soothe the both of them.

‘I didn’t mean that.’ Janek said.

‘I know.’

‘It’s just…’

‘There’s no ‘just’ about it is there?’ Thomas said dryly.

Janek laughed again. ‘No. No there’s not.’ He turned onto his back to stare at the ceiling, dislodging Thomas’s hand.

Thomas withdrew his arm, resting it on the bed between them. He waited.

‘There’s something I should tell you.’ Janek said to the ceiling.

He paused.

‘Alright.’ Thomas eventually said, feeling highly dubious of Janek’s need to ask permission to divulge.

‘You know I don’t…’ Janek began. ‘…don’t really go in for the lasses. Never have.’

Thomas nodded, fighting the urge to point out he was in the best position of anyone to know that already.

‘Wasn’t really one for anyone. Then you came and…well…we…’ Janek trailed off.

This time Thomas couldn’t avoid teasing a little. ‘Not like you to be delicate.’ He said.

‘Don’t have to say it do I?’ Janek was suddenly sharp.

‘No.’ Thomas said quickly. He gave an apologetic grimace. ‘You don’t. I know what…happened…after we met.’

Janek nodded to the ceiling. ‘Then you were off.’ He paused a moment. ‘Then I found this girl.’ He said. ‘Anna something, I forget the rest.’

‘Right…’ Thomas prompted, trying not to sound too invested.
‘She was some friend. Gareth’s sister brought her by, I think.’

‘But you forget.’ Thomas said.

‘Yes.’ Janek agreed quietly. ‘I forget.’

‘So…’ Thomas swallowed.

‘So I heard about her the Saturday.’ Now it was Janek’s turn to swallow. ‘Then the Sunday I met her I took her to my mother’s.’

‘And how was that?’ Thomas said with more than a touch of resentment.

‘It was…’ Here Janek’s voice took on another tone entirely. Clear and hopeful, with a genuine joy. ‘…good. Everything was beautiful.’

‘Your mother loved her?’ Thomas said.

‘She loved what she was.’ Janek replied quietly. ‘And I walked out of there feeling like a king…I didn’t even know her.’ He added. He cleared his throat before continuing. ‘Then we went to this tea shop. Me and Anna.’

‘Yes?’

‘I ordered a black tea and a one with a little milk. She asked for honey as well.’ He sniffed. ‘So I got some.’

‘Janek for God’s sake…’

‘Her knee!’ Janek practically spat at him.

Thomas jerked back in alarm.

Janek settled down. ‘Her knee.’ He repeated, shaking his head. ‘I bumped it with mine when I sat down.’ He raised a hand to his forehead to sweep away the errant hairs plastered to it. ‘And I jumped up, like I was stung. Then I left. I tried, again and again, the next few weeks but…’

‘…I think I understand.’ Thomas said eventually.

‘Do you?’ Said Janek. ‘Because I have many ladies I know. Lovely ladies. We kiss and we dance. We drink and play cards until dawn. But…’

‘But when there’s something more, everything is…unsavoury.’

‘Yes!’ Janek declared to the air above his head. ‘That is it.’

‘What happened then?’

‘Then…’ Janek continued. ‘…I got on a train to find you.’

‘Ah.’ Thomas said. ‘So…a happy ending then?’ He volunteered, leaning a little in towards Janek, willing him to abandon staring at the ceiling and turn to him.

Janek didn’t move. There was fresh water running down the sides of his cheeks.

‘No?’ Said Thomas.
‘Yes.’ Said Janek. ‘Yes, happy.’

It would have been more convincing without the tears.

‘What is it Janek?’ Thomas said, debating reaching out to him again.

The only answer was another screwed up face and some sobs. Janek’s face disappeared behind his hands as he fought to hold himself together.

Thomas watched, feeling somewhere near to as lost as Janek.

‘It’s me.’ Eventually broke through Janek’s hands. ‘Just me. You know they’re all dead. And it’s just me.’

‘You’re brothers?’

‘It wasn’t supposed to be like this.’ Janek’s sobs continued unabated. ‘There was always someone to get the learning. Get the good job. Look after her. There was…’ Janek said. ‘…women. Aleks and Marcin, they had women. Those women were supposed to have babies. Leon, he would have had a woman too…’ Here Janek’s speech descended into incomprehensible coughs and sniffs.

Thomas felt useless. All he could think of was to reach for him but Janek twisted away when he tried.

‘What kind of brother am I?’

‘I…’ Thomas tried. ‘…I don’t know what to say?’ He was eventually forced to concede.

‘I should grieve for them all. And I do.’ Janek said softly. ‘But then I think…who will have the babies?’

‘Janek…’

‘They are dead.’ He shook his head again. ‘And all I think is they should have made children.’

‘Janek you mourn them.’ Thomas said. ‘You miss them. I’ve seen it.’

‘But the children.’ Janek was crying freely now. ‘Who will have them? There must be some. A whole family must not go to dust.’

‘It happens Janek.’

‘No!’ Janek cried. ‘No it…’ He paused. ‘…But how can I make children when I am…’ He searched for the words. ‘…a woman myself?’

‘I thought you liked…how things are between us.’ Thomas said.

‘I do. Truly, I do.’ Janek said, wiping away the wetness from his face. ‘And don’t you ever think otherwise.’

Thomas gave up on his previous position and instead turned to look at the ceiling along with Janek.

‘You take her money…’ He said tentatively. ‘You visit her. You have…made the best effort to meet her expectations.’

Janek listened silently.
‘You’ve done enough.’ Said Thomas. ‘And you must know that’s true.’

‘I’m last, Thomas.’ Janek said. ‘I am the last.’

And that was true also.

‘Fuck the fucking war.’ Janek suddenly declared with a sense of finality. ‘Fuck them for dying in it.’ He added with a flourish, as though making a toast.

‘You love them, Janek.’ Thomas said simply.

‘I do.’ Janek agreed with a sigh that could have raised the roof.

‘But by all means hate the fucking war.’ Thomas said.

Janek gave a snort of agreement.

Thomas hesitated a moment before speaking again.

‘You know, men and women don’t always manage babies.’

‘I know Thomas.’ Janek replied. ‘And I know I never will. I can’t even bump a girl’s knee...’

‘That’s that then.’ Thomas said, unsure what else to say.

Janek nodded silently. He turned onto his side, tugging Thomas’s dressing gown tighter round himself and hid his face.

Thomas’s efforts to get close were rebuffed, and the chances of getting the covers out from under Janek were slim to nil, so Thomas settled to sleep beside him with his feet already numb at the bottom of his pyjama legs. Not touching was an effort in the tiny bed, but there seemed to be an impenetrable barrier wrapped all around Janek that night, and Thomas had no desire to breach it.
When Thomas woke up there was no Janek.

Janek must have seen himself off to work. Thomas chose to take this as a good sign.

He strongly suspected that if Janek intended to blow off work and spend the day in the pub he would have invited him along for the ride.

Thomas winced at the painful cold in his bones. He’d slept above the covers all night and his thin pyjamas hadn’t done much even before the stove had burned out. He needed to crawl out of bed and find his dressing gown (he assumed Janek hadn’t taken it to work) and then transport his icy carcass to the bathroom for one hell of a hot bath.

He reasoned he needed some heat more than he needed breakfast that morning.

‘Fuck!’

A look at the clock told him he didn’t have time for either. There were fifteen minutes before he was due at work and at least thirteen of them were accounted for by the time it would take him to get there.

‘Fuck! Bollocks, bollocks, bollocks!’ He jumped out of bed. A sharp jolt of pain split between the ball of his foot and his heel. The other foot was numb. ‘Balls …fuck!’ He hopped across the room. He wound up on his arse on the floor as he dragged on his long johns. The blasted things stretched twice their normal size but refused to pull fully over his toes to release his foot. It took every ounce of self-control to reach down and tug the elastic free from his foot so he could pull them up.

He made it off the floor.

Nothing was where he thought he’d left it.

‘Trousers…where are the cunting…?’ He found the trousers. ‘Shirt…shirt…BOLLOCKS!’ His knee caught the side of the second bed.

It too almost ten minutes to get dressed. No time to shave.

Thomas spared a miserable glance at the mirror at his visible stubble line before slicking his hair down with his hands. God only knew where his comb had got to.

He got his coat and hat on, remembered at the last minute to take his bag, and crashed out of the door with the speed and force of a thundering race horse.

The people of the city moved in slow motion around him as he first strode then ran in the direction of the main road.

Buildings and pedestrians blurred. He wouldn’t have known it had he run past the King himself.

There was the odd near miss with the milk carts (now going back to the depot – another sure sign he was late) and he almost flew straight over a ginger cat that appeared unexpectedly from a shop-front.

He didn’t dare pause to check his watch and see how late he was as ‘Mr Cutter’s Clock Emporium’ came into view.
There was a snap and a rattle as Thomas flung open the door. The shop-bell clattered down the edge of two shelves before hitting the floor and breaking.

‘Fuck!’

Thomas looked up to find himself staring at the bemused faces of Mr Cutter and an as-of-yet unidentified man that Thomas desperately hoped wasn’t a customer.

‘I’m sorry…’ Thomas said quickly, dumping his bag by the door. Breathless, he sank down and began to gather up the pieces.

From across the shop, Mr Cutter gave a laugh. ‘Jona, meet my new man.’ He said.

‘Pleasure I’m sure.’ The man snorted. ‘So…’ He turned back to Mr Cutter. ‘…I got all that you asked for…’

Thomas was intensely relieved to find that the man was a delivery man. Not that it made the manner of his entry (late and destructive) any less humiliating and improper.

‘Sir…’ Thomas began the moment the delivery man left. ‘…I am so, so…’

Mr Cutter held up a small, wrinkled hand to stop him.

‘Bugger me Thomas that is the funniest thing…’ Mr Cutter’s eyes watered as chokes of laughter jiggled his cheeks. ‘…I have ever seen of a Monday morning.’

‘But I’m sorry!’ Thomas said, holding the pieces of the bell. ‘I’m sorry about the bell, I’m sorry I’m late. I just…’

‘Don’t worry yourself about the bell.’ Mr Cutter said, drying his eyes with a clumsily but lovingly embroidered handkerchief. ‘That’s been there since I bought the place. I’ve been thinking about replacing it every time it’s rung since!’

‘Thank you.’ Said Thomas quietly. ‘I’ll just…’ He deposited the pieces on the countertop. ‘…put these here.’

Mr Cutter nodded, his eyes still bright with merriment.

‘You still beat my lazy boy in…’ He said, somewhat sadly. ‘But I seem to remember you’re heading out this morn?’ He perked up.

‘Yes…’ Thomas agreed, feeling fresh horror at the state of his unshaved chin and uncombed hair. ‘Yes I am.’ He said. ‘The cotton merchant’s house. Mr…Hilson or Helson or…’

‘You’d best get that straight before you go!’ Mr Cutter chuckled.

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Ron, for goodness sake.’ Said Mr Cutter. It was a familiar routine by now.

‘Mr Cutter.’ Thomas responded dryly.

Thomas took himself and his bag off to the workshop to settle his nerves and to gather what he would need to take to the town house. A ‘service’ could mean anything from winding to a complete re-build, and Thomas was dearly hoping it would just be half a dozen of the former. He didn’t think his attention would hold to attempt anything more in-depth.
He left a short while later, bidding Mr Cutter a humble goodbye mingled with another apology for being late.

The town house was to the West, not far from where he’d wandered when he’d first come into the city. So he felt reasonably sure that he and his bag of tools could find their way.

He stopped for a cup of tea on route and seriously debated ducking into a barbers for a shave and a haircut (realising that perhaps a lack of a comb-through was the least of his hair’s problems after such a long period of neglect) but he doubted he could sit still for long enough, even if he had the time.

When he arrived at the house he momentarily considered the idea of just waltzing right up to ring the front doorbell. It would be a victory of sorts. However he mentally acknowledged he still qualified as a ‘tradesman’ (whether that was a step up from ‘servant’ was still open for debate) and would be better served by following protocol and seeking admission via the doorway at the side of the house below street level.

‘Good morning…’ He greeted the quizzical girl (scullery maid?) that opened the door.

It took some time to communicate his purpose in being there in simple enough terms for her to realise she needed to fetch the butler. She left him standing out in the side-road while she did.

‘Ah, Mr Barrow…’ At least the butler offered a hand to shake. The man could have been Carson’s double; all girth and eyebrows and booming voice. ‘…thank you very much for coming.’

The man guided him into the corridor and motioned for him to walk ahead. He took Thomas to the bottom of a rickety wooden staircase, leading out of the lower level of the house to (hopefully) a more solidly built staircase above that would lead him to the main house. Through a slither of air between doorframe and door, Thomas caught a glimpse of liveried men and women clustered about a small table; encircled by cigarette smoke and the steam from their cups of tea.

‘Frank!’

A nervous boy in footman’s uniform suddenly appeared.

‘Direct Mr Barrow to the time pieces requiring attention.’ Carson’s double said sternly.

The boy continued to look between him and Thomas in confusion.

‘The clocks, Frank. The clocks.’ The butler eventually barked.

‘Right away!’

And the boy was ‘right away’. Thomas stumbled several times behind him on the staircase trying to keep up.

Entering the upstairs from the bare and rickety steps was like emerging into another world. White and gold were the order of the day, with the décor being far too grand for the narrow, albeit tall, rooms of the town house.

Delusions of grandeur. That was at the forefront of Thomas’s mind as he surveyed his surroundings. But all the same, being in the midst of that crisply clean luxury…it felt like coming up for air.

‘…And that’s all of them.’ The young footman spun about and vanished the moment the tour was complete, leaving Thomas alone in the hallway with a silent Grandfather clock.
Most of the clocks in the place were silent, and those that weren’t were off by hours. Thomas could only assume that it was the owner rather than the staff who looked after the clocks, and that he must be away for a long trip and the staff had panicked about how he would react upon returning home.

It wouldn’t have hurt Frank to stick around, Thomas mused. Or the butler. Someone in the fucking house should learn how to run the things.

God he felt sour.

It wasn’t like looking after the damn things was hard. Any fool could have read in a pamphlet how to tug at the chains of the Cuckoo clock Frank had walked him past a few minutes earlier. And as for the Grandfather…was it really all that hard to push the hands round to tell the correct time?

He set his bag on the floor and opened the glass front.

He gave a long exhale before raising his hands to begin tending to the hands.

Was he angry about being left alone? Was that the truth of it?

Had he expected a hallboy or footman to be assigned to him, or even the attentive ear of the butler?

He twirled the hands round until the clock read right.

He fancied he could hear them all, the group he had glimpsed down in the servant’s hall. They were chattering, and laughing, sharing. Common experience, community, cabin fever even, binding them together. Always someone to talk to, or at least listen to. Looks that could be exchanged in an instant that told long stories of familiar experience, a strong connection between people that were otherwise nothing alike and shared no other common ground.

Thomas whistled slowly.

He vaguely recalled the time Tom Branson’s brother had visited Downton. The way he had made himself at home in the servant’s hall; regaling them all with his stories and wit.

Thomas’s hands dropped to his sides. He stared blankly at the motionless mechanics of the clock.

He wanted to be that man.

He wanted to finish up his work in the upstairs then be welcomed to the table below. He wanted the staff to want him there. He wanted their wonder. He wanted them hanging on his words. He wanted…a cup of fucking tea with people he shared something with.

But what good was it to fantasise? He was unshaven, tired, disoriented and in that moment had all the charisma of a rusty nail. He couldn’t even hold the attention of one footman, how could he hope to enchant a room?

There was a snuffling of noise from the end of the hall.

Thomas didn’t turn his head, his pride prevented him, but he saw out of the corner of his eye that two young serving men and a woman were peeking out from a doorway; watching the strange solitary man stood staring at a clock.

Something that felt alarmingly like tears pricked at the corners of Thomas’s eyes. Bending down to find something to enable him to wind the clock didn’t help but a quick sniff put his wobbly face back to rights.
He went through the motions, working his way through the clocks in a dazed disconnected state.

He felt hung somewhere between the aloof invisible family of owners and the present but unapproachable staff.

He was keen to be rid of the place.

If Thomas had it his way he would have high-tailed it out of the house the moment his job was done without speaking to a soul.

But he still had to go through the humiliating motions of locating the butler and obtaining his fee before making his escape.

He left the way he’d entered and he’d never found the stench of the street so comforting.
Chapter 60

In a spectacular feat of poor timing, Thomas arrived home that evening to be greeted by a letter that would have been welcome on any other day. Mrs Porter caught him, looking dejected and fed up in the hallway, to hand it to him.

It was from Baxter, he recognised the writing in an instant; a charmingly depressing reminder of his previous existence (even if he hadn’t spent most of the day in painful reminiscence). It was a very short letter, from the size of it, and its lack of bulk strongly suggested there would be no additional words from Jimmy or, more importantly, reference from Lord Grantham inside.

Thomas absolutely couldn’t face opening the thing at that moment.

He thrust it into his pocket unopened, managed to make it past Mrs Porter with only minimal rudeness, and with the last of his energy climbed the stairs and filled himself a warm bath.

He sank into the water with a sense of relief so strong that his mind already bemoaned that at some point he would have to get out.

Not for some time though.

He may have fallen asleep because his fingers were well pruned when he was roused by a hammering at the bathroom door.

‘Occupied.’ Thomas shouted from the sanctuary of the filled bath tub.

‘I know…’ Thomas gave a snort at recognising Janek’s cheeky voice. ‘…I smell the soap from here.’

‘What?’ Thomas said, as much to himself as to Janek. It didn’t say much about the other occupants of the house if he alone were identifiable by soap.

Out in the corridor he heard Janek chuckle.

Thomas sank a little further into the bath water, submerging his shoulders and leaning his head back into the welcome warm.

‘Can I come in?’ Janek called.

‘In theory…’ Thomas began. ‘…but Lord knows I’m not getting out this tub till I’m good and…’

The sentence was left hanging. In the time it took Thomas to speak it Janek had made a return trip to their room, retrieved a knife and proceeded to pick the latch of the door.

‘What the…?’ Thomas sat up in the bath, reflexively drawing his knees to his chest. ‘How did you manage to get that open so…?’ Thomas glanced down at the knife in Janek’s hand as Janek closed the door behind him. ‘That had better not be one we eat with.’ He said gruffly.

‘I will wash it.’ Said Janek with a wink, dropping it onto the floor along with the dust and spiders accumulated in the corner of the room.

‘Lovely.’

Thomas gave an exaggerated smile that held a distinct air of grimace about it as Janek approached.
He dropped the jibe, along with unfurling his knees, once Janek was safely seated beside the bath with his arm resting on the rim.

‘You alright?’ Thomas settled back, letting a tap prod at his shoulder. He looked towards Janek with poorly disguised curiosity and concern.

‘Mmmmm.’ Janek’s chin rested on his arm as he nodded, tugging the skin back and forth beneath it. His eyes were wide and searching, fixed on Thomas’s face. ‘But you are not, are you?’

Thomas didn’t think it right proper to retort that Janek was the one who should still be in need of support. Besides, annoyingly the man did look genuinely fine.

And he wasn’t wrong about Thomas either.

‘I’m alright.’ Thomas heard himself say.

Janek raised his chin from his forearm and mimed sniffing the air.

‘As I thought…’ He said as he returned to his resting position.’

Thomas knew he would regret playing along but cocked an eyebrow regardless.

‘…smell of bullshit.’ Janek concluded with a smile.

Thomas sighed heavily enough to send ripples across the bathwater.

‘I went to a rich house today.’ He said. ‘And now I feel a bit queer.’ Thomas watched Janek closely, searching for cracks, ticks, twitches…anything to tie him to the quivering mess of the previous night.

But no. Janek’s attention was unwavering, sincere, and he seemed every bit his usual self. His usual self being usually, Thomas mentally acknowledged with a twinge, concerned with Thomas. ‘Look it doesn’t…’

‘Ah.’ Janek wagged a finger in his face to shush him. ‘Matters.’ He said firmly.

‘I just went in, sorted out the clocks.’ Thomas said, shrugging his shoulders up in the water. ‘And…’ He struggled to find his voice a little. There was a depth of emotion there that caught him off guard even given his musings earlier in the merchant’s house, and now of course there was the added humiliation of admitting to a seemingly childish notion. ‘…I felt lonely.’

‘Lonely?’

‘Yes.’ Thomas said. ‘I couldn’t meet with the family that own the house. I couldn’t be with the workers neither.’

‘You can’t make friends in all places.’ Janek said.

‘It’s not about that.’ Thomas said, dragging himself up and propping his elbow on the side of the bath to rest his head by Janek’s. ‘And by the by, you seem to have friends wherever you go.’ He teased, nudging at the mess of Janek’s hair with the tip of his nose. Janek chuckled and pulled back.

‘It’s just…I belonged somewhere, you know. Now, the clocks…’ Thomas shook his head. ‘…is that it? Is that all there is?’

Now it was Janek’s turn to ruffle Thomas’s hair. He lazily drew back bits of hair from Thomas’s wet forehead back to the crown of his head, playing with them when they fell back forward.
For now. He said.

The words were so certain in the unspoken promise of better to come that Thomas couldn’t help but feel lifted, though he knew, in all practicality, he was unlikely to be going anywhere beyond his present situation anytime soon.

Janek toyed with his hair a little longer before leaving Thomas to himself in the bath.

By the time Thomas had extracted his very wrinkled self from the bathroom Janek was already well into making dinner. Or at least that would be the technical term for the ungodly aroma pervading the entire room in a haze so thick Thomas felt he could already taste it.

What in the bloody fuck have you got in there and how long’s it been dead?

Thomas switched from being wrapped in his bath towel to being safely warm in his dressing gown; noticing with pleasure the ease with which he could do so, without worrying about the view he cut to Janek, and also noting that the robe still smelt strongly of Janek from the night before.

In response Janek pulled off the lid of the pot (conspicuously without using a rag to shield his hand from the heat) and brought out a fish head, balancing it between the wooden spoon and his finger. Its mouth was open as if in surprise at finding itself in a cooking pot.

I trust the rest of the fish is in there somewhere? Said Thomas, his voice muffled by the dressing gown sleeve (deliciously scented with earthy essence du Janek) that he had thrown up to protect his nose.

I should think so… Said Janek, peering down into the pot as though to search.

You think I’m eating that you’ve got another thing coming. Thomas tossed out over his shoulder as he set about preparing his clothes for the next day.

You will eat… Janek abandoned the pot to join Thomas over by the chests of clothes, brandishing the wooden spoon like a conductor’s stick. He tilted his head in just close enough to steal a kiss, not touching any part of him but his lips; away as quickly as a thief. …and you will love it. He said as he turned about to return to the cooking.

Thomas caught him by the shoulder, struggling to resist the urge, as ever, to bury his nose in the space between Janek’s neck and shoulder and never come out again, and stole a kiss of his own.

That’s what I thought. Said Janek triumphantly as Thomas released him.

MmmNnn… Thomas leant his head to the side and moved in for another, opening his own mouth wide enough to gain a little heat from Janek’s own. He pulled back. It’s just that I won’t be going anywhere near your mouth after you’ve eaten that. Thomas nodded towards the stove.

Ha! Janek gave him a sharp knock with the spoon. Very nice!

All I’m sayin’ is I’m going to need a clothes peg on my nose before I can even think about eating. Thomas said with a grin.

Then you find one, eh? Janek poked him in the chest before returning to the pot.

Thomas didn’t quite make good on his threat to eat with his nose pegged shut, but he did have to deliberately breathe with his mouth rather than nose when Janek served up the stew-like substance onto the table before him.
‘This is…’ Thomas said gingerly, struggling to keep his first mouthful in his mouth (being equally unwilling to swallow as to spit it back out).

Janek had no such scruples. A stream of bits of flaked fish, broth and vegetable made their way swiftly down from his mouth back to the plate. ‘Fuckin’ awful!’

Their eyes met above the unpalatable meal and a second later they were both collapsed with laughter.

A few minutes later the firelight found them sitting on the floor in front of the open stove with pieces of bread stuck on the end of a poker.

Every now and then Thomas’s shoulders shook with poorly suppressed laughter.

‘Shhh!’ Janek leant sideways to knock their sides together.

‘You know darling…’ Thomas spoke with the most put-on upper class drawl he could muster. ‘… that truly was an exemplary dinner…’ He broke off a piece of lightly charcoaled bread and went to put it in his own mouth before changing his mind and offering it to Janek’s.

Janek too the bread, lightly nipping at the tip of Thomas’s fingers; perhaps by way of cautioning him from pressing the issue of the dinner disaster too far.

‘Well I’m glad…’ Janek tried and failed utterly to copy Thomas’s hammy speech. His accent was too strong, his tongue and mouth unaccustomed to the discipline of the sound.

He covered by offering Thomas a little piece of toast torn from his own skewer.

Thomas leant forwards to eat it.

‘Mmmm, delectable!’ He declared.

‘Who are you and what’ve you done with me Yorkshire lad?’ Janek nudged him again.

‘Yorkshire lad…’ Thomas broke character to laugh.

Once their feast of toast (and some dried meat Thomas remembered they had lurking near the back of the cupboard) was over Thomas assisted Janek in the task of disposing of the fish-based disaster. That done, they worked side by side to wash up the various utensils.

Time crept on and once the clearing up was completed, the candles lit, the fire safely died down and behind the stove door, and the clothes all put where they ought to be the issue of bed raised its head.

Well, it wasn’t so much the ‘bed’ aspect as to what may or may not happen in it. And Thomas had no idea how to bring about the conversation. He felt it the appropriate thing to do to offer to sleep in the spare bed should Janek prefer. He couldn’t quite come up with the words, so settled for taking a seat on the spare bed in a pointed manner to see if Janek reacted.

‘And you are doing what over there?’ Janek asked, noticing Thomas’s position as he undressed by the foot of the other bed.

‘Thought you might like…well…’ Thomas fumbled for the words. Janek walked around to stand between the two beds.

‘If you are not here…’ Janek backed towards the bed by the wall; confident, beguiling, naked. ‘… there is nothing to like.’ Janek sat down onto the bed.
Thomas was struck silent and still.

‘Well?’ Janek twitched his head, trying to see past Thomas’s bewildered expression.

‘I cannot see…’ Thomas managed. ‘…how anyone could possibly refuse that.’

He was up and on his feet as though drawn in a trance and made his way over and down onto the bed where a laughing Janek waited.

There was a great deal of kissing, during which time Thomas’s dressing gown made its way first to the side of the bed then onto the floor. Their bodies stayed in close as they romped at the mouth, letting their lips drag and sop against the other’s in a way that only people more concerned with sensations than with appearances can do.

They were still pressed together in these sloppy close quarters when Thomas inclined his face to rest their foreheads together, briefly separating their mouths.

‘Are you alright though?’ He said. ‘Really? ‘Cause I’d have thought, after yesterday…’

From underneath him Janek’s fingers reached up to squeeze at Thomas’s bicep.

‘Shhh…’ Janek hissed, nudging forwards in search of Thomas’s mouth.

‘No but…’ Thomas persisted, shifting his head slightly to breath against Janek’s cheek. ‘…there’s problems there and I…’

‘No problems.’ Thomas felt one of Janek’s thighs move against his own amid the bunched up bed clothes. He kissed Thomas’s cheek, raising his head off the pillow enough to let him whisper into Thomas’s ear. ‘Not for another whole month.’

He rested his head back against the pillow. His eyes briefly imparted a look of sombre, resigned sorrow – inviting Thomas to share in the openness for a moment – before burning back to the contentment of a few moments previous. Thomas’s eyes followed him on the journey, and his lips met Janek’s when they rose to his.

Thomas barely registered which parts of their fronts were coming into contact with one another, he knew only that there was lots of skin to be had. And what his torso and legs couldn’t have, his arms could find; slotted under Janek’s back and buttocks whenever Janek shifted enough on the mattress to give him room to do so. Janek’s hands were more focused. They settled on Thomas’s hips and urged more pressure, more friction; pulling Thomas unmistakeably towards him.

They had managed a great deal of sweat and saliva, and the tips of both cocks were leaking wet. Thomas endeavoured to make as much use of each as possible; trailing fingers down from Janek’s mouth, to his glistening stomach, to his straining cock; adding a little from his own mouth in the bargain to open him up.

When they were finally locked together, Thomas settled high above Janek’s open hips, the pause before either moved was mere seconds.

As rhythm set in they moved as fiercely as possible – pulling away with force to enable a swifter, more vigorous re-joining. Their bodies bemoaned every inch of air between their chests, stomachs… but melted into every thrust as they slid together again.

As was the usual order of business, Thomas, overcome with wonder that he was experiencing the encounter at all, worked hard to make Janek lose himself. Janek, for his part, fought hard to keep
with him and give him some blissful abandon of his own.

The battle of wills distilled itself to a potent rush of feelings, not wholly of the physical, that had both men feeling numb while at the same time experiencing a more intense sensation across their skin than felt before.

A strange sense of timelessness settled over them as Thomas collapsed down. The ticks of the clock seemed to fade away, leaving their lazy breaths as a metronome as the night sky moved slowly past their un-curtained windows.

Thomas’s head remained fixed in the crook of Janek’s neck throughout the night. He dreamt of open fields and salt-soaked rope. And his lot wasn't quite so bad after all.
Chapter 61

‘Shit!’ Thomas wrenched himself upright, sending the bed springs creaking. His eyes flew open in a panic.

It was still dark.

‘What?’ Janek groggily mumbled from somewhere inside the bedclothes.

‘Shit…’ Thomas said again, this time by way of relieved sigh. He pushed back his unruly hair and let himself fall back onto the bed. ‘Thought I was late again.’

‘Again?’

Thomas couldn’t quite make out where Janek’s face was hiding. He tugged away at the bunch of sheets to reveal a very sleepy visage atop a twisted neck, resting lazily in the deep grove of the pillow.

‘Yesterday.’ Thomas whispered, moving so that they were almost nose to nose. ‘Woke up after you’d left and properly missed my time at work.’

‘Ah…’ From somewhere to the side of them Thomas heard the sound of Janek’s fist thumping the mattress. ‘Knew I should have wakened you. You were sleeping like a dead man.’

Thomas groaned in response.

‘I should be getting up now.’ Janek said.

Thomas felt rough fingertips lightly running down his nose and cheek. ‘So early?’

‘There is a big order complete today.’ Said Janek. ‘Least we hope it’s complete.’ He added with a snort.

Thomas laughed with him. ‘Go on then.’ He prodded Janek’s nose with his own.

Janek’s fingertips briefly tickled at Thomas’s exposed throat before throwing the covers off and sliding down to the end of the bed.

Thomas turned onto his front and buried his face in the pillow. ‘Does this mean I have to bloody get up ‘n all?’ He grumbled, missing the warmth of the covers.

Janek made no sound as he moved. He made Thomas jump by suddenly appearing beside the head of the bed to whisper. ‘It may be worth your while.’

Thomas was up.

He had a coffee, a suck off and a plate of hot food; in that order. He stood with a second cup of coffee and a cigarette watching from the window as Janek make his way down the street and out of sight.

He drank the coffee down to the dregs, discarded the cigarette out the window and reasoned he could suffer many more mornings like this one.

He arrived early to the clock shop and had to wait outside for some time before the shuffling figure
of Mr Cutter appeared. Though it hadn’t been his intention to arrive so early, Thomas nevertheless
glowed a little at the smile Mr Cutter gave him in recognition of the ‘effort’ he had made to make up
for his poor showing the previous morning. Chris, of course, was nowhere to be seen.

Thomas and Mr Cutter waded into the jobs for the morning. Thomas sat in the back workshop,
quickly dissembling the mechanism of a troublesome mantle clock, while Mr Cutter sat at the shop
counter in case a customer should appear (not likely at this time of day, Thomas was now well
aware) working on a wall clock so large that Thomas had wondered if a clerk had nicked it from the
train station before realising it didn’t work.

At least it meant Mr Cutter wasn’t having to overly strain to see how the pieces fit together.

Better yet, Thomas had managed to engineer their jobs to be this particular way round seemingly
without Mr Cutter having cottoned on that Thomas was trying to make allowances for his failing
sight.

‘I feel…a cream bun!’ Thomas heard Mr Cutter declare from the shop.

‘Do you now?’ Thomas called back, waiting for a punch line.

There wasn’t one, it emerged. Mr Cutter had simply decided they had had a productive enough
morning to warrant a treat.

Despite Thomas’s protests (which Thomas tried hard not to make about how slow Mr Cutter was,
and the desirability of avoiding walking out in the street alone where possible) Mr Cutter left to
retrieve the buns and left him in charge of the shop.

Thomas settled himself behind the counter in the shop in Mr Cutter’s absence, partly to watch for
customers, partly to check there was nothing untoward with Mr Cutter’s work. There wasn’t, and
there usually wasn’t if Thomas was honest, but he felt better for checking all the same.

He looked up from the counter top just in time to spy the familiar stout bulk of Chris appear through
the glass of the shop door. Thomas saw Chris peer in and grimace when he saw him sat at the desk.

‘Morning young master Chris!’ Thomas declared, loudly enough to make the boy jump as he
entered.

Chris didn’t respond. He just gave him a grumpy look, silently reproaching Thomas through slitted
eyes as though a morning greeting was the most stupid sentiment in the world.

He may have had a slight point, Thomas mentally conceded; it was past noon according to some of
the faster clocks in the shop. Thomas chastised himself to stop getting caught out by that.

‘Ma’s got a message for Pa.’ Chris grunted out.

Thomas had to applaud Mrs Cutter’s ingenuity once he recognised the scheme for what it was; a ruse
to get Chris to actually turn up to the damn shop. Sadly, Chris’s presence rarely translated into useful
input. But at least he was there.

‘You’ll have to wait for him.’ Thomas said nonchalantly, pretending to put his attention back to the
clock. He declined to mention that cream buns were behind the absence. ‘How ‘bout you go in
there…’ He nodded towards the workshop. ‘…and have a look at what I’ve been doing this
morning?’

Chris looked at him as though he were a slug to be picked off a lettuce leaf.
‘Or…’ Thomas said with an exaggerated smile. ‘…you could go in there, read your copy of Fanny Hill under the table top as usual and pretend to look at what I’ve been doing this morning.’

He saw Chris’s cheeks colour (no mean feat as they usually held a ruddy blotch anyway) and felt no small sense of satisfaction as the boy stomped past him to the workshop, slamming the door behind him.

Thomas turned back to the splayed out mechanisms before him on the counter top.

Perfectly beyond his control, he felt his mood sink.

And it was such an unwelcome contrast to those few blissful hours after waking that he felt compelled to act.

Things couldn’t continue as they were. More importantly, they needn’t continue as they were.

‘Chris.’ Thomas tapped at the door before opening it (the boy was reading Fanny Hill, after all), taking care to keep his voice soft.

Chris was sat at the table, not reading obscene stories but not making any effort to peruse the pieces of clock either. He merely stared at the wood of the table. The sense of sadness in the moment before Chris fixed his usual stubborn expression was potent enough to have Thomas feeling a tiny bit guilty for mocking the boy earlier.

‘We’ve never really talked because, well, you don’t really want to hear what I’ve got to say…and I don’t really like you. At all.’ Thomas said, perhaps emphasising the point a little more than necessary.

Oddly, the last part had Chris turning to him in curiosity rather than anger. The boy was clearly unaccustomed to being levelled with by an adult.

‘Thing is…’ Thomas rested against the doorframe. ‘…you don’t want to be here.’ He said. ‘And I respect that. I understand.’ Thomas clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth and briefly glanced down to the floor. ‘More than you know. But the thing is…’ Thomas raised his head defiantly. ‘…you’ve got a good chance here. You’ve got the chance to learn something. More important, you can take away what you learn here to anywhere in the country. You take note of what’s being offered to you here…’ Thomas leant forwards and tapped at the wood of the desk. Chris blinked. ‘…you learn what’s on offer, then that’ll let you leave. You can leave and then you can set up the life you want. Exactly what you want. You can get away from your father. Your life can be as far away from this city, this shop…’

Thomas became aware of the presence of a third person.

There was an immediate and potent rushing sense of numbness in his belly.

‘…What?’

Still with his back to the shop, the hairs prickled on the back of Thomas’s neck as he reassured himself that the small voice that had spoken behind him couldn’t possibly be that of Mr Cutter. Mr Cutter was out. He was fetching buns. And he would have heard the tinkling of the shop bell if he had returned.

But of course, the bell was broken.

‘Get out.’
‘Sir, I…’

Thomas turned, slowly as though submerged in water.

‘Get out.’

‘Sir…’

‘Get…OUT!’

The contortion of Mr Cutter’s face, the uncharacteristic scream, the raw fury of the man…

Thomas was fixed to the spot in terror, until that same terror dislodged him.

‘GET OUT!’

He ran.

There was nothing for it, he ran.

Across the shop, out to the street, barely grabbing up coat and bag (hat, in the workshop, be damned) he ran.

He couldn’t breathe.

At the same time the burst of fresh air overwhelmed him.

The street swayed. His throat clenched.

Good God how he wanted to scream.

Docks or home?

Docks or home?

Somewhere. Somewhere to think.

He wanted Janek but home was closer. And there were no people there. And anything was better than squealing in the street.

The numbness in his belly had crept up to his shoulders, shuddering them violently as he attempted to walk.

One foot, other foot. He repeated to himself again and again.

God what had he done?

One foot, other foot. One foot, other foot. He forced himself to think as he walked on.

His coat hung over his arm, he hadn’t the ability to stop and put it on.

His bag was unfastened and might burst open at any time.

And his heat? Clenching like his throat.

It was a good thing, wasn’t it? It was a good thing he had been doing?
He’d spoken the truth.

But now there was a little old man, red faced with angry tears, who could never again take pleasure in attempting to teach his son the trade he had dedicated his life to.

‘Oh…’ It was the first sound Thomas’s mouth had managed to make since leaving the shop, and it was so pitiful and unsteady a sound that he didn’t risk opening his mouth again until he was safely back in his room.

He swore; he cried; he rocked in silence and pounded the table.

Nothing soothed him.

No sooner did he try to settle his nerves to think through what had happened, the image of Mr Cutter’s twisted face and the sound of his ear-splitting screams forced themselves to the forefront of his memory and had him howling into the empty room.

What had he done?

Been fired, was the obvious conclusion. But he was in no fit state to even begin to unpack the practical side of the situation. He was unsettled and deeply churned by conflicting thoughts; certain he had done Chris a service, much as was in his power to do, while at the same time feeling somehow worse for being expelled by Mr Cutter than he had by his own father.

How was such a thing possible?

It wasn’t until the pounding, alternated with pacing, sapped his energy that Thomas was able to get it together enough to get himself a cup of water. He drank a sip and then promptly dashed across the hallway to heave up the contents of his stomach.

He stayed where he was, one arm resting on the toilet bowl, for some time.

When he was finally able to extract himself from the floor he shuffled back to the room in a daze. He sniffed back and swallowed the pieces of breakfast that had lodged themselves in his nose during the purge. And he wondered how long it would be til Janek was home.

He couldn’t fathom how he could begin to explain what had happened. But somehow the thought of Janek was enough to quell the churning in his stomach.

He managed to make himself a hot drink, and to keep it down as he sat smoking at the table.

He kept smoking, kept sitting, staring at the sky out the window until his cigarettes were gone.

Going out for more was impossible. Making food was impossible. Reading, cleaning…everything was impossible. And Janek wasn’t due home for hours.

Thomas undressed slowly, feeling the fabric of each garment as though for the first time as he folded everything carefully back into the chests of drawers. He pre-emptively stopped himself from thinking about creases, and about how he might have wanted something hung up to wear smart the next day.

He folded himself into the bedsheets, turning to the wall to block out the pale sunlight that taunted him from the windows; telling him that all useful people were elsewhere than home in their beds at such a time of day.

How was it he was here again?
‘Thomas…’

Thomas stirred, opened his eyes, and wondered why he couldn’t see.

He turned over, a faint outline of moonlight picked out the frames of the windows. The room was otherwise in total darkness.

Thomas grumbled and stretched out.

‘What time is it?’

‘Late.’

Janek’s voice sounded disjointed.

‘You alright?’ Thomas leant over to fumble on the small table by the bed for his lighter, meaning to light the candle.

The flame lit up Janek’s towering form. His eyes were wide, flaring in the sudden light.

But it was his unexpected proximity and the dark substance streaked across his shirt, face and arms that had Thomas accidentally burning his fingers and dropping the lighter in fright.

Thomas was too stunned to suck his wounded fingers into his mouth. He could only watch, with shallow breaths, as Janek retrieved the dropped lighter from the floor and proceeded to light the candle by the bedside.

The flame shook in Janek’s hand for its entire journey.

‘Janek?’

The only answer was a sniff.

The candle lit, Janek set the lighter down gently on the table top, allowing Thomas an unpleasantly good view of the dark mess that had flecked up his forearm and soaked into his shirt sleeve.

Thomas noted, uncomfortably, that Janek wasn’t blinking.

Janek turned about. He plodded heavily and slowly over to the other side of the room, to the waiting wash basin.

‘Janek?’ Thomas sat up and watched Janek rest a hand either side of the bowl, his shoulders tensing as he propped himself up against it.

From the back he looked almost normal in the candlelight.

Hair a little more rumpled than usual, but otherwise normal.

‘Thomas…’

Thomas barely heard the whisper of a sob from across the room.

‘Janek…’ Thomas bunched up the under-sheet as best he could around his middle, holding it up against his chest as he shuffled across the room. ‘…what’s happened?’

He had been reluctant to ask.
And for a moment the lack of response was almost a relief.

A sound that was almost a laugh came from the depths of Janek’s throat as he stared down into the water of the bowl.

‘Oh, Thomas…’

In the semi-dark Thomas couldn’t see much. But the combined light of the candle and the moon was enough to pick out the contrast between Janek’s skin and the dark substance spattered across it.

‘What’s happened?’ Thomas said again. His voice was stronger than he felt.

Much as he wanted to put a hand to Janek’s tense shoulder he couldn’t quite bring himself to do so.

‘Janek please!’

‘Thomas…’ Janek said quietly, inclining his head to look at him.

‘Yes, I’m here.’ Thomas replied, shaking his head a little.

‘Will you stay here?’

Janek’s voice had all the foreign lilt Thomas recognised from when he spoke his mother tongue.

If anything, that worried Thomas more than…

‘The blood.’ Thomas blurted. ‘Is it…are you hurt?’

‘No. It is not mine.’

Thomas closed his eyes a moment and nodded. He breathed deeply before he opened them again.

‘Janek…’

‘Will you stay?’ Janek cut in, his voice rousing itself from a whisper. ‘Will you be here for me? You must be here for me…please.’ Janek’s face crumpled at the last word and Thomas was left thinking it sounded more like a prayer than anything Janek had uttered before.

It also brought back memories of a bloodied body in a gutter.

‘I’m here.’ Thomas said slowly. ‘You see me here, don’t you?’

‘I see you.’ Janek replied.

‘Good.’ Said Thomas, not knowing what else to say.

‘I need you to be here for me tonight.’

‘Janek, I just said I’m here.’ Thomas said.

‘But maybe you won’t be…’ Janek’s head shook from side to side as he lowered his head out of view for a moment, staring back down at the water in the bowl. ‘I know you won’t be. You will anger…’ In all honesty Thomas was too scared stiff to even contemplate anger at that moment, but he listened silently as Janek continued. ‘…but I need you tonight to be here. Please, tonight.’

‘Janek…’ Said Thomas as firmly as he could muster, shuffling forwards as the night air nipped at his shoulders. ‘…whose blood is it?’
There was no answer.

‘Janek what have you done?’

‘What we have done.’ Suddenly Janek was all animation, raising his head from the wash bowl and releasing his heavy leaning against its sides. ‘What we have done, Thomas.’

‘You and…?’

‘The men.’ Janek’s eyes caught the moon. ‘Me and the men.’

Thomas licked at his dry lips. ‘Who did you hurt?’ He asked quietly.

‘He deserved…’ Janek shook his head at the window, clearly hearing a different question than the one Thomas had asked. ‘…more than we could do.’ Thomas could hear his own breath, rough in the silence, before Janek added. ‘But we did something.’

Thomas waited, waiting for the walls to melt around him to reveal the encounter as a dream. But in the meantime he listened.

‘That man…’ Janek said. ‘…limping, you know him?’

‘Pay…’ Thomas had to cough to awaken his throat before managing. ‘Payton…the Central Warehouse Manager.’ He added redundantly, speaking as though to a stranger.

Janek nodded. ‘The limping man.’ He reached a finger to trace out ripples in the water of the bowl.

Thomas couldn’t look at his face. Instead he stared down at Janek’s other hand, hanging limply to his side; absentley noting that at least the blood had dried enough not to drip down to the floor.

‘The limping man.’ Said Janek again, that name clearly more real to him now than Payton’s God-given moniker. ‘He’s always talking…’ Janek watched the rippling of the water with dead eyes. ‘…always with talking. Talking and no one wants to hear his story. So he tries another, and another…’

For the second time that day Thomas’s guts felt wholly absent.

‘…And then he says to us…’ Janek smirked at the water. ‘…he has the best story of all.’ Janek smacked the water, sending droplets splashing against the window. Thomas felt one catch at the corner of his mouth.

‘He tells us he is so clever.’ Said Janek. ‘So clever that he tricked…’ Janek lingered on the word. ‘…men into thinking he had been hurt…Over the top.’

Thomas needed no explanation for the phrase. He suspected no man of his generation would ever forget the darkness the words invoked; the memory of leaving a claustrophobic prison of mud to run into the path of fast death ‘over the top’.

‘He tricked his Lieutenant…’ Janek gave a throaty laugh. ‘…into the man feeling sorrow for him. He said that, the man felt sorrow. Sorrow for him. All the men felt sorrow for him.’ Janek paused to take a breath. ‘And so he was sent home. Injured in duty…’ Janek said, nodding his head as he relived the story. ‘…for the country. To go home safe while other men stayed to die.’

Thomas’s grip had tightened round the folds of the sheet at his chest to the point where his bones felt ready to break from his skin.
His other hand had moved behind his back.

‘He shot *himself*, Thomas.’

Thomas could only nod.

‘That is what he did.’ Janek said. He let his other hand drop from the wash bowl and turned to face Thomas. ‘And he was proud of it.’ He concluded softly.

‘What did you do?’ Thomas whispered.

‘Pipes. We beat him with pipes.’ Janek said, his lips twitching as though he were near to tears. ‘…Chain, there was chain I think. Rope, there was. And fists, of course. Boots.’ He stepped towards Thomas with each admission. ‘And water.’

Thomas answered by stepping back.

‘Janek is he…is he still alive?’

‘Please…’ Janek held out a hand to Thomas. ‘…don’t be angry with me tonight. Tomorrow please. Just let me rest tonight.’

Thomas’s back found the wall.

‘Thomas you understand.’ The tears that had been threatening to break free now ran in rivulets down Janek’s cheek as he walked closer, hand outstretched, face open and hopeful. ‘You know what the war meant for me. You know, Thomas! Please…’

‘Is Payton alive?’ Thomas didn’t recognise his own voice.

‘I don’t think so.’ Janek replied, answering the question absently as though Thomas had asked him if he thought it might rain. And with not nearly enough certainty for the gravity of the question. Throughout, Janek’s hand reamined extended in the space between them.

Janek bobbed it about a little in the air, pleading with his face for Thomas to take it.

Thomas swallowed and looked down, pressing himself tighter against the wall.

‘Thomas…’

Janek took another step closer, the blood flecks on his face black in the moonlight.

‘Thomas why do you hide your hand from me? Thomas please…’

Janek’s hand bobbed again, fingers outstretched.

Thomas couldn’t bring himself to look at it. No more than he could bring himself to extract the hand he had firmly wedged between his buttocks and the wall.

It was all he could do to keep breathing.

‘Thomas…?’

Janek’s voice had changed.

‘Why do you hide your hand from me Thomas?’ He said.
He spoke quietly, but the words escaped with a quicker tempo than usual.

They were quickly followed up with an increasingly rapid, more desperate, repetition.

‘Why do you hide your hand from me?’

Thomas could not speak.

‘Thomas…Your hand…’

Thomas made the mistake of looking at him.

Every ounce of need fled from Janek’s face. Something ugly took its place.

‘Thomas…’

In a moment Janek had Thomas’s arm pulled out from behind his back.

He clutched Thomas’s fingers together as though to kiss his hand, holding it up to show the remnants of the faded scar to the moon.

‘Janek…’

Janek moved his grip down to take hold of Thomas’s palm with large calloused fingers.

The painful squeeze forced Thomas to look at him.

‘Janek I…I just wanted to go h..o..m.e.’

Janek’s grip tightened to the point of agony.

Thomas’s legs gave out.

‘Janek please!’ He squealed.

Janek’s fingers eked out sickening cracking sounds from Thomas’s hand, enveloping him in his grip.

There was torturous pain.

Thomas felt the bones of his hand shift.

Then he stopped being able to feel anything beyond his wrist.

In the light and shadow, Janek’s face was as terrifying as it was heart-rending; an agonising picture of the man he was and the man he could be - forced into one in front of Thomas’s face.

His pale eyes asked one simple question.

Don’t you think we all wanted to go home?

Thomas cried as Janek released his hand.

He watched as Janek stumbled across the room.

Watched him go to the door and out through it.

The door closed behind him.
The rush of air from the door didn’t manage to extinguish the solitary candle.

It kept burning; a mocking presence as Thomas remained where he was, huddled by the wall, unable to move.

One hand held the sheets to his chest, the other hung useless and broken against the floorboards.

He had his head pressed down to his shoulder. His knees were twisted in the same position that they had fallen.

Through the corner of his eye he watched the door.

There was respite, hours later; when the candle finally burned to nothing, letting him lose himself to his breaths, alone in the darkness.
Chapter 62

Something was dripping nearby. Thomas noticed it gradually, like a gramophone being steadily turned up, until it rattled the windowpanes.

If it had been any other day he would have looked up, noticed it was raining and reason that the guttering must have gotten blocked or overloaded. Large drips of water were being periodically sent down through a hole in the roof that would have otherwise rushed quite happily down to the drains of the street.

To Thomas the noise had no explanation and no purpose other than to torment him in the same way that the finally burnt-out candle had done during the hours of darkness.

He hadn’t moved from the wall or the floor. Both hands had gone numb. One because of the white-knuckle grip he maintained on his makeshift bed-sheet gown. The other unfeeling, broken and holding the promise of agony soon to come. Thomas hadn’t looked at it yet.

At first he had done nothing but look towards the door. Then the door began to fade and his eyes remained open and unseeing as he mentally retreated into a sort of haze.

As the light began to fade again, warning of evening fast approaching after a day of nothing, Thomas’s attention went back to the door.

You really ought to get dressed you know.

The thought came fully formed out of nowhere. Thomas was taken aback by the insistence of the strange little voice in his head and by the fact that of all the needs currently vying to be met (‘thirst’ perhaps being the most pressing) his thoughts would turn to clothing.

He laughed at his vanity then stopped, mouth open, when he realised that the little voice was trying to prepare him for his final moments. It didn’t want him to face the indignity of being caught in nought but a crumpled bedsheet.

Thomas’s eyes found the floorboards. His nose threatened to drip but he hadn’t the energy to sniff or cough away the lumps lodged in the back of his mouth.

Was he on death watch?

He didn’t think so. Not truly. But at the same time his mind followed the footsteps of Gareth, Liam, all the dockers, from the crush of the walkways at quitting time, down the main roads, up the quiet side-street and up the stairs to…what?

Thomas didn’t believe they were coming. But it didn’t stop him go back to staring at the door until it got too dark to see.

He extracted himself from the floor with difficulty, finding his backside irrevocable asleep already, and curled himself into the spare bed.

The next morning when woke there was still rain and there was no Janek.

He put his clothes on as best he could. His trousers went on with the topmost buttons undone, his braces weren’t tightened and his shirt went on without an undershirt (the thought of squeezing his deformed hand into one of the tight sleeves was horrific) and his tie remained where it had been
discarded the day before yesterday. He didn’t manage socks either. And his shoes were loosely
laced.

He ate what he could from the kitchen cupboards that didn’t need cooking and chanced drinking
water direct from the tap. The water had a crude metallic taste and the food seemed to have all the
taste and texture of damp moss. The whole lot nearly came up again and it was only by Thomas
reminding his stomach of the mammoth effort required to eat in the first place that it stayed down.

There was no sound save for the loud drips above, the soft ghost-like padding of his feet against the
floor, and the clacking of cupboards and drawers as he pulled and pushed them. His ears felt about
ready to explode from lack of noise.

He still wouldn’t look at the hand.

It had moved past numbness now and on to feeling twice-engorged and full of aches. He hadn’t tried
to move his fingers, he knew he wouldn’t be able to, and the one time he had tried to use his thumb
(forgetting about his troubles for a moment when attempting to do up his trousers) it had hurt so
much that he still hadn’t attempted to move it back to its usual resting place. Truth be told, he wasn’t
sure he could.

He shuffled over to the door and out into the corridor. He made his way to the stairs, not bothering to
shut the room door behind him. He found he needed the wall to prop himself up as he went.

By some miracle he made his way down the stairs without falling.

‘Yes?’

Mrs Porter’s formidable presence appeared at the door quite some time after he knocked. Her air of
annoyance quickly fell away to one of surprise as she took in Thomas’s bedraggled appearance. Her
cigarette holder was poised but forgotten.

‘You alright there sweetheart?’ She said, trying to catch Thomas’s eye.

‘I…um…’ Thomas swallowed, hands by his sides, staring over at a knot in the wood of the door
frame. ‘I need to find a doctor.’

She frowned. Quickly darting her eyes across and down what she could see of Thomas as he swayed
lightly on his feet she soon arrived at the static and misshapen hand.

‘Oh my…’ She said, remembering her cigarette. ‘…Careless with the door were you?’ She gave a
husky laugh flavoured with cigarette smoke but when her eyes finally met Thomas’s they were sad
and uncomfortably sympathetic.

‘It’s nothing. I just need a doctor. I’d try and sort it myself but…’

‘My good Lord no!’ Mrs Porter declared. ‘How that looks I imagine they’d need a team to sort that.’

‘I haven’t seen it yet.’ Thomas said, unable to muster any energy to lie or deflect.

‘Well…’ Mrs Porter was clearly thrown, peering at him carefully as though reassessing the likelihood
of his remaining upright long enough to continue the conversation. ‘Why don’t you take a look
love?’

‘Can you take me? Please?’ Thomas said quietly.
‘Yes.’ Mrs Porter nodded quickly, reaching up beside the door and bringing her hand back down clutching a threadbare but fur-trimmed cape. ‘Yes. Now. We’ll have to walk mind.’

They walked slowly. Thomas was barely aware of Mrs Porter’s presence apart from a firm hand on his good arm that steered him in the right direction at turnings. The rain poured down heavily over them both and soon they were shivering.

He got left behind when he realised his shoe had come undone.

Not being able to face the prospect of trying to re-knot the laces, Thomas reached down and tucked them in by the sides of his bare ankles.

As he straightened up he caught the eye of a passer-by and for the first time realised how he must appear to others; out in the rain with no hat, not all buttons done, no socks, un-kept hair, deformation and a face full of deep misery. He belonged by a gutter somewhere, away from decent people. Or at least that’s what the disdain of the passer-by seemed to be saying.

‘I’m hurt.’ He wanted to explain to them. ‘I hurt my hand that’s why I couldn’t…’

‘There you are!’ Mrs Porter came back into view and grabbed hold of his shoulder in her spindly grip.

He followed her down the street.

Two streets later he lost her for a second time. This time his attention had been taken by the sight of a policeman vanishing into a many-chimnied brick building that stood alone on the corner of two roads.

‘Love…’ She said when she came back to retrieve him.

Thomas was surprised to feel her arm creep round his middle to briefly squeeze him.

‘…they won’t do anything for that.’ She said softly, nodding down at his hand.

Thomas could only nod mutely and allow himself to be led onwards.

A change of direction and another half a mile later and they were stood outside of a building proclaiming itself as a clinic.

‘Now I’ll be leaving you here if you don’t mind.’ Mrs Porter said, giving his arm a rub.

Thomas turned to her in surprise.

‘Much as I’d like to see you through, I’m not dressed to be sitting with a room of people.’ She admonished sternly before winking at him.

Thomas realised for the first time that Mrs Porter was indeed improperly dressed, perhaps even more so than him, in her thin dress that could well be a nightshift under the folds of the cape. There was something of an ache in his chest in gratitude but he couldn’t quite get himself together to say a proper thank you.

He mumbled as much of a thanks as he could muster, took the cigarette that she offered him by way of parting gift and did his best to light it in the rain.

By the time it was alight, cupped safely inside his good hand, Mrs Porter had long since gone, leaving him alone by the steps of the building.
He allowed himself one deep inhale before throwing the cigarette away.

It fell into the swelling rivulet running down the road and vanished.

Thomas turned back in the direction they had come.
Railings from the street led to stone steps. The rain had mingled with a thin coating of dust and moss to render them slippery underfoot. That and his general state of mind had Thomas falling down the last three steps and into the door.

It rattled loudly on its hinges as Thomas grabbed at the knob to steady himself. He winced, embarrassed, and realised he had knocked one of his fingers even further out of alignment.

He groaned, waiting for the pain, but felt nothing more than the agony in the palm of his hand that had dogged the past day. He grunted, shaking his head to clear it. His hair irritated his eyes but he felt too secure leaning with his good hand on the door to correct it.

A sound from the other side of the door had him quickly stepping back, opening it with his head bowed.

‘Thanks chief.’ A chipper black-coated man passed him by. Halfway through putting on his hat, the man never gave Thomas a look, for which Thomas was intensely grateful.

But he could hardly linger now, the door held open to the rain, wetting the mat beyond.

With a few small steps Thomas took himself inside.

He was confronted immediately with another door, a glass paneled door that gave him a milky view of the hallway beyond. The form of a single man was visible sitting behind a desk in low lamplight.

Thomas opened the door, his wet fingers slipping on the brass handle.

The man didn’t look up as the door opened. He was occupied with a brown covered folder and had a stack of over a dozen of the same waiting for his attention. His Policeman’s uniform sickened Thomas to his stomach.

There were wooden chairs lined all along the side and a brown board with embellished writing to the left that was two thirds full of names. Men of the law clearly, men of note no doubt. Most likely successive commendations for the man in charge. But Thomas found his vision too blurred to read it.

As the man continued to scribble Thomas wondered if he should take a chair. He looked down at the floor and realised he was dripping water on the stone.

The man looked up.

Thomas had anticipated a certain level of distaste; he knew what a pathetic figure he cut at that moment. But he hadn’t expected a look of weariness.

‘This isn’t the place.’ The man said, dispensing with the folder he had been working on and taking another. ‘We don’t hold anyone here.’ He said to the desk. ‘If you’re looking for a place to spend the night…’ He said dryly. ‘…you need the vagrant cage.’

‘What?’ Thomas said, disoriented.

‘Look…’ The man said, looking up at Thomas with a slight shake of his head. ‘…you can get a blanket and a space over at Richmond for a penny. Between now and night you should be able to get that. Ha?’
‘I’m not…’ Thomas took a few steps forward to the desk and watched the Policeman lean back warily in his chair as he approached. ‘…looking for a place to sleep.’

‘So…?’ Said the man, glancing pointedly towards the door as though to indicate another Policeman was expected any moment. ‘What are you looking for? We don’t keep no money here.’

‘There was…’ Thomas began, blinking to re-awaken his heavily lidded eyes. ‘…a man. A man was attacked, night before last.’ Thomas gave up the fight and let his eyes temporarily close. ‘At the docks.’ He added with some difficulty.

‘Hah!’ The Policeman declared, suddenly animated. ‘Well you don’t half try some tricks, don’t you you lot?’ He said, his eyes sweeping over Thomas’s disheveled appearance.

‘I don’t understand.’

‘I’ll tell you what I told the other reporters.’ He said. ‘A statement’ll come out once they’ve identified the body.’

The Policeman went to wish him a ‘Good day’ with a sense of finality but stopped as Thomas’s face crumbled.

‘Oh you…’ He quickly rose from his chair and moved to the side of the desk, one hand outstretched in a placating manner. ‘You’re not here to do that, are you? Are you a relative? I…I didn’t know they’d contacted anyone yet…I’m…’

‘No.’ Thomas said, biting his lips tightly to keep in the trembling. He shook his head, unable to speak for a moment as he found himself in the previously unthinkable act of crying freely in the presence of a stranger. ‘No I’m not here to do that. I just…’ He gave a shaky breath. ‘I wasn’t sure he was dead.’ He offered, not that the man could possibly understand the significance.

‘So, what are you here for?’ Said the Policeman tentatively. ‘Mr…?’

Thomas couldn’t reply right away. So far nothing had been said that he couldn’t take back, take with him, and run away with to the street.

‘Barrow.’ He said. ‘Mr Thomas Barrow.’

‘And why are you here, Mr Barrow?’ Said the Policeman.

‘A man…’ Thomas said. ‘…confessed to me an incident at the docks the night before last.’ He let all the air go out of his lungs and back again before continuing. ‘The Central Warehouse Manager, Mr Payton.’

‘Mr Payton informed you of the incident?’

‘Mr Payton was the man…the incident.’ Thomas said.

‘And you…you had someone tell you they did it?’ Thomas hadn’t previously thought it possible for a man’s eyes to go that wide.

‘I…’ The Policeman continued. ‘Like I said we don’t have identification but…’ He stared at Thomas in wonder.

Thomas flinched as the Policeman suddenly shouted and leant over to ring the bell on his desk.

No one came.
‘If you’ll just…’ The man said, moving as close to one of the nearby doors as he could while keeping Thomas in his sights. He shouted again through the door, trying three names before settling on ‘Anyone!’ as an acceptable summons.

Thomas saw the Policeman’s eyes stray behind him to the glass panel door, no doubt contemplating locking it or at the very least putting himself between it and Thomas.

Thomas didn’t blame him.

It was only the secure knowledge that the other side of the door held no acceptable options for him that kept Thomas where he was, standing in the center of the hallway dripping onto the floor.
Chapter 64

Thomas’s tea had gone cold. It might have been cold when they brought it. But a more reasonable explanation was that he had paid it no attention, and now it was cold. The telltale twists of steam were absent as he looked at it, sat accusingly on the stained wooden table.

The table was a solid affair, but very very stained. It was marred by dents and scratches. There were three burn marks, two near him and one off to the corner.

The room was un-plastered and cold. The bare bricks had a touch of mould at floor level on the far wall. There were no windows.

Thomas sat looking across at an empty chair. He had divested himself of his wet coat and sat in his wrinkled shirt-sleeves, regretting not having added his suit-jacket before leaving Mrs Porter’s boarding house.

He couldn’t remember where he’d left his suit-jacket. Probably folded somewhere. Maybe folded. Maybe hanging carelessly on a peg by the door. Maybe discarded on the floor; it wasn’t like he would have needed to preserve it for another day’s work at the point at which he’d come home from Mr Cutter’s ‘Emporium’.

Thomas had his hands in his lap, his good fingers exploring his bad ones. Every now and again the urge to grab and pull overtook him. He knew what to do. He knew the sound to expect when he did. Even had a vague idea of the pain and ultimate relief that would follow after bringing the bones back to where they should be.

But he lacked the energy.

Besides, there was something in his palm that stopped him. It was an alien feeling. When his hand had been shot apart there had been a feeling of open release, both literally and figuratively. His hand had felt flayed open and he hadn’t cared if it ever felt whole again. But this feeling was different. Now it felt small, squashed, pieces moved into places they shouldn’t be.

‘Mr…Barrow?’

He hadn’t heard the door open.

It took a while for him to respond to the wiry grey haired man in the doorway.

‘Yes.’

‘Well…’ Thomas watched the man as he closed the door tight and moved to take the empty chair opposite. He would recognise that particular brand of vacant smile anywhere. It was the smile of a man who was trying his very best to keep his personal judgements to himself and project an air of familiarity. Thomas had used it himself. He had seen Lord Grantham use it on occasion. But never Carson, he mused, absentely, as the man sat down. ‘I understand…Mr Barrow…that you have come to us with highly sensitive information pertaining to a case.’

Thomas said nothing. He didn’t reply with his chin either, neither nodding nor shaking his head; merely looking up at the man’s thin smiling face through dead watery eyes.

‘I am Chief Inspector Hurst.’ Said the man, nodding encouragingly. ‘And I am very pleased to make your acquaintance.’ He extended a hand across the table.
Thomas reached to take it, unconsciously placing his wounded hand to rest on the wood of the table as he did.

He saw Hurst’s eyebrows rise.

‘Oh my..’ Hurst said. ‘…that’s a sorry state of affairs.’ He smiled as he said it, as though making a joke. Thomas imagined the man was trying to brush off such obvious evidence of his own vagrancy. But the alternative to correcting him, to make it clear that his injury was not the result of trying to break into a building or a drunken fumble…that Thomas could not quite bring himself to do in that moment.

‘So..’ Hurst settled himself down, nudging the pad and pen he had brought in front of him into perfect alignment. ‘…my colleagues tell me you have come with information relating to a murder which took place in the vicinity of the interchange between the North and South docks?’

‘You can’t be more specific?’ Even in his present state Thomas couldn’t help the scathingly sardonic response.

Hurst paused a moment, considering, before responding.

‘We can’t be precise.’ He said. ‘With the movement of the tide the body could have washed into Clarence Docks from quite some distance.’

The words were not spoken unkindly, only someone knowing Thomas’s full situation could have achieved that. But there was a bite of chastisement behind the friendly unwavering smile.

‘Sorry.’ Thomas heard himself say.

‘So have you?’ Thomas sat up as he saw Hurst retrieved a cigarette packet from his pocket. Hurst immediately offered Thomas one before continuing. ‘Have you come to us with information?’

Even with Hurst’s evident proficiency with hiding his true disgust at Thomas’s appearance he couldn’t quite hide the tentative and earnest hope behind the question.

Thomas resented it.

It was clear as day that the Police had nothing.

The last thing Thomas wanted to feel in that moment was wholly responsible for what would inevitably transpire once he spoke.

‘Was it Payton?’ He said, leaning as close as he could across the table to light the cigarette from Hurst’s engraved lighter.

‘What?’

Thomas sat back in his chair, angling himself to stare at the wall.

‘The man in the water, the one who washed up. Was it Payton?’

He heard Hurst shuffle about in his chair to come round to the corner of the table, bringing himself closer to Thomas.

‘I can’t disclose…’

‘I’ll not speak a word.’ Thomas said shakily. He shot a quick glance in Hurst’s direction, his fingers shaking as he attempted to keep the cigarette aloft. ‘Not unless I know.’
Hurst sighed, coming to lean forwards on his knees with his chair sideways on to the table. He removed his hat and set it down carefully, revealing more grey hair, styled neatly but simply, before speaking.

‘There is a woman on the train from Manchester as we…’ Hurst looked up to Thomas. Thomas was satisfied Hurst would find nothing but steely resolution in his face, despite his trembling fingers.

‘His aunt.’ Hurst offered quietly. ‘His aunt is on the train from Manchester to identify…’ Hurst sat up, leaning an elbow on the table, his smile fell to be replaced by a look of weary defeat. ‘It was Mr Payton.’ Hurst said.

Thomas’s gaze remained firmly fixed on the wall but his lips were beginning to go the same way as his fingers.

‘I met him…’ Hurst said, allowing himself a few pulls of his cigarette before continuing. ‘…two years ago. He was working with his father, at one of the registration buildings.’

Thomas shook his head and gave a small shrug.

‘Registration.’ Hurst repeated. ‘Dockers sign in to a particular building and instead of going to the stands each day they…’

‘What happened to his father?’

‘Influenza, I believe.’ Said Hurst.

Thomas took a deep draw of smoke. ‘And Payton, what happened to him?’

Hurst looked confused but quickly covered himself. ‘I was hoping you were here to tell us that?’

‘No I mean…’ Thomas’s cigarette now sat neglected in his hand. ‘…how did he die?’

‘Mr Barrow are you wasting my time?’

‘No.’ Thomas said quickly, forcing himself to turn to Hurst. ‘I just…’ He trailed off. ‘Was it the water that killed him?’

‘No.’ Said Hurst without pause. ‘No it was not.’

Again Thomas found himself in the unfortunate position of crying before a perfect stranger. The hand that reached to his shoulder stung but he did not shake it loose.

‘His skull was broken in.’ Said Hurst, trying to peer down to catch Thomas’s gaze.

‘Fuck.’

That was all Thomas could say for some time.

‘Mr Barrow…’ Hurst tried tentatively. ‘…have you information?’

Thomas rose from his chair, swiping at his face with his good hand, his cigarette now discarded and burning itself out on the stone floor.

Hurst rose too, suddenly alert and with eyes on the door.

But Thomas merely moved his chair back to face the table and stood behind it, clasping it and
leaning heavily against it.

Hurst warily moved his chair back to the opposite side of the table and emulated Thomas in standing behind it.

‘I live with a docker.’ Said Thomas. ‘Lived with.’ He added. ‘And that man…he came home to me the night before last and he confessed…misdeeds.’

‘Yes?’ Hurst’s hopefulness was back, and as if to confirm his supplication he sank immediately into his chair, allowing Thomas to stay standing opposite and above him.

‘He came in…’ Thomas’s voice felt wholly alien to him. ‘…with blood on him. He said that…’

Here Thomas sat down also.

‘He said that they had beaten Payton. With pipes and…other things.’

‘He did?’

The man’s earnest look was painfully raw.

‘Yes.’ Said Thomas.

‘What is this man’s name?’

‘It…’ Even inside the featureless stone and brick room the world seemed to stand still for a moment. ‘Janek Biel.’

Inspector Hurst’s hand flew to grab the pen.

Thomas traced the words he was writing with his eyes, feeling a sense of panic and despair.

‘And “they”…’ Mr Hurst said. “…can you tell me who “they” are?’

‘No.’ Thomas said softly. ‘He didn’t mention names.’

‘Could you suggest any names?’ Hurst’s pen was poised.

‘No.’ Said Thomas. ‘He didn’t say.’

‘Is there…’ Hurst had the good grace to swallow uncomfortably before asking. ‘…any way you could ask this Mr…’ He looked down at his pad. ‘…Biel?’

Thomas brought his mangled hand up to rest once more on the surface of the table.

‘No sir. I couldn’t.’

Hurst visibly recoiled.

‘He did this to you?’

‘Yes.’ Thomas replied, his voice sounded hollow and forlorn even to him.

‘Does he have a history of violence?’ The ink of Hurst’s pen was again flowing freely over the paper.

‘I don’t…’ Thomas began, staring wide eyed at Hurst’s upside down scrawls. ‘Well…’
‘Yes?’

Thomas closed his eyes, running the back of his injured hand over the bumps and scrapes of the table. ‘There was one night, some time ago.’

‘Yes?’ Hurst said urgently.

‘They beat a man.’ Thomas said. ‘He was…he ignored a drunk man in the street. So they beat him.’

‘Tell me.’

‘They took on him with their boots. The man was bleeding and…Some policemen came.’

Hurst’s pen fell still.

‘This wasn’t…outside the Fisherman’s Net?’

‘I couldn’t say.’ Thomas said honestly.

‘There was a gentleman, a Mr Friedrich, beaten senseless a few weeks back.’ Hurst said. ‘He is still senseless now.’

‘I can’t recall…’ Thomas began, though the image of the peeling sign outside the pub he and Janek had entered began to take shape in his mind.

‘You keep saying “they”…Are you able to give names for this event?’

‘I…well.’ Thomas said, wishing dearly for another cigarette and something besides cold tea. ‘I don’t know if I…’

Another cigarette and a flask from the confines of Hurst’s jacket made an immediate appearance without prompting.

‘May I take details of your residence, Mr Barrow?’ Said Hurst, pen poised.

‘I don’t have one.’ Said Thomas. ‘Not any more. The others...”they”...they know where I was so…’

Hurst nodded quickly, silencing him with a wave of the hand. ‘We will sort you out.’ He said.

A moment layer Hurst added. ‘Keep you close. Until this is all put to rest…’
Chapter 65

Six and a half cigarettes and several deep swigs from the Chief Inspector’s flask later the two of them made their way out into the corridor.

The weight pressing down on Thomas’s shoulders (not to mention all major organs) remained an unbearable burden. Any hopes of feeling lighter, or at least relief, had ended up on the floor along with the cigarette ashes.

It was either lean on a stranger or lean on the wall to stay standing. Before Thomas could decide he realised Hurst had been speaking.

The final word ‘…agreed?’ was all he caught.

‘What was that?’ Thomas said with what was left of his voice.

Chief Inspector Hurst tutted, but he still deigned to turn Thomas with the now familiar vacant smile. ‘The two Officers here will accompany us…’ Said Hurst briskly, evidently summarising rather than repeating the full speech Thomas had missed. ‘…to the docks…’ Thomas’s shoulder connected with the wall. His focus shifted from Hurst to somewhere down the end of the corridor. Hurst’s concluding words brought it right back. ‘…where you will identify Mr Biel…’

‘What? No. That’s…’ Thomas frowned, managing to get himself upright.

‘I know, I know…’ Hurst said breezily. ‘I know you have already given us his name. But really it will be so much faster to have you point him out in the crowd.’

Thomas lacked the energy to widen his eyes, but managed to work his mouth into something semi-gormless.

‘And…’ Hurst continued, raising his own finger and gesturing to the ceiling. ‘…this man will know from the outset that there is no point in denial.’

The mystery-flask liquid shot violently back up Thomas’s throat. Only a speedy hand and violent swallow saved the shoes of the nearby men from being splattered.

Hurst was undeterred. ‘So you two…’ He nodded to the waiting Policemen. ‘…will drive us to the docks. We will approach by the…’

‘No!’ Thomas shouted, finding his voice again and barking at the assembled group far louder than he intended to. ‘No.’

‘Mr Barrow I understand this is difficult, but consider…’

‘No, I mean…’ Thomas spoke to the ground, nodding his head a little as he spoke to urge himself to continue. ‘…we can’t just go. Not like this. There’s so many at the docks we need…more men. Not enough that it looks like we’re wanting a fight but…’ Thomas had to stop a moment to take a breath. ‘…enough that they’ll think twice before starting one. And we need someone like Goodrich. We need…’ Another breath. ‘…you know, men in charge. They need to walk with us, and the men with clipboards too. So the dock workers know that someone with us knows who they are and that they’ll lose their jobs if they…’ Thomas had to stop again, he stood swaying slightly. ‘There are just a lot of dockers.’ He said finally, a last attempt to save his own skin and most likely the skin of the men near him.
Chief Inspector Hurst peered down at the top of Thomas’s bowed, tussled and greasy head. He looked up at the waiting Policemen. They stared back at him.

Hurst looked back to Thomas, then up again.

Hurst gave a small shrug. ‘What he said, I concur.’

He patted Thomas on the shoulder hard enough to almost send him into the floor.

‘I need to…’ Thomas called out in a gargled voice as Hurst went to lead off down the corridor. ‘…stop somewhere first.’

‘Oh?’

‘The house…my things…’ Thomas managed.

‘Right.’ Said Hurst slowly, in the sort of placating voice used by parental figures worldwide. ‘Now, Mr Barrow, you must understand that our endeavours here are of a little more importance than…’ He trailed off.

‘But I won’t be able to…to go back…after…’

Thomas’s frustration and general state of agitation had him finally bringing up the liquid contents of his stomach all down the wall.

‘Well isn’t that something…’ Said Hurst into the awkward silence than ensued. ‘Officers, I believe we will be having a stop on the way to the docks.’
Chapter 66

Thomas’s upper body was a good half a foot shorter than usual as he sat in the back of the car with his shoulders drooping and his head attempting to connect with his knees.

He was too busy musing on whether or not Mrs Porter would be home, or any of his largely anonymous, flatulent housemates, to think about the fact he was on view in the back of a police car for all the city to see.

And why should he care about that? He had no connection, or any possible future connection, to the faces passing by the window. Sometime in the last forty-eight hours the people of Liverpool had reverted to the mindless simpletons living in a damp filthy hole that Thomas had encountered on his first visit with Lord Grantham.

He couldn’t have given less of a damn if they’d stuck him in a sack-cloth and drove him in the back of an open cart surrounded by chickens.

That last thought managed to raise a smile which meant he arrived at the corner of his road wearing an inappropriately chipper expression that vanished the moment the car door was opened for him.

Mrs Porter was home, of course.

The second the front door opened she was in the hallway, screaming and flicking the contents of a glass of clear liquid that smelled highly alcoholic in his general direction.

Thomas was trapped, staring in confused bewilderment at the woman; not quite believing that level of noise or facial distortion was possible for a woman whose general demeanour was coolly (albeit occasionally sassily) collected.

She berated him for leaving the doctor’s without waiting for her. Then she berated him for not going into the doctor’s on catching sight of the mangled hand poking out from his coat sleeve. Then she saw the first of what would soon prove to be a gaggle of Policemen and all hell broke free.

There was something warming about the level of passion she put into attacking the Police on his behalf. He actually saw two of the men (and not the younger, less experienced men) take an uncertain step back as she advanced. She demanded to know what Thomas was supposed to have done, and how DARE they think to admit themselves to her house, and….

Thomas took himself upstairs. A single Policeman managed to circumnavigate the chaos in the hallway to follow him.

Thomas could hear the man, or boy really given the general look of the bloke, close behind him. But that didn’t stop the ugly sound, collapse and tears that came the minute he pushed open the door.

The room was exactly the same. Everything where he’d left it.

Part of him had been hoping to find the place torn up. To find some evidence that Janek had come back and…done something. Or to find that some random person had vandalised the space. Anything was preferable to find a perfectly undisturbed time-capsule of the night he still couldn’t quite believe had happened.

‘Nice…’ He heard the Policeboy say of the room, before the boy noticed the state of him and grimaced.
Thomas ignored him. He stumbled over to the bowl that served as a wash basin. A few tiny dried flecks of rusty brown were on the wash cloth by its side.

Thomas picked at them, bleary eyed and absent.

‘So…do you want…?’ The voice of the Policeboy cut into the silence with all the subtlety of a horn.

‘The case is under the bed.’ Thomas said.

‘What?’

Thomas turned around, drawing himself up to almost his full height for the first time that day by planting a hand at the side of his waist on the counter. ‘Under the bed.’ He said.

The Policeboy didn’t move.

‘It won’t move by itself.’ Thomas said.

In front of him was no longer a boy in Policeman’s uniform but a useless hallboy and in ten minutes flat, under Thomas’s stern instruction, the case was out and everything he could remember bringing to Liverpool was in it.

Thomas left the room, with the boy huffing as he carried the suitcase behind him.

Thomas made his way down the stairs, eyes straight front. The sounds of the world around him (at that moment chiefly Mrs Porter, still attempting to verbally eviscerate the Police on Thomas’s behalf) dulled into a droning noise around his ears.

Thomas ignored the lot of them.

He made his way down the street and let himself into one of the waiting cars.

An indeterminate amount of time later the sounds of opening and closing car doors told him the Policemen had returned. He didn’t bother to look at any of them.

A short drive over uneven cobbles and a familiar slipway came into view with the glistening Mersey beyond.

The cars stopped, side by side. Thomas could see Hurst and another two Officers already there, out of view of the workers by the side of a nearby warehouse. Goodrich and two clipboard bearing men, as requested, were deep in discussion with Hurst who was wearing his convivial smile.

Thomas exited the car.

He walked across the top of the slipway, only vaguely aware of being flanked by his own Police escort. He was also vaguely aware that his legs didn’t have that much more to give and also that one look at the expression on his face had Hurst and company looking very nervous indeed.

Hurst turned to lead the way, motioning for Goodrich to follow.
Chapter 67

The motion of the men moving between the warehouses and the loading bay mirrored the movement of the water in the docks. Thomas felt vaguely seasick as he moved forwards with Hurst to his side and Goodrich beside him.

The men parted and stilled as the tightly wound procession of Police moved through them. They stared at Thomas, the only one neither in uniform nor affiliated with the docks. Near a hundred staring eyes followed him. Every way he looked, Thomas was met by those eyes. Eyes that were unfamiliar, but also knowing. Knowing in a terrible way that turned Thomas’s stomach. He felt himself shrinking.

The unsettling looks had him forgetting the Policemen around him, let alone why they were there, until he picked out the sight of Liam’s familiar dour stare in the crowd. Thomas involuntarily recoiled. Halting in his tracks he accidentally stepped on Chief Inspector Hurst’s foot.

‘What’s this?’ The dockers parted for Liam as easily as they had parted for Thomas and his escort. He ignored the men around Thomas and made straight for him. Faces Thomas recalled from pub nights in Liverpool filled the breach left by Liam and stared darkly at Thomas as Liam approached.

‘Keep your distance.’ Thomas heard Hurst say.

Liam ignored him. He also ignored the Policeman who stepped forward and halted his progress with a hand on his chest. Liam stopped walking, true, but the Policeman may as well have been a fly settling on his shirt for all the attention he paid him.

Almost as if someone had sounded a bell, every man carrying a load dropped it to the floor in a dull thud that kicked up wisps of dust and sand.

In the deathly silence that ensued, Thomas’s ears rang as though he were standing in the aftermath of the blast of a bomb. Through the ringing he could hear the sound of the breath of the men around him. The Policemen looked uncertain, Goodrich looked unsettled; all of them were breathing painfully erratically. Hurst’s face alone betrayed none of the fear that his heavy breathing gave away.

‘What’s this?’ Liam demanded again, louder than before.

Hurst looked to Thomas. His eyebrow was raised in a silent question.

It took a moment for Thomas to realise what Hurst was asking.

Thomas shook his head in a brisk motion that reawakened the feeling of seasickness.

‘Not him.’ Thomas forced himself to say in the silence.

‘Well…?’ Hurst gestured round the assembled men, more coldly collected in his demeanour than Thomas would have ever believe was possible, given that the atmosphere had all the tranquillity of a powder keg ready to ignite.

Thomas looked around, swaying a little as he did. The faces, familiar and otherwise, blurred into a single, amorphous, hostile army.

‘Mr Barrow?’ Hurst’s tone was clipped and impatient.
Thomas sympathised. He wanted out of the present situation every bit as much, and as quickly, as Hurst.

‘I don’t see him.’ Thomas said, his voice coming out thin and a little desperate.

‘Mr Goodrich?’ Hurst turned to Goodrich. ‘Do you see the man we want?’

Goodrich clutched his clipboard for dear life as he stepped unsteadily forward, casting his head about the crowd.

‘Do you know where Janek is?’ He asked of a random docker who happened to be standing nearest.

The docker’s expression remained utterly blank. He said or did nothing.

‘Janek Biel!’ Hurst shouted. Every man in the vicinity flinched at the sudden volume, with the notable exception of Liam. ‘I am here to inquire…’ Hurst continued, with no loss of volume. ‘…as to the whereabouts of one Mr Janek Biel.’

‘Not here.’ Liam said bluntly. His eyes never left Thomas’s. His face sent the clear message that he considered Thomas personally responsible for Janek’s absence, and that he was none too pleased about it.

‘Where is he?’ Said Hurst. Thomas’s stomach clenched as Hurst walked towards Liam. The Policeman’s arm that separated Hurst and Liam was woefully inadequate protection in Thomas’s opinion.

‘Shipped out.’ Liam replied, finally dragging his gaze from Thomas to Hurst. ‘Gone.’

‘Gone?’ Said Hurst.

‘Yeah, off on a fucking ship. You simple?’ Liam’s knees gave a little bob as he emphasised the point. His chest pressing against the Policeman’s hand. ‘Gone ‘cause of this one’s wild fancies.’ He thrust his chin in Thomas’s direction.

‘Fancies?’ Hurst repeated, looking like a man far too sure of himself and his safety in the current situation for Thomas’s liking.

‘He never did nothing to Payton.’ Said Liam.

*Idiot.* Thomas thought. Somewhere in his haze of fear and discomfort, Thomas felt a tiny glow at finding his scathing inner voice was still alive somewhere inside of him.

‘No?’ The lack of reaction on Hurst’s face confirmed Thomas’s suspicion.

*Body hasn’t even been properly identified yet…*

‘Yeah, he never did nothing.’ The man behind Liam asserted.

Hurst said nothing, merely looking coldly from one man to the next.

*You’re hanging yourselves.* Thomas thought. *You absolute idiots.*

‘He never touched Payton.’ Another man stepped up.

Two more men nodded their solidarity.
Thomas saw the expressions of a few of the more perceptive dockers shift as they noticed Hurst taking careful note of the men who had chosen to weigh in on Janek’s behalf. The perceptive men moved back, leaving the small group of dissidents isolated in front of the crowd.

‘Men.’ Said Hurst simply, motioning to the group.

The conveniently isolated men were easily taken in hand by the waiting Policemen. Thomas watched Liam’s face carefully, waiting for the moment he realised his mistake. It didn’t come until Hurst openly thanked the men for their kind assistance in identifying the recently deceased victim of a ‘despicable attack’.

‘What…no…” Liam was rendered briefly speechless as he was led away with the others. Though he regained his faculties enough to inform Thomas in a manic bellow that he was a ‘Worthless cunt’ before a sharp baton blow to the head rendered him silent.

Thomas felt the blow to Liam’s head as if it had landed on his own, and noted absently that the floor was rushing up to meet him before the world went black.
Chapter 68

Thomas woke up looking at the damp plaster ceiling of a hospital ward.

There were six beds in the room. Four of them were occupied, including his. They all had the look of bare metal-barred dormitory beds. There were three sets of canvas screens folded by the closed door to his right.

He had on a shirt but could feel his forearms were bare above his blanket. There was a strap rubbing against one wrist, the other was free. His head was heavy but painless.

He absently took in the sight of the folded screens, noted that none of the other three men in the room looked imminently close to death, and rested back onto his pillow with a contented exhale.

There aren’t many men who would be calmed by realising they were in a hospital. Thomas, for his part, had always found that being in hospital brought good things.

The two times he had been in hospital as a child (the first for a near fatal case of tuberculosis, the second for a spectacularly well faked flu) resulted in obscene levels of treats and motherly coddling.

The time he had been admitted as a young man (he was a late bloomer as far as the chicken pox went) had meant a couple of weeks’ escape from his father’s suffocating obsession with ticking things.

Much later there was the time a quaint village hospital meant relief from the pounding of gunfire and the smell of putrid mud and burning skin. Hospitalisation had meant a literal return to civilisation. It meant a comforting return to the familiar. He hadn’t even been certain he’d wake up with both hands still on his wrists after they stretchered him away from the trenches to the field.
hospital in France, and he hadn’t cared.

And now…

‘Fuck…’

It was a whisper loud enough for the whole ward to hear.

The man in the next bed grunted, squinted, and turned his head towards Thomas.

‘Is it there?’ Thomas said.

A sound something akin to ‘What?’ rumbled from his neighbour’s throat.

‘IS IT THERE?’

‘What?’ Now it was the turn of the man on the opposite wall.

‘Just tell me!’ Thomas called out.

The man next to him grunted dismissively and shifted himself to face in the opposite direction.

‘Is my hand there…?’ Thomas said, quieter this time, his voice coming out a little more pitiful than he would like.

He heard the neighbouring bed creak as the man turned back to him.

‘Look, aye?’ The man said.
Thomas closed his eyes. No. No that was most definitely not an option.

‘Please?’ Thomas said.

‘Well it’s there, aint it?’

‘Both?’ Thomas raised his wrists a little.

‘Aye.’ Said the man, sounding confused.

The man ceased to be of interest as Thomas sank back further in his pillow, breathing out to the ceiling.

‘Still there…’ He said softly to himself, looking up at the patches of damp.

For a moment the world was golden. Then the sound of the opening door and view of a Policeman in his peripheral vision sent the muscles in his face slack and the sides of his lips bowing downwards towards the pillow.

A Doctor followed close behind.

‘How are you feeling?’

The Doctor’s accent was thickly Liverpudlian. Everything rushed back in like a powerful swell of inky black water.

_How was he feeling?_

Thomas blankly side-eyed the Doctor in silence.
‘Yes…well…’ The Doctor uncapped his pen. ‘Do you know your name?’ He said.

Thomas answered the first two or three questions the Doctor threw at him seriously. Then he began answering grudgingly. Then sarcastically. It felt good to be sarcastic. Sarcasm distracted him from the dark waters that threatened to overpower him.

By the end Thomas was prefacing every answer with scathing observations of the Doctor’s intelligence or lack thereof.

The waiting Policeman did a deliberately poor job of hiding his smirks just out of view of the Doctor. That bolstered Thomas’s fragile mood somewhat. Funny, yes, he could be funny. That was good.

Thomas tried to hold on to that as the Doctor told him the story of his hand, but ultimately he was forced to try to zone out completely to preserve what little composure he still had. Thomas caught something that was essentially code for flaying, some noise about picking out fragments, some reproach about the pre-existing damage that had made the surgeon’s job harder and the overall conclusion that there really was no conclusion at present; the hand might work, it might not. And it wasn’t pretty.

Apparently Thomas had the influence of Hurst to thank for the hospital having undertaken the surgery. The usual procedure, as the Doctor began saying haughtily, but ended up mumbling after getting a look at Thomas’s expression, was to check the funds were in place *first* before commencing treatment on so serious a wound.

Were it not for the strap holding his wrist still, Thomas would have attempted to raise a finger or two in the Doctor’s direction to see how good a job they’d done on unpicking the damage.

‘So…’ Said the Doctor, glancing somewhat accusatorily at the Policeman over his shoulder. ‘…who will be providing payment?’

‘Just here to follow up.’ Came the Policeman’s reply.

‘Well?’ The Doctor looked back at Thomas.
Dark waters broke over Thomas one small wave at a time.

Money, he had none.

Job, no.

Home, no.

Friends in the city? Not a one.

Mrs Porter, his Landlady, might conceivably be called upon to have sympathy. But spare money to spend on his behalf? He doubted it.

Besides, if the hold of Janek’s charismas was anywhere near as strong on her as it was on the dockers, she’d probably limit her intervention to spitting on him should their paths cross again.

Thinking of Mrs Porter threw up another pressing problem. Assuming he managed to settle his bill, where was he going to go after?

He’d seen enough to know that the community round the docks bled into the whole city. Even if Janek hadn’t been taken in by the Police, other sons, brothers and husbands had. Mothers, bigger brothers and grieving wives would have his name. And every docker would know him if they saw him on the street.

And how much had Janek told the likes of Liam about his final night with Thomas before he’d ‘shipped out’? Bad enough that he was a grass and the reason for the loss of a beloved friend. What if they knew him for a deserter too?

‘Fuck.’ The word escaped Thomas’s lips in a painful gasp.

‘Well?’ The Doctor repeated. ‘Who will settle for you?’
Fucking everyone.

‘Who will settle your bill?’

Thomas looked to the Policeman for help, but he averted his eyes and regarded the wall with an impatient expression.

Thomas forced himself to think. Really think.

His family? Thomas felt his body immediately, violently, physically pushing the thought away.

Even without knowing the particulars, he knew they’d receive the news of his current predicament with one thought and one thought only; that he’d gotten exactly what was coming to him.

What other choice did he have?

‘Could…Could you bring me a phone?’ Thomas said.
Chapter 69

The orderly who wheeled the table with the phone to his bedside didn’t leave the room, but they had the good grace to withdraw to over by the door at Thomas’s pleading. There was nothing to be done about the three bedridden men in the ward who made no secret of their interest in the proceedings.

Entertainment was clearly a scarce commodity once the daily round of medication had been concluded and the patches of damp on the ceiling had been counted for the umpteenth time.

Thomas had steeled himself to make the call in the time the phone took to arrive, but as the call was put through he didn’t even make it past the first ring before he felt his face crumple.

He had neither time to compose himself, nor put the phone down before a painfully familiar voice came over the line.

‘Downton Abbey, Mr Carson the Butler speaking.’ Came the sound of Carson’s clipped and slightly technically uncomfortable voice.

Thomas sobbed. Loudly, and unrecoverably.

‘Mr Carson speaking.’ Carson repeated, he sounded uncertain.

It briefly crossed Thomas’s mind to try to pretend the pitiful noise he’d made was part of a malfunction on the phone line.

But all he could do was sob again and press the phone to his forehead.

‘Hello?’ Carson sounded even more confused.

Somehow Thomas managed to form words, moving the phone to his ear and holding it so unsteadily it trembled against his temple.

‘It’s Thomas…’ His voice broke.

‘It’s whom?’ Now Carson sounded annoyed.

‘Thomas.’ It came out as a pitiful whine.

‘Thom…Mr Barrow?’

‘Yes.’ Thomas squeaked out with the last of the breath he had in reserve in his throat.

There was silence on the other end of the line.

Thomas cleared his throat, wiping his cheek with the back of his bad hand.

‘I’m calling for Lord Grantham please.’ Thomas swallowed. ‘Please.’

‘Mr Barrow?’ Said Carson again. Thomas wasn’t sure if Carson was struggling to reconcile his strangled voice with the composed façade Thomas usually wore, or if he was staggered by the audacity of Thomas to dare call him on the telephone, and ask to speak to Lord Grantham of all people.

‘Please.’ Thomas pleaded. The room and its occupants faded around him and he was lost in
desperation. He knew he’d never manage to get the words out twice, assuming he could get them out at all. Attempting to explain himself to Carson and then again to Lord Grantham wasn’t even a remote possibility.

‘He’ll want to hear this.’ Thomas somehow managed to get out. And that was at least partially true.

He had no doubt Robert would pause for at least a moment over his morning coffee if he were to read in the paper that Thomas’s body had washed up on a beach somewhere with a caved in skull.

‘I don’t think…’ Carson began to say.

_Proper. You don’t think its proper._

‘Please.’

_God, just help me._

More silence down the other end of the line.

‘One moment, Mr Barrow.’ Thomas heard Carson say, suddenly prim and proper, fully business as usual.

Thomas let his head rest back on the pillow, knuckles white around the phone.

A lifetime passed as he listened to nothing down the phone.

_Please, please, please…_

‘Mr Barrow?’

‘My Lord…’ Thomas’s face screwed in on itself again. All his prepared words fled, along with any remaining sense of dignity ‘…please, I need help.’ The last word was barely comprehensible in a sea of sobs.

‘What has happened?’ The concern sounded genuine and Thomas felt a wave of relief wash over him.

‘I…’

For a long time Thomas couldn’t form words.

‘I’ll tell you everything.’ Thomas said, and he meant it. ‘But I can’t now. Not right now.’

‘Thomas?’

‘Please, I need help.’

‘Where are you?’ Said Lord Grantham.

‘I’m…’ Thomas tried. His voice was lost and replaced with humiliatingly inhuman whines.

‘Thomas?’ He heard Lord Grantham say, but he couldn’t reply.

The hospital orderly appeared in his peripheral vision.

Thomas relinquished the phone and listened, with as much a sense of biblical salvation as he had ever felt, as he heard the orderly give the name of the hospital.
He watched, unable to breath, as the orderly recited the nature of his condition. He winced as the man bluntly raised the question of payment. He continued watching as the man placed the phone back in the cradle.

‘What did he say?’ Said Thomas as the man went to wheel the phone away.

‘It’s being taken care of.’ Said the man, seeming to look right through Thomas and his tearful state, off into a place of wonder and magic. ‘And you’re to wait for your escort.’

‘Escort to where?’ Thomas tried to sit up.

The man frowned at him, startled out of his star-struck internal reverie. ‘He just said someone would bring you back.’

‘Back? Back to where?’

‘He just said ‘back’…’ The orderly trailed off. ‘Say, was that really a Lord?’

‘What?’

‘A Lord, was that a Lord?’

Thomas blinked and nodded.

‘Cor.’ Said the orderly sounding pleased. ‘Never spoken to one of them before.’ He started wheeling the phone away again then stopped. ‘Wait, are you one of them then?’ He said to Thomas, brushing down the creases in his coat.

Thomas shook his head.

‘Right, alright then.’ The man said, sounding awed all the same. ‘If you need anything…’

Thomas stopped listening and stared at the ceiling, tears still itching down his cheeks.
Chapter 70

*Somewhere in the North Atlantic*

A week into his service on HMS Millicent and Janek’s mind was occupied with two clear thoughts. One, that he should have put to sea years earlier. And another, that he found himself grateful to Thomas for having pushed him to do it.

*I owe you thanks, you...*

Janek pushed the thought away.

He sat on the top deck, the sole Ropemaker appointed to the expedition, splicing the strands in a neglected rigging. The air tasted good. Salty, open and free.

The motion of the ship confronting swells has sickened him at first, even in the relatively sheltered waters of the Irish Sea. It had called forth equally nauseous memories of his time crossing the English Channel to take his place in the trenches of France. Now each motion thrilled him. The constant motion, and constant consciousness of the motion, kept dark thoughts at bay as HMS Millicent blazed a path across the Ocean.

Everything was perfect.

The ship, like the men upon her, was a living, breathing thing. A clear cut community with clear codes of work and honour. There were no grey areas, not like there had been in the trenches during the war, or like there had been at the docks.

Or in his abandoned Liverpudlian home.

*Thomas...*

Janek pushed the name away and let it float upwards on the breeze.

No, here everything was clear. The consequences of hard work and steadfast honour in service were immediate. A thing ‘done right’ and according to duty reaped an immediate reward in the smooth running of the ship over the waves. There was no grey.

It was a world Janek could understand. Could thrive in, could revel in. The work was backbreaking. In parts open and free above deck, in parts claustrophobic and dank below. But always that clear code of work and reward.

It called Janek back to the black and white world of childhood. A world where there were only two choices; duty or despair. If you didn’t sleep with the animals, they were taken in the night. If you didn’t go hungry in autumn, you starved in winter. If you didn’t pull your weight, you got abandoned.

Three men, or rather two Ship’s Boys and a Midshipman, had been put to shore when HMS Millicent had docked in Ireland. Two for drunkenness, one for general incompetence. No arguments, no comeback, and the ship had put to sea again a little lighter for the loss of them.

Less than a day after the ship lost sight of the Irish coast and pushed East, a Caulker had been flogged for theft of ship’s supplies. It was simple, it was pure.
Janek had watched, along with the rest of the ship’s company. He saw the swift, immediate, and unreproachable retribution doled out to a man who had shirked his ultimate duty. A man who had selfishly put his own needs ahead of others. And Janek revelled in it. Revelled in the simplicity of it. With every lash he saw Payton, not the straw-haired Caulker. He felt the same sense of authority and absolute righteousness of cause that he had felt the night he and the dockers had bloodied and broken Payton with metal bars.

Here there was no Thomas.

*Shhhh…no Thomas.*

No Thomas to fill him with dread at the thought of judgement for a retribution well given.

Righteously given.

No Thomas to be devastatingly revealed as just as deserving as the punished man. No Thomas to make him pause. Question. To shake him, and his oh so clear honour, to the very core.

No.

Here there were men who looked uncomfortable, yes. Guilty, yes, for the thoughts they might have nursed about sneaking extra rations for themselves. Guilty and fearful as they watched the Caulker shout. Men who understood, with absolute clarity, that they had best keep themselves straight. Keep themselves beholden to the rules of law and duty.

Or else.

The strands of rope ran easily through Janek’s deft fingers as he sat on the deck. He drank in the trade winds and let his head loll for a moment on his shoulders.

He felt absolute freedom.

More so than he had ever felt before.

Aboard the ship he was simply himself. His clear-minded self.

Back ashore in Liverpool there was mother to receive his seaman’s wages. His duty there, done. While his every other living need of food or comfort was taken care of below deck. Amid men he knew would be held utterly to account for their duty.

Oh, freedom.
Thomas felt like shit. Humiliated and pitiful shit, at that.

He was in his old room at Downton, and everything about it was the same.

The botanical pictures he hadn’t bothered to take down from the walls were the same. The spot in the mattress that sagged was the same. The drawer that didn’t properly close was hanging ajar just the same. The sound of the footsteps scurrying to and fro in the men’s corridor were just the same.

The only difference was that he wasn’t scurrying to join them.

Just the same…

He’d been in a fever for what seemed like weeks. He barely remembered the return journey to Downton in the company of hired men he didn’t recognise. He wasn’t sure if he’d seen Lord Grantham yet, though even in his present state of shittiness he liked to think he’d remember if he had.

He’d seen Carson. Or, rather, Carson had seen him, as he’d been carried and bumped up the stairs.

He’d endured the humiliation of Molesley cleaning him and putting him to bed by pretending to be even more out of it than he really felt.

Hallboys had brought him food, and attempted to make sure he ate it. Being spoon fed by children was, again, something that Thomas had endured by pretending to still be insensate.

In his bed-bound state, he seesawed between wishing to be left alone, and wishing the likes of Lord Grantham, or even Carson, might visit him to give him some idea of where he stood.

While he might not have known where he stood, in the present moment, he definitely knew where he lay. In a house he’d abandoned under cover of night to run off with…

Fuck.

Off.

Thomas rejected that train of thought with every fibre of his being. He was at Downton now, and he’d been at Downton before. The only difference was now he felt like shit. Everything that had come between was immaterial.

Jimmy hadn’t come to see him. Or at least hadn’t been permitted to see him.

Neither had Baxter.

Which should have made for a pleasant surprise when her black-dressed form finally appeared round his door.

Before, her appearance would have stirred feelings of comfortable familiarity.

Under the circumstances, the sight of her only drove home to him the pitifulness of his situation and he cried.
‘Hello Thomas.’ She said.

There was no way on God’s green earth that she hadn’t notice his tears, but she gamely ignored them all the same. Thomas felt a wave of gratitude towards her far stronger than he’d have ever thought possible.

‘What’s going to happen to me?’ He said as best he could.

‘Well…’ She said softly, quickly checking the corridor outside to make sure no one had seen her before closing the door. ‘…I think the question is what’s happened to you?’

Thomas closed his eyes.

‘His Lordship’s eager to talk to you.’ She said. Thomas felt the mattress compress as she sat down by his feet.

‘I don’t know what to tell him.’ Said Thomas.

Baxter waited a beat before responding.

‘Well, not the truth, obviously.’

From somewhere deep within, Thomas felt a genuine laugh force itself to the surface. Baxter laughed too. Then her face grew sombre.

‘Did he hurt you?’ She said. ‘The man you were with?’

Too defeated to muster a denial, Thomas nodded.


To her credit, Baxter didn’t press the issue.

‘So…’ She said gently. ‘…do you have a job there still, in the city?’

Thomas squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head.

‘Alright, alright. I’m sorry.’ She said quickly.

‘No…’ Thomas said. ‘…I’m sorry. I’m just…’ He drew in a shaky breath, at a loss for how to continue. ‘…I’m a bad person.’ He said. It came out as something of a drawl in an attempt to lighten the mood.

‘I don’t believe that.’ Said Baxter softly. ‘And you shouldn’t be believing that either.’

‘I lost my job because I told a son to spite his father.’ Said Thomas. ‘I lost…’ But he couldn’t put into words what else he had lost, or why.

‘Lord Grantham is inclined to be kind.’ Said Baxter, reaching up to rest a hand on his leg. ‘He told me so himself. So don’t you worry.’

‘How kind?’ Said Thomas.

‘There’s work here for you if you want it.’ She said gently. ‘If you keep your head about you.’ She
added, slightly more firmly.

‘Work.’ The word escaped from Thomas’s lips like a prayer, containing all the longing for a secure place in a secure community that the prospect offered. ‘But why?’ He asked.

‘I don’t rightly know.’ Baxter admitted. ‘But…he just said that you’d been here a long time. That he knows you sometimes…’ She paused and smiled grimly down at him. ‘…get away from yourself in your wilfulness.’ Her smile grew warmer. ‘But he cares about you.’

‘I can have a place here?’ Said Thomas.

‘You play your cards right, and your old place is yours.’ Said Baxter.

‘My cards…’ Said Thomas, with a rueful attempt at a grin. He managed a bitter chuckle.

‘Just don’t be telling him anything that’s hard to explain to the outside world.’ She said pointedly.

Thomas nodded.

‘I’ll tell him whatever needs to be told.’ Said Thomas, knowing as well as Baxter did that ‘whatever’ would be far, far from the truth.

Baxter squeezed his leg through the sheets. ‘Welcome home.’ She said.

‘Wait.’ Thomas said, as she rose to go. ‘You wrote me a letter.’ He said, dimly recalling seeing it in his hand in the boarding house as though it were a memory from years earlier. ‘Where is it?’

The corners of her mouth twisted uncomfortably upwards. ‘I disposed of it Thomas, when they brought in your things.’

‘What did it say?’

She shook her head. ‘It’s nothing now, is it?’

‘Tell me.’ He said.

She looked sorrowful and far away.

‘Tell me.’ He said again.

‘I wrote that Lord Grantham wouldn’t be providing a reference…’ She quickly continued as Thomas went to sit up in concern. ‘…but that was my fault, I’d made too much of how well you were doing in Liverpool.’ Thomas settled back, somewhat warily, against the pillow. ‘And I wrote down your sister’s address, as you asked me to.’ She said.

‘What else?’ Said Thomas.

She shook her head. ‘That was…’

‘What else?’

Baxter sighed. ‘I told you that I knew you were making your own way in the world, and that I knew you were happy.’ She said, sounding slightly reproachful at Thomas for having forced her to say it.

‘You knew I was happy...’ Said Thomas to the ceiling with a bitter snort.
‘Were you?’ She said.

A maelstrom of conflicting feelings and memories swirled in Thomas’s head. There was the warmth of the broad shouldered embrace of a man he couldn’t bear to name. There was the camaraderie of the dockers. There was the memory of a man beaten in the street. There was the feeling of loneliness and loss at entering a town house and being treated as a ghost when he’d gone about his business fixing clocks. There were the shouts of Mr Cutter ordering him out of his shop. There was the memory of buying furniture for his own home, of eating pie at his own table. There was the memory of Payton’s limp, and Janek’s bloody shirt.

Weighed against it was Downton. The promise of safety, of a cocoon of predictable repetition, intrigue and duty in a world he knew he could navigate his way through.

‘I’m happier now.’ He said.
There was such a small tap on the door that Thomas almost expected a child to be standing the other side of it.

‘Come in.’ He called, brushing toast crumbs from the corners of his mouth. They fell off the bedspread onto the floor. Thomas followed them with his eyes and wished he had a cloth.

He spent so long worrying about the toast crumbs that he forgot the papers spread out over his legs. Thomas attempted to sort them out as his guest entered.

He dropped the papers in surprise on recognising Jimmy in the doorway. Several papers joined the toast crumbs on the floor.

‘Here, let me…’ Jimmy quickly moved to gather up the errant newspapers. It wasn’t wholly clear whether Jimmy thought Thomas was too debilitated and infirm to handle folding newspapers himself, or whether Jimmy was trying to avoid having to explain his lack of visits during Thomas’s convalescence up to the present moment.

Hence the slight bit of bite behind Thomas’s insistence that he ‘Wasn’t simple’ as he snatched the papers back from Jimmy with his good hand. Meanwhile, the back of Thomas’s bandaged hand was swiping over Thomas’s temples in an attempt to tame his hair.

Jimmy retreated to the end of the bed.

‘His Lordship wants you.’

Thomas felt himself pale. ‘What?’

‘In the library.’ Said Jimmy, having the good grace to look sympathetic as well as awkward. ‘If you’re able.’

‘When?’ Said Thomas.

‘Now.’ Said Jimmy with an apologetic grimace.

Involuntarily, Thomas looked down at himself. Bandages and rumpled, improperly buttoned pyjamas. And his hair was in his eyes. God alone knew if his cologne had made it back from Liverpool unscathed, but suddenly Thomas was very very aware he was in need of it.

‘Well, obviously I’ll need a minute.’ Said Thomas.

The attempt at lightening the mood fell flat. Thomas stared at the shape his feet were making under the blanket and tried to decide what he ought to attend to first.

‘You know…’ Said Jimmy tentatively. ‘…I charge very reasonable rates for my valet services.’

Thomas managed a snort of a laugh and Jimmy laughed too.

‘Please.’ Said Thomas.

***
Having someone to help make him presentable for Lord Grantham should have been a comforting, calming experience – apart from various awkward moments involving talcum powder.

In fact, far from being comforting, it had the opposite effect. The experience revealed to Thomas just how far his standards of personal grooming and presentation had fallen during his time away from Downton. He thought he’d kept himself up reasonably well amid the chaos of Liverpool.

How wrong he was.

The acceptable standards of cleanliness when it came to a shirt, properly pressed trousers, trimmed finger nails and eyebrows, among other things. All things Thomas thought were ‘alright’. That is, before Jimmy, regarding him with a critical eye, insisted they ‘fix’ the problem.

Thus, Thomas found himself fully preened, standing in his bedroom in his underthings, waiting for Jimmy to return with freshly pressed trousers, feeling more nervous than ever.

If he had been ready to go into Lord Grantham’s presence in un-pressed trousers, then what other personal standards might have slipped? How should he address him? Where should he stand? How should he stand?

And all this coupled with the anxiety of knowing he currently occupied a limbo between a private person and an employee. Or, more honestly, was currently a private person, nursing the desperate hope that he might become an employee in the near future.

‘Shit.’ Thomas looked at himself in the mirror. Despite Jimmy’s best efforts, all Thomas saw looking back at him was a forlorn and pitiful creature of a man.

I wouldn’t hire me, Thomas thought.

Once he was reunited with his trousers, Thomas let Jimmy lead the way down to the library.

Jimmy announced him and made a hasty retreat, leaving Thomas lingering awkwardly in the doorway.

Lord Grantham and Carson were stood by the bookshelves at the far end of the room.

‘Mr Carson, if you please.’ Said Lord Grantham in his peculiarly quiet way. He indicated the door.

Carson did a poor job of concealing his surprise at the instruction. He opened his mouth to respond, side-eyeing Thomas as he did.

Lord Grantham cleared his throat. Carson quickly came back to himself, gave a quick incline of the head by way of a bow and removed himself from the room.
Chapter 73

‘Come in Thomas, don’t linger in the doorway.’ Said Lord Grantham, still quiet, still gentle.

Thomas reacted to the words as if they had been shouted, and quickly stumbled into the room. He felt like he had de-aged by a good twenty years and had to look at himself in the reflection of the window to remind himself he was not, in fact, a child.

The coggs in Thomas’s mind, which he could usually rely on to help him manipulate his way out of sensitive situations, were attempting to come together. Thomas could feel his mind attempting to work. Attempting to take in all the evidence before him and make an analysis. Was the choice of the library venue significant? Was being called ‘Thomas’ a sign of familiarity or reproach? Why was Carson sent away? How much did Lord Grantham know?

But there was no help to be found in his head. Thomas recognised the various thoughts and suggested solutions (e.g. cry) but was unable to process them. Each thought felt like an alien intrusion; of no more consequence or duration than an insect crawling over his skin. He couldn’t hold on to anything, except the fact he was very scared, and he could make no plans.

‘Come here.’ Said Lord Grantham when Thomas halted half-way across the room.

Thomas shuffled the remaining distance and took up Carson’s place by the bookcase. He stared down at Robert’s shoes, knowing that he should be looking the man in the eye.

‘Are you well enough to stand?’

‘Yes, My Lord.’ Said Thomas quickly. And once he started talking he found he couldn’t stop. ‘The fever’s all gone now. I’ve been taking food fine. And I can move the fingers, it’s just the scabs keep coming off so…’

Lord Grantham held up a hand and grimaced as if to say a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ would have sufficed.

‘Baxter has kept me appraised.’ Is what he actually said.

Thomas nodded, he managed to meet Robert’s gaze. Thomas hoped he didn’t look as frightened as he felt.

‘I know this may be uncomfortable.’ Said Lord Grantham quietly. ‘But you have involved me and my name in a very sensitive matter, and I must have an explanation.’

Thomas nodded again.

‘How did it come to pass that I received a phone call from a hospital, and hear your name connected with a murder?’

‘I didn’t do anything!’ The words flew out of Thomas’s mouth minus the appropriate ‘My Lord’.

‘Do you believe I would have taken you into my house if I thought you had?’ Said Lord Grantham. Still so quiet and gentle. Thomas felt himself de-age a few more years and realised he was perilously close to breaking down.

Yes, some aspects of the past months would be a hard-sell whatever spin he put on them, but that’s where his prolific skills as a liar should come in.

Yet there he was, in serious danger of bawling his eyes out.

The thoughts passed through Thomas’s mind, then flew away again just like the others. He was left standing silently, unarmed, in front of Robert’s softly concerned expression.

‘Thomas, I am merely giving you the chance, in your own words, to tell me how you came to be in that hospital.’ Said Lord Grantham. ‘I suggest you take it.’

‘Yes, My Lord.’ Said Thomas quickly. ‘Well…the person I was staying with, he came home one night and said someone had been attacked.’ Thomas swallowed. ‘That he’d been part of a group that had attacked someone.’ Thomas corrected.

There was a tiny shift behind Robert’s eyes as a touch of surprise came into his expression. But it was a very slight change, and Thomas was unable to take note of such things in the present moment to either exploit or mitigate against them.

‘He was all bloody.’ Thomas said, speaking to himself more than Robert. He stared blankly downwards, re-living the strange horror of that night, picturing Janek in his mind’s eyes for the first time since…well, since. ‘And he went to wash, and…’ Thomas was so lost in trying to recall the details that he never stopped to think which ones were proper to include or omit. ‘…and I think I asked him something like, was the man still alive? And I don’t remember what he said…’ And that was the truth. ‘I just remember thinking that the man probably wasn’t.’

‘You told him you intended to go to the police?’ Robert interjected, unaware he was inadvertently doing the job of lying, or at least misdirecting, on Thomas’s behalf.

And a good thing too, as Thomas was in no fit state to do it himself.

Thomas didn’t answer, largely due to confusion at the unexpected words, but Robert took his silence for a ‘yes’.

‘And then he attacked you?’

Thomas swallowed. He was no longer looking at Robert’s shoes, but seemed to be looking through them at a spot on the floor. He wasn’t really aware of what his eyes were doing, he was too busy trying to summon up some appropriate words.

Again, Robert took the silence for a ‘yes’. Before Thomas’s mind had properly caught up, Robert had moved on past the original circumstances of the injury (and the false assumption of the cause of it) and onto the aftermath.

‘So did…this man…intend to warn you off reporting the crime? Was that the purpose of this injury?’ Said Lord Grantham carefully.

Thomas looked up at him, confused.

‘I suppose what I really mean to ask…’ Said Lord Grantham. ‘…is why you are still here at all, having told a clearly violent person you intended to report them? Were you let go, without further injury, because they were satisfied you would not go to the police?’

‘I…um…’ There was a brain, somewhere in Thomas’s skull. And within that brain was the capacity for both memory and speech. Somewhere. Thomas was sure of it.
‘I apologise for pressing the matter.’ Said Lord Grantham. ‘I know this must be unpleasant, but I must insist on knowing the truth of the matter.’

‘The truth.’ Thomas repeated meekly. Under the weight of the lie-by-omission of concealing his status as a deserter from Lord Grantham, admitting to a relationship with the attacker seemed of no consequence at all.

‘The truth is he stopped himself.’ Said Thomas. ‘I wouldn’t have been able to get away.’ Thomas added somewhat absently to himself. ‘He stopped himself and walked away. He didn’t want to hurt me more. He didn’t want to hurt me at all.’

‘In such matters, Thomas…’ Lord Grantham’s expression didn’t change at all. He kept his face neutral by some momentous interior exertion. ‘…I believe outcomes are of more consequence than intentions, however noble. Whatever the intentions, you were injured.’

‘Yes, My Lord.’

‘And what transpired after this attack?’

‘Soon as I was able I went to the police.’ Thomas said flatly. ‘I told them what may had been hurt, or killed, and I told them what I knew about who did it.’

‘And then?’ Lord Grantham pressed.

‘Then…’ Thomas became aware that his posture and elocution had slipped during the course of the meeting and quickly straightened himself out. ‘…I accompanied the police to the docks, where I knew the right man would be, and there the police arrested quite a few men.’ Thomas took a breath. ‘I must have fallen or fainted.’ He said. ‘Because the next thing I remember if being in the hospital and…’ He paused awkwardly for a moment. ‘…them asking for payment for putting me back together.’

‘Yes, well…’ Lord Grantham trailed off.

That would have been the perfect moment for Thomas to speak up and beg Lord Grantham to let him work off his debt. Worst case scenario, that would at least give Thomas a few months of safe room and board to come up with a new plan before being turned out into the world.

But Thomas couldn’t ask. He had no right to, he knew, because there was a significant and fundamental betrayal of trust that had yet to be discussed. And he could only hope that Lord Grantham would bring it up for him, because Thomas had no idea how to go about approaching the issue himself.

‘I don’t believe I need to ask you why you left, Thomas.’ Said Lord Grantham, as though reading his mind. ‘Nor do I need to ask why you felt it necessary to do so under cover of darkness, in secret, without observing the appropriate procedures.’

Thomas didn’t think there could be anything more horrific than the soft and painfully reasonable tone of Lord Grantham’s voice in that moment.

Thomas found himself attempting to say ‘I’m sorry’ several times. Each time he manged to squeak out a mere few syllables before either emotion, or Lord Grantham, cut him off.

‘There is no…’ Lord Grantham paused. ‘…precedent for me to call upon in a situation such as this. At the risk of indelicacy, I would invite you to consider the vulnerability of a woman who finds herself in your situation. I would also invite you to consider, in no uncertain terms, what the stance of
this household has been towards such women over the years. You will note that none of them have been permitted to return to the fold after exhibiting such a lack of character as to lapse into impropriety within the walls of Downton and beyond.’

Nothing about the comparison sat easily with Thomas.

But unpicking which part was offensive for what reasons was a knot beyond Thomas’s mental faculties for the time being. In lieu of a more coherent thought process, he was merely overtaken by a wave of resigned humiliation and despair.

Lord Grantham paused, inviting Thomas to speak.

Thomas managed a small nod. Yes, he understood.

‘Well…as I said, there is no precedent for this.’ Robert continued. ‘Even so…’ He said, his voice hardening for the first time. ‘…were I to set a precedent for dealing with such an occurrence, the answer would be very clear.’ Lord Grantham paused again. Now it was his turn to look defeated. ‘Clear for anyone but you, it would seem.’

Thomas looked up in surprise at the unexpected warmth in the words.

‘Make no mistake…’ Said Lord Grantham quickly before Thomas could speak. ‘…you were a boy, and have grown into a man, that I have long considered to be deficient of character in many ways. In this, I refer you to instances of untruths, of suspected by unproven theft, of proven malicious intent and abuse towards other members of staff in my employ. And all this before on takes into account your personal proclivities, your illegal personal proclivities. Proclivities which have, now on several occasions, threatened to bring this household into disrepute by scandal.’

Thomas nodded.

‘And yet despite all this, there is honour in you. It is not always seen. In fact it is rarely seen. But on the occasions when it does come through, you show a highly admirable, and rare, strength of character and should be held as an example to others. I see it now, in your decision to loose everything of your new life in order to do the right thing and go to the authorities instead of remaining silent. Just as I saw it…’ Robert’s voice caught in his throat. ‘…when you joined forces with my dear Sybil to advocate for the proper and humane treatment of our war wounded.’ Now Lord Grantham looked close to tears and Thomas could only imagine what his own eyes were doing.

‘What I am trying to do, Thomas…’ Lord Grantham quickly regained his composure. ‘…is to give you an appreciation, once and for all, for the fact that you are known here. For better and worse. Whether that will be enough to settle your restless spirit, I do not know. But I am willing to give you a final chance to be a member of this household. Do you wish to take it?’

The question came so abruptly that Thomas was caught wholly off guard.

It took several moments of frantic nodding before Thomas could get out the words.

‘Yes, My Lord. Thank you, My Lord.’

Beside them, the door rattled slightly in its frame.

Lord Grantham smiled thinly. ‘Do invite Carson to come back in, I worry he might be straining his ears.’
Chapter 74

*North Atlantic Ocean*

The crew were somewhat chipper at finding themselves still alive and still afloat at daybreak. At midday on the previous day, a fierce wind had trapped and tossed the boat. The men had laboured through the night to secure the ship’s load, keep the sails from ripping themselves to shreds and to bail out water from below deck. Each deluge of surf on the upper deck dripped down into the ship’s underbelly. Not a dry person or possession was left on the vessel. And for a time it looked like the vessel wouldn’t be left either.

The pumps became clogged. The waters rose so high that the fire in the boiler was doused out. The crew went about their work with frantic, manic, energy – each fully expecting to meet his maker before dawn.

Yet here they were. True, the men were still labouring to pump out the boat with the newly repaired pump. And they were in the process of stoking the engine fire, using precious coal they could ill-afford to expend so early in the voyage, while the process of mending the sails was underway. But the men were alive, and the ship was afloat, and as far as the captain and crew were concerned, all was right with the world. The crew had undergone its first major test and won through. At least in the face of imminent death, the men had proven themselves dedicated to the ship and by extension to one another. The captain could only hope that the motley crew he had assembled – part navy, part panicked recruitment in Liverpool and Galway – would translate that level of team-work and dedication into the more mundane side of ship life.

Janek had taken his turn at the pumps in the early hours of the morning, when the sea and sky had been at their angriest. The hours were a blur of monotonous straining, muscle popping, and turning one’s head to the side every few minutes to vomit, or attempt to do so. Janek hadn’t been alone in his sea-sickness. Even the weather beaten types who’d lived more of their lives on sea than on land were brought to their hands and knees that night.

Now the sea was calm and the danger of death was less imminent. Janek sat amongst the chaos left on the decks by the violent weather, trying to think up a stronger means of securing the crates and barrels in transit. He worked on mending bindings that had frayed and split under stress during the night.

The men still labouring over the pumps were singing to one another to keep time. Janek noticed them only in the most abstract way. He was fully engrossed in his solitary work. He did notice, however, that each time a particular boatswain walked past the pumps the men would start up a new tune that invariable contained the phrase ‘old man’ or ‘old father’ in some capacity. Each time a different man came up with a different song, and before long it was clear they had run out of traditional ditties and were simply composing them on the spot.

Janek knew what was going on. He knew that the boatswain, Alpin, had made the mistake of admitting to insecurity about his rapidly receding hair one night over the evening meal. Evidently Alpin had been somewhat vain about his hair in the past. Alpin was by no means the oldest man on board, but Janek knew the ill-considered remark about his balding head had earned him the nickname ‘Old Father Alpin’. Not that any of the men called him that to his face. Alpin was liked, even if he was also a figure of fun. He was also a figure of fear for what harm he could potentially, lawfully, bring to bear against a common seaman who overstepped the mark.

The men were clearly feeling invincible in light of their recent brush with death and resumed a new
chorus as Alpin made another appearance. Janek knew what they were doing. They were enjoying seeing how far they could push their luck in crooning about ‘old men’ in Alpin’s vicinity. Janek was aware it was supposed to be funny. It might have actually been funny, truth be told. But Janek felt nothing. It was exactly the sort of entertainment he might have dreamt up in the past – a harmless something to blow off steam and amuse the men. But sitting there on the deck, Janek felt no humour at all. Just a numb and disconnected feeling. Not a wholly alien feeling. But more all-encompassing than any that had gone before.

‘That’s not right…’

Janek didn’t need to look up to know Alpin was standing over him. He recognised the voice, so why bother raising his head?

A hand came into view, prodding at the strand of rope Janek was working on.

‘…but it’ll work, I suppose.’

Janek said and thought nothing.

‘You’re good. Given this ain’t your trade.’ Said Alpin, as though he were simply stating an interesting fact rather than making a serious accusation.

Janek decided he’d better look at him.

Above him, Alpin laughed.

‘Don’t be looking at me like you wish I was dead. That’s not going to happen.’ He said with a snort. ‘And don’t be worrying your sour little head about your credentials. Half the bloody men on this ship aren’t right for the jobs they’re occupying. We had to put to sea in a hurry you understand. Well, you definitely will, I remember you coming aboard in Liverpool. Time sensitive mission and all that.’

Alpin rolled his eyes as though the reason for being at sea was of no consequence to him, provided there was a sea and a boat to float in. ‘On His Majesty’s service.’ Alpin chuckled.

Janek’s face remained blank and dark.

Alpin sighed. ‘How about you say two words to me? I don’t even mind what those words might be…’

Janek went back to his work.

‘Well at least stop scowling at anyone who gets near you.’ Said Alpin. ‘Then maybe you’d have some friends on board.’

Janek looked up again and let his ‘sour’ face speak for his opinion on that particular possibility.

‘All I’m saying is, if you went overboard right now, who would notice or care?’ Alpin smiled and shrugged as if to say ‘I sure as shit wouldn’t’.

Janek believed him, but gave no reaction.

‘So anyway…’ Said Alpin with another slightly barbed smile. ‘…like I was saying, you’re not bad at this. You must have known someone, who knows something, at some point, you know.’

Janek did know. And he could name the someones if he were so inclined.

‘But sooner or later you’re going to make a mistake…’ Alpin continued. ‘…and I’d rather not be
finding out about it when I’m dangling up there.’ Alpin pointed up the main mast, currently conspicuously missing sails as the ship chugged along under engine. ‘I don’t want to be seeing none of my boys hurt neither.’

Despite his sullen determination to remain silent, Janek heard himself reply.

‘I would not.’

The full sentence was ‘I would not do this work unless I knew I could’ but Janek could only make it as far as the first three words.

To his credit, Alpin didn’t mock him for having finally spoken. ‘I’m not saying you know nothing…’ Alpin continued, as though those hadn’t been the first words he’d ever heard from Janek. ‘…just that you don’t know enough. So what I’m going to do is I’m going to get some of my boys to help you.’

Janek watched Alpin warily.

‘My lot know their way around a ship, have done since they were wee lads. You watch them close and they’ll teach you a thing or two. You play it right, they don’t have to know they’re teaching you. You get it?’

Janek’s eyes flicked down to the decks then up again. His head felt like too much dead-weight to move.

‘And try and make some friends.’ Said Alpin.

Involuntarily Janek’s eyes went to the group of men turning the pumps.

Alpin looked over his shoulder, following Janek’s gaze. ‘Oh, yeah.’ He said. ‘My troubadours. I’ve been finding any excuse to go by them for the last two hours to see how long it takes ‘em to realise I’m the one messing with them. Care to make me a bet on it?’

Janek shook his head.

Alpin went on his way, whistling.

Up ahead, the men quickly changed song to something about ‘Old Father Time’ and did a poor job of concealing their laughter. Alpin breezed past them with nary a look.
Chapter 75
*Downton Abbey*
Thomas’s feelings towards serving at the breakfast table had changed over the years. During his
earlier stints presiding over the scrambled eggs as a young footman, you would have seen him puffed
with pride. Vanity at being chosen for that particular honour, above all the other footmen, kept his
chin high. Over the years that pride had slid into frustration and impatience. Instead of silently willing
the breakfasting family to take note of his impeccable appearance and dedication, Thomas instead
merely willed them to hurry the hell up. The sooner breakfast was over, the sooner Thomas could
stand in the yard with a cigarette planning ways to make life less disappointing.
In the present day, the breakfast room was an oasis of silence and safety, and Thomas cherished that
quiet time with all his heart. While he stood against the wall, next to a portrait of a long-dead king,
Thomas could enjoy not having to worry about anything for a little while. Below stairs, nobody
seemed to know quite what to say to him. Above stairs, Thomas panicked each time he was
summoned in case something had happened. Specifically, in case the police had contacted Lord
Grantham to demand Thomas’s return to Liverpool. But waiting on the breakfast table was
predictable and safe. Nothing to do except serve, wait for familiar instructions, and enjoy the luxury
of no funny looks or stilted attempts at conversation for at least half an hour.
That is why Thomas was so wholly unprepared for Lord Grantham to turn to him one morning over
breakfast to exclaim, ‘Good God, Barrow. Have you seen this?’
Lord Grantham brandished the paper.
Thomas shook his head, before remembering that words were respectful.
‘No, My Lord.’ He said.
Thomas dearly hoped it would be something frivolous – unexpected horse racing results or an
unexpected marriage – but why would Lord Grantham care about Thomas’s opinion about such
frivolities? More worryingly, what would make Lord Grantham call on God so casually in front of
Lady Edith, the sole other breakfasting Crawley.
‘Dock workers praised…’ Lord Grantham read out to Thomas, seemingly oblivious to Edith’s
presence. ‘…as motivation for recent violent attack revealed to be the deceased’s desertion during the
war. The city has lauded Judge Kelly’s controversial decision to order the men’s release after the
deceased’s status as a coward and a traitor to his country was corroborated by a close relative…’
A nearby clock chimed and the sound seemed to carry on forever in Thomas’s ears.
‘My word, Barrow.’ Said Lord Grantham. ‘This does change things somewhat, doesn’t it?’
Mercifully, Lady Edith spoke up and distracted him.
‘I’m not sure I understand.’ She said.
Lord Grantham looked a bit sheepish, he had genuinely forgotten she was there.
‘A man was recently slain, you may recall…’ Said Lord Grantham gently. He didn’t look at Thomas,
but Thomas felt his cheeks burn all the same, even as ice slipped down his spine. He’d never knew
how much Lord Grantham had told the rest of the family about the circumstances of his return. ‘…


and it would appear that the reason has some legitimacy in the eyes of the law…’ He straightened the paper out again to have another read.

‘Legitimacy?’ Said Lady Edith.

‘The man was a deserter.’ Said Lord Grantham patiently. He took a sip of his coffee. ‘At least this ghastly business is over now, Barrow.’ He said over his shoulder. Thomas could see sympathy in Lord Grantham’s eyes. They seemed to be saying ‘shame you ruined your life on account of a simple misunderstanding, I do hope you will get over it’. Lord Grantham gave Thomas a little nod. ‘Noble endeavour, of course, Barrow. You weren’t to know of course.’ He said and nodded again. ‘Noble effort.’

‘I don’t understand.’ Edith persisted, again pulling focus from a deeply grateful Thomas.

Lord Grantham sighed. ‘The deceased was a deserter.’ He said gently.

Behind Lord Grantham, various bodily functions threatened to overwhelm Thomas as the initial shock of the news began to wear off.

‘But this wasn’t a man executed during the war as some kind of moral boosting example…’ Said Lady Edith. Her hands were by her sides instead of on her cutlery, a sure sign she considered the matter of greater import than Lord Grantham was willing to acknowledge, and that the debate was tipping into dangerous territory. ‘…what possible purpose could his death serve now? And how can something of this nature be excused so easily?’

‘I’m sure the judge put some thought into the matter.’ Said Lord Grantham, now more dismissive than careful. ‘The matter may well have gone a different way with a different judge, who is to say it would not? Evidently Judge Kelly felt strongly regarding the principle of the thing, as do the people of that fine city.’ He concluded in a way that made it clear he was of a similar mind.

Lady Edith took the paper from him and regarded it critically.

‘How can this behaviour be condoned?’ She said, speaking to the paper rather than Lord Grantham.

‘With respect, my dear, you may need to accept that situations of this nature are beyond your ability to comprehend.’

Perhaps luckily for Lord Grantham, Edith was too busy reading the paper to hear him.

‘This is despicable.’ She said. ‘You’ve read what they did to him?’

‘I have.’ Said Lord Grantham, taking the paper back. ‘But I don’t think it necessary that you do.’

Lady Edith shook her head. She pressed her lips together tightly as she looked down at her plate.

‘I know it seems barbaric.’ Said Lord Grantham. ‘But a military man would understand.’ He said, swelling slightly with pride at being able to consider himself amongst their ranks. ‘You understand of course, don’t you Barrow?’

Thomas, at that moment having all the mental faculties of a block of ice sat next to a radiator, had utterly nothing to say.

‘Don’t be cruel, papa.’ Said Edith. ‘You ought not make Mr Barrow choose between us in our arguments.’
She picked up her knife and fork and attacked her plate with gusto.

Lord Grantham pointedly read the paper for a few more moments by way of convincing himself he had won before turning his attention to his own breakfast.

Thomas somehow made it through the breakfast without visibly melting.

Despite his discomfort, and powerful longing for his bedroom – or, more accurately, the bathroom – he stayed behind in the breakfast room far longer than usual to clear the room ready for the day.

Things were folded and re-folded, polished then done again, furniture moved one millimetre one way, then the other, until his trembling fingers were fully satisfied.
Chapter 76

*Davis Strait*

In the end, Janek managed to make ‘friends’ without actually trying to. And without giving a single word or smile.

It happened shortly after the ship’s boiler broke down.

After a supply stop in Greenland the boiler started losing pressure and a few days later it was in danger of giving up the ghost completely. This was unfortunate for a number of reasons. First, the incompetent cook had sent the ship’s engineer to the sick-room even before they’d left Greenland, so he was no help. Second, there was no time to head back to port to get it fixed by someone else.

They were travelling north to collect messages that had been left buried in cairns on the islands west of Baffin Bay. And the window of opportunity to do so was rapidly closing. Once the winter took hold, the temperatures would plummet, the winds would grow deadly (well, deadlier) and the waters would ice up.

The ship had been dispatched in a hurry to try to beat the winter season, but now faced the prospect of having to wait another year to complete the mission.

Decades earlier, men who had been dispatched to explore the area at the far north-west extremity of the globe had built up the piles of stones and left messages for ships that might follow. The men who came after had left their own messages while trying to find out what had happened to the original explorers. ‘Frozen death’, seemed to be the general consensus.

For the search parties, beating a hasty retreat when supplies ran low, and weather closed in, seemed to be the most prudent course of action to avoid their own frozen deaths. Consequently, some of the messages had never been collected.

Various captains over the years that followed had decided that messages reminding people where supply depots were, or noting the health of long-dead sailors, were of little consequence.

But someone in the British government had now decided that there was a danger to national pride should any of the messages fall into the wrong hands. Specifically, the hands of nations they were in the process of falling out with.

The captain, a twit in popular opinion, was at least self-aware enough to know he was on a fool’s errand. He knew he had been selected for the hastily planned mission purely because he was the person least likely to be of use anywhere else. In other words, his absence would be of least inconvenience to the admiralty.

The captain was aware that it was likely the messages had already been collected by some unknown ship years earlier. The finders may have taken a brief detour to pick up a few extra cans of meat at the old supply depots that the notes directed them to, but otherwise were unlikely to have given the contents of the messages another thought.

It would be of no consequence whatsoever should he succeed in gathering the ‘lost’ messages in the cairns.

And, while failing to collect the messages would also have little consequence to the fortunes of Britain as a whole, it would be a career ending humiliation (what little career he had) if he should
fail.

Hence the need for a working bloody boiler.

It’s not hard to imagine the captain’s surprise when a tentative midshipman interrupted the ‘What the hell are we going to do?’ meeting to inform him that the boiler was fixed.

Janek didn’t know about British government officials, or the captain’s non-starter of a career, or cairns or rescue missions, but he did know that the ship needed a functioning boiler. He took himself to the boiler room without being asked. And why would a sullen rope-maker be asked if he knew anything about boilers?

A few hours later he emerged from the boiler room painted in grease and soot, burned in several places, and accompanied by an exhausted ship’s boy who pointed at Janek and told everyone who would listen that ‘He’s the smartest man that ever was!’

Nobody knew that Janek had joined the ship fresh from a career in a boiler workshop by the Mersey, so his rescue of the ship’s boiler was considered something of a miracle. Some of the more cynical or intelligent men in the crew (of which Alpin was definitely one of the two) realised that of course there had to be some prior knowledge and experience involved, but that certainly didn’t lessen the importance of Janek’s achievement.

His refusal to answer praise and his lack of reaction to claps on the dirty shoulder shifted people’s perception of him as a man and crewmate. The sour loner had become the humble genius.

None of it was of any consequence to Janek.

Likewise it was of no consequence when he was summoned to meet with the captain.

The captain had been advised of the impropriety of making a fuss of a man who had essentially done a standard job (albeit someone else’s job), but his gratitude was such that he insisted Janek be brought to him.

It was lucky that he did so the day after Janek had fixed the boiler, otherwise he was likely to have been holding an audience with a soot demon if Janek hadn’t happened to wash himself down with seawater the previous evening as part of his bedtime routine.

Janek said nothing while the captain somehow spent ten minutes saying ‘Thank you’ and he was sent on his way with a large box of Turkish delight sweets. Had Janek been paying attention to anything other than how to get away as quickly as possible, he would have seen the men around the captain looking extremely uncomfortable over what they considered to be a patronising gift. A knife, gloves, a high-value coin…If the captain felt compelled to thank the man, even though he didn’t need to thank him, almost anything would have been more appropriate than sweets. But Janek didn’t react to the gift either way. The men were grateful to him for that, and for expressing nothing other than a silent and (they assumed) humble wish to be on his way.

After his audience with the captain, Janek returned below deck in time for food and left the sweets at the end of the table as he took his place. The men eyed up the box, then him, then the box again. This went on for several minutes.

Eventually a brave soul reached over, very slowly, to take a piece of Turkish delight for himself. When Janek failed to react, others helped themselves too. Soon the box was making the rounds of the other tables.

Several times men took the box over to offer it to Janek, but he shook his head. He sat silently,
surrounded by sailors merry in the grips of a temporary sugary high. His attention was focused on his left palm, where one of several moments of carelessness in the boiler room had left him with a nasty blistered burn.

The men may not have gone so far as to propose three cheers for Janek, but it was clearly the pervading sentiment in the room. A room filled with men already bored of standard ship’s fare in terms of food, more so than usual due to the incompetence of the cook.

Disinterested in the surrounding feelings of camaraderie, Janek picked at the blisters on his palm and slowly curled his fingers to smear in the stickiness that resulted.
Chapter 77

*Downton Abbey*

Thomas entered the sitting room to find Lady Edith sat in as un-ladylike a posture as her years of conditioning would allow. A perfectly powdered forehead rested on her upturned palm, elbow on the table, and shoulders slumped a barely perceptible amount towards the sheets of paper spread out before her.

‘My Lady…’ Said Thomas softly, feeling the need to announce his presence but lacking a free hand to knock. He brandished the tea tray. ‘…I understand you rang for tea.’

Edith sighed and brought herself upright in the chair.

‘Yes, Mr Barrow.’ She said wearily. ‘The strongest tea…’ She sniffed and caught the pen that threatened to roll off the side of the table. ‘…that you have ever made in all your good years of service, if you please.’

Safely behind Edith’s back, Thomas winced.

‘Is everything alright, My Lady?’ He ventured, aware he was straying outside of the bounds of propriety.

‘Perfectly fine.’ She said.

As she looked up, Thomas caught her eyeing up the bottle of brandy sitting on the side table at the other end of the room.

It was ten in the morning.

Still, who was he to judge?

‘Would My Lady prefer something a little stronger than tea?’

‘Oh…’ She caught herself and gave a small embarrassed laugh. ‘…No, just the tea, please.’

Thomas set about making it, wondering how literally he was to take Edith’s request for a cup of the strongest tea he had ever made.

‘Though I reserve the right to change my mind later…’ Edith trailed off and sighed. She sat heavily back in her chair, another unladylike gesture, and this time the pen did roll off the table.

Thomas deposited a cup of tea by her side with one hand and reached for the pen with the other.

‘Might I be of some assistance, My Lady?’ He offered, returning the pen to the table.

She sighed again. ‘I suppose you might.’ She said. ‘But I hesitate to ask. I shouldn’t like to put you in a compromising position.’

‘In that case I think I’d best hear what’s needed.’ Said Thomas with a small smile.

Lady Edith caught the humour and offered a weak but apologetic smile in response. ‘It’s this business in Liverpool…’ She said. And immediately Thomas wished he’d kept his big mouth shut.
‘…I want to make it the topic of a column for The Sketch. I want to write about the inhumanity of the whole affair.’ She said. ‘But whatever I try…’ She shook her head and flipped through sheets and sheets of discarded beginnings. ‘…I cannot find a way.’

‘I shouldn’t have thought that would be too hard, My Lady.’ Thomas said before he could stop himself.

Hearing those words from him seemed to perk Edith up a little. ‘But that’s the thing, you see. It’s so clear to some that such an act is inexcusable, but to others there are…justifications.’ She eventually concluded. ‘And I can’t think of a way to write about it without people simply coming back to say deserters deserve what is done to them, both legally and morally. I try to confine it to this one occasion…but then it keeps growing…’ She stared dolefully down at the papers. ‘I suppose I can’t deny that there is also the issue of experience.’ She continued. ‘Who am I, a Lady in a well-appointed sitting room, to tell men how they should feel about their actions, or the actions of others, in war?’

Thomas stood by awkwardly, wondering how he could extract himself from the room as speedily as possible while causing the least possible offence.

‘I wonder…’ Said Edith carefully, looking up at Thomas. ‘…if some input from a sympathetic soldier might be of benefit?’ She said. ‘Am I correct in thinking that you feel Mr Payton’s death was a deplorable act, despite having served yourself?’

For a moment Thomas’s mouth was too dry to respond.

‘I don’t think I’d be much good, My Lady.’ He eventually said.

‘I don’t have to name you.’ She said, visibly brightening as her mind latched onto the potentialities. ‘I wouldn’t name you, of course. But if you could just perhaps give me a few words. Something to quote? Mr Barrow, that would be marvellous. What would you want to tell those who think Payton’s death was excusable?’

Thomas blurted out a quick ‘Please excuse me, My Lady’ before making a hasty retreat. So hasty that he quite forgot the tea tray and had to ask Jimmy to go up to collect it for him.

When Jimmy returned with the tea tray he brought a message of apology from Lady Edith.

Thomas survived the rest of the day on cigarettes and coffee.

Before Thomas could go to bed that night he took out everything in his dresser and wardrobe and carefully cleaned and re-arranged things into perfect order. Perfect rows, perfect folds. And all items atop the dresser arranged just so.

It was past two o’clock in the morning when he considered his work complete.
Chapter 78

*Baffin Bay*

The ship sat at anchor in a sheltered bay. A filmy layer of ice lapped at the hull, roughly the consistency of mushy peas and equally aesthetically disappointing. But beyond, the open water glistened black on one side, and on the other the moonlight picked out imposing white peaks on the island.

The ship’s deck was a warm glowing lantern in the harsh black and white surroundings. A comforting cocoon of yellow light rose from gas lanterns and candle jars arranged on deck. The flames barely moved in the still night. Only occasionally they would wisp to the side, as if to follow men as they walked by.

The warm glow reached so far, then stopped. It rested on the railings along the side of the deck, but penetrated no further, leaving the water an inky swirl beyond. Above, the light reached part way up the mast. But beyond the boundary of light the riggings were frosted and forbidding in the dark.

The sounds of the fiddles and the barrel organ brought merriment to the deck. But it took a considerable amount of alcohol for one to disregard the haunting effect of the music fading into the overwhelming space and silence of their surroundings. Luckily for the men, the alcohol was flowing freely that night.

Janek didn’t know what the celebrations were in aid of. He only knew that everybody else seemed to know what was going on apart from him. There had been singing. Then a larger than usual meal. Then barrels and bottles had been tapped and uncorked. Then more singing. Then costumes had appeared; some new and makeshift, some old but finely crafted. Then there had been a play.

For all the attention he was paying, Janek had originally thought he’d gotten caught up between three or so people having a particularly abstract conversation. Then one of the seamen had addressed one of the others as his daughter (to various lewd comments from the audience that seemed to have sprung out of nowhere) and Janek made a hasty retreat to the other side of the deck. Some hands grabbed at his shirt as he made his way through the crowd, encouraging him back, but Janek kept walking and made out to be heading for the beer barrel.

He deliberately took as long to pour his drink as it took for the others to lose interest in him. Eventually they turned their attention back to the developing drama on ‘stage’.

The day’s frivolities bled into the night, and Janek could only walk and wait, willing the endless cavalcade of merriments to end and for the hammocks to be pulled down below for sleep.

He wandered the upper deck, staring off into the dark. The more beer he drunk the more the moonlit view reminded of the bleak, wide landscapes of his childhood home.

While the men jigged and spun about the masts, Janek was largely left alone. He was grateful for that.

He was also grateful for the relative balminess of the night as he pissed his fifth beer over the side of the ship without having to worry if his cock might be kissed by frost and drop off.

The night’s entertainment showed no sign of abating, and Janek felt the need for sleep descending over him like a heavy blanket. Gingerly he picked his way through the whirling men to head below. He let himself be tugged this way and that in the crowd, and then quietly ducked out, without a
word, as soon as people’s attention went elsewhere.

There were men merry-making in the living quarters. The room which doubled as a dining space (tables on ropes that were lowered at meal times) and sleeping space (hammocks slung up so close you knocked your neighbour when the ship rolled) was very much part of the party as well. Some older souls, who were likely feeling the chill on deck, had brought themselves below. Some with real beards, some with fake ones. All in moth-eaten robes of green and gold, were sat sharing stories of glory days gone by, while a stoneware bottle was passed amongst them.

Janek slipped out before they could see him.

He headed for the store rooms. His initial plan was to sneak a lie down on the sacks of flour in the cook’s stores, but there was a good chance someone would come in for more supplies as the night wore on.

So Janek took himself onwards. He made his way down a long corridor partitioned off by packing crates. The light of the lamps above seeped in through the gaps between the planks above (the same planks that had let in so much sea water during the high winds) and painted the space with yellow stripes. But Janek picked his way forwards carefully all the same, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Temporarily deprived of sight, Janek listened to his breath on the damp air as he inched his feet forwards. But as he held his breath to step over a large coil of rope, the sound continued.

Someone else was breathing down there.

That in itself wasn’t too surprising.

There were no habitable places on the ship where a man could go to be truly alone.

But the nature of the breathing, it’s speed and shallowness, sent some kind of electricity through Janek’s core. It set his heart beating, strongly and in time with each gasp, and drove all the moisture from his mouth.

His feet carried him forwards. Moving utterly without his knowledge or consent. They brought him to a halt a short distance from a tangle of moving cloth and flesh that stood out in stark contrast to the clear lines of the packing crates.

Janek knew Alpin immediately. He also knew the young man under him; one of the rope ‘helpers’ Janek had been gifted by Alpin a few weeks before. Janek didn’t know what his name was. He hadn’t bothered to learn it.

At first Janek thought the young man was struggling to push himself off of the crate he was bent over, struggling to push Alpin away.

But, as Janek watched, the young man used his tight grip of Alpin’s wrist and shoulder to pull him towards him, to pull them together. So tightly that it was Alpin who was struggling to pull away each time he buried himself.

Janek watched, lost in the moment, watched the young man somehow arch his back and twist his neck far enough for sweat-slicked lips to meet. And slide. And crush.

There was needfulness. And tenderness.

And Janek let out the breath he had held for far too long.
It cut through the air. It broke the spell. Alpin looked up and cringed and swore. He held the young man’s arm protectively even as he moved to extract himself.

‘This isn’t…It’s not…Fuck…Please…’

Janek stepped back.

‘Please…It’s not what it…’ Alpin stood, looking as ridiculous half-in his pantomime costume as the dark-haired young man looked alluring half-out of his. ‘It’s not what it looks like…’ Said Alpin.

Janek stepped back again.

His eyes were nowhere near Alpin and his companion.

He couldn’t hear either of them. Not their pleas, not their staccato breaths, not their fear.

They weren’t there.

His mind wasn’t there.

‘Please…Just…’ Alpin walked towards him, hands outstretched. Behind him, the young man struggled to put his clothes to rights.

‘Is he alright?’ Said the young man, looking at Janek’s face.

Janek’s back hit something behind him. His legs took that as a cue that it was a safe time to give out.

Under Alpin’s confused gaze, Janek dropped heavily onto his backside and burst into tears.
Chapter 79

*Downton Abbey*

‘There you are…’

Thomas winced at the sound of Jimmy’s voice.

Yes, here I am. Thought Thomas. In the deepest, darkest, dampest area, the most inaccessible and private area, of the gardens. Alone, because I obviously want company.

‘Yes.’ Thomas replied as he continued to smoke and tried to keep his hand from shaking. ‘Am I needed at the house?’ He said sourly, hoping Jimmy would take the hint and leave him to his own devices if that wasn’t the case.

‘No.’ Said Jimmy, all smiles and conspiratorial grin. ‘I was just looking for you.’

Thomas said nothing.

Jimmy took a seat next to him on the bench. Thomas had to work hard to stop himself physically curling up at the unwanted proximity of another human.

‘Can I have one of those?’ Said Jimmy.

Thomas bit his lip. After a moment’s dark deliberation he fished in his pocket for his cigarettes.

‘One.’ He said. ‘Then you leave me be.’

‘Alright.’ Said Jimmy, his sunshine somewhat dulled.

They smoked in painful silence until Thomas cracked.

‘What is it?’ He said.

‘I was just thinking…’ Said Jimmy, feigning nonchalance that was spoiled when he had to break character to rub wayward smoke from his eye. ‘…That we haven’t talked is all. You know, not really since you’ve come back.’

‘We have talked.’ Said Thomas, staring down at the putrid residue of mushrooms hiding in the hedgerow.

‘Well…yes. But I’ve been thinking, like, wondering…’ Jimmy bent his knee up onto the bench to face Thomas. ‘…about you and that bloke.’

‘Wondering like how?’ Thomas grasped the wood of the bench with his free hand.

‘Well how did you…like, how was it, you and him living together?’

What? Thought Thomas.

‘I don’t feel like talking about it.’ Was what he said. And I’ve got a lot else on my bloody mind right now, he added silently in his head.

‘Might help you to talk about it.’
Jimmy’s expression was eager rather than conciliatory.

‘Thought that sort of thing always made you uncomfortable.’ Said Thomas, the bush and mushroom remnants he was staring at started to blur in his vision.

‘Go on, you can talk to me. You can tell me about it.’

‘What exactly…’ Thomas took a deep breath. ‘…about me and him living together do you want to know?’

Jimmy shrugged, eyes bright.

‘Anything you want to tell me.’

‘Been thinking about this a lot have you?’

Jimmy withdrew a little.

‘Well, no. I mean, no.’ He tossed his head. ‘Not thinking about it like that. No. I’m just trying to help out.’ He sounded highly offended. ‘Just trying to help.’

By wanting details of my living arrangements? My…living…arrangements. Thought Thomas. There’s a fucking shitty euphemism if ever I heard one. He flicked away his cigarette and immediately tried to light another, but his hands wouldn’t cooperate. Want to know who did the cooking, do you? I’m sure that’s what you’re after. And who did the washing, yes? Thomas was almost tempted to call Jimmy’s bluff by regaling him with an hour long diatribe about the intricacies of keeping the floorboards clean.

‘Fuck off, Jimmy.’ Thomas spat, surprising himself with the involuntary words, though he fully understood why his instincts had provided them.

In recent days Thomas had been overflowing with unwelcome thoughts brought on by Edith’s proposition for him to offer a perspective on the plight of the cowardly soldier. So much so that he’d come close to bursting in all manner of unfortunate situations where he had no way to reasonably extract himself and go shout in a cupboard.

His inner struggles had manifested in a deathly facial tone, and a mood more sour than any that the Abbey residents had had to contend with in the past.

He’d been coming around to the idea that he needed to unburden to someone. Perhaps not the whole truth, perhaps not his own war story at all. But to talk to someone. And that someone might have been Jimmy.

But now, if the feeling in his gut was correct, that someone would not be Jimmy at all. And thank fuck he hadn’t gone down that route. He’d thought Jimmy had matured, at least a little, into someone he might one day call a true friend.

But here was the old Jimmy, still clearly wanting to distance himself from admitting any interest or association with Thomas’s world. But here was a new, unexpected and wholly unwelcome twist to contend with; Jimmy somehow suddenly wanting to know what happened behind closed doors.

Thomas finally managed to get the cigarette lit and put his spare hand back on the seat of the bench. He felt sick.
He felt even sicker when Jimmy failed to fuck off, and instead silently put his own hand out to still the tremors in Thomas’s.

‘Walk away.’ Said Thomas.

Jimmy left his hand a moment longer. Thomas’s stomach churned at the movement of Jimmy’s thumb down the side of his hand.

‘Another time?’

Thomas snatched his hand away.

‘Don’t you dare.’ He said. ‘Don’t you bloody dare. On top of everything!’ He paused to catch his breath and try to calm his voice. ‘I do not need this to deal with, on top of everything else…’ He was shouting, and he was beyond the point of being able to do anything about it. ‘On top of everything else, I’ve now got to be pissed at you.’ He smacked the wood of the bench in lieu of Jimmy’s head, which was now too far away to reach given that it’s owner had hastily risen and retreated a few steps away. ‘Fuck off!’ Jimmy went to comply. ‘And if you say fucking anything about this to anyone…’ Thomas shouted after him. ‘If you fucking twist this, and tell anyone, I will fucking kill you! Do you hear me?’

Thomas listened to the hasty rustling of Jimmy making his way out of the garden, punctuated with his own ragged breaths.

As silence returned, Thomas was left to contend with himself.

‘Fuck.’ He whispered. He’d been ashamed of himself before, that was nothing new, but he’d never managed to tip into a place of being genuinely afraid of himself before. And of all the people in Downton Abbey to crack in front of…even Lord Grantham would have been better.

‘What the fuck?’ He whispered. ‘Fuck.’

He spoke to no one as he made his way back to his room that night.

He closed the door to his bedroom feeling like there were insects crawling all over his skin. Fighting the urge to tear his hair out, or tear his face off, or take grooves out of his arms with his nails as he dragged off his shirt, Thomas paced the floor half-dressed trying to keep in the urge to wail at the walls.

Finally, exhausted, he dropped into a chair.

I have to do something. He thought. I have to do something, I have to do something, I have to do something.

‘I have to do something.’ He said, out loud, and loud, without meaning to.

The sound of someone shuffling down the corridor outside his room immediately brought him back to himself. He clapped a hand over his mouth and rocked in the chair.

Sweating yet freezing, he brought himself round to face the desk. He grabbed a pen and scratched ‘I have to do something’ right onto the desk.

Taking a breath, he stared at the words.

Taking another breath, he reached for paper.
‘I have to do something’ he wrote, then crossed it out so vigorously it put holes in the paper.

He took another sheet.

‘I have to say something’ he wrote. ‘I have to say something, to someone…’ After a moment’s deliberation he added ‘…to everyone…’

He sat back and considered the words for some time before taking up his pen to continue.

‘…or else I’ll go mad.’

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