A Girl in Black

by mrstater

Summary

*I'm not as sad as I should be. That's what makes me sad.* The Titanic sinks, Patrick dies, and rather than wait at home to meet the new heir of Downton, Mary tries her luck in London, where she meets Sir Richard Carlisle instead. [Alternate S1]
Mary defies social convention by attending a ball in mourning, where she finds herself invited by Sir Richard Carlisle to partner in an even more unconventional sort of dance.

May, 1912

That's interesting, thinks Mary for the first time all night at Agnes Belcher's engagement ball which, thus far, has hardly proven an event worth defying her mother to attend. Nevertheless, she does her best to school her features into an expression that is absolutely not interested—and certainly not approving—as the stranger whom she's caught staring at her several times across the ballroom weaves his way around mingling guests, cutting an unmistakable path toward her. But the eyes peering bright blue from beneath his heavy brow catch her gaze and hold it before she can glance away or even blink, and she knows before they have exchanged one word that this is a man to whom the word no holds no meaning. Hers aren't the only eyebrows raised, at least, when he stands before her with an outstretched hand.

"I don't believe we've been introduced," he says.

"No."

Mary's gaze flickers down to the white-gloved hand, and then back up again to his face. In acknowledgment of his overture, and her dismissal of it, she tells herself—not because his gaze commands hers. At the slight narrowing of his eyes, almost a wince, she tilts her chin upward. But though he slowly lowers his arm and slips his hand into his trouser pocket, he forges ahead with the self-introduction that reminds her so of Mr Collins' ill-advised attempt to ingratiate himself to Mr Darcy. If Mr Collins were tall and trim and handsome in evening attire and Mr Darcy as snobbish as Elizabeth Bennett initially judged him to be.

"I'm Richard Carlisle. Sir Richard Carlisle," he amends, and it's all Mary can do not to smirk outright; as if his manners don't speak plainly enough of his common breeding, he's as good as shouted it by forgetting to use his title which is no doubt as newly acquired as his money that bought him his invitation to this ball and of which he is crass enough to talk. "If you read the newspapers, you'll no doubt know the significance of the name."

"Oh? Then that must make you either a murderer or a politician."

Mary cringes inwardly—though not outwardly, she hopes fervently—at hearing Granny's words spoken in her own voice—though she quite agrees with the opinion the Dowager Countess would no doubt have of this situation, that even though Mary knows very well that Sir Richard Carlisle is Britain's rising newspaper magnate, it won't do at all to allow that sort of person too many delusions of grandeur.

So she takes her gaze off him and lets it blindly wander around the room of waltzing couples, and pretends not to know—or, better yet, not to care—that one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in England has singled her out from all the rest.
As if the black mourning dress she's wearing amid all the maidenly whites and creams and pinks and pale lavenders hasn't set her enough apart from the others in the ballroom, she thinks with a sigh, catching her reflection in one of the mirrors inlaid in the elaborate gilt moulding near the ceiling.

But Sir Richard chuckles, low and rumbling, and when her eyes meet the blue ones again the twinkle tells her he knows that she knows who he is, but that he'll play along with her little game. As that sort of person must, Mary reminds herself.

Although when he speaks, she isn't entirely sure it is her game, after all.

"You might consider me a murderer of a sort," he says, "if reputations count as victims. And I've been known to argue that my newspapers give me a louder voice than those poor fools who spend their whole lives and fortunes campaigning for a chance to shout over each other in Parliament."

"Excepting, of course, those rich fools who only have to be born to get the chance to shout?" Mary can't resist poking at him, though she instantly regrets it when Sir Richard seems suddenly to loom over her, his eyes flashing steely grey to the sound of rattling glass behind her as she instinctively backs away from him and into an unsuspecting footman.

Luckily he balances his tray with a feline grace that makes her think of Thomas back home--right down to the briefly insolent look he shoots her. Mary flushes, either from the realisation that the footman isn't the only person looking at her, or that Sir Richard has caught hold of her elbow, no trace on his face of the expression she found so intimidating just a moment before. Still, she'd like nothing better than to wrench her arm free of him and walk away without another word--and no one would blame her for wanting to escape the graceless, blundering fool--she refuses to make more of a spectacle of herself than she already has, thanks to him.

Or to admit that Mama had been right about her attending this ball at all.

"Goodness," she says, and puts on a simper which feels every bit as becoming to her as the wretched black gown. "I'm not sure which of your alter egos I'd best beware meeting in a dark alley."

"Are you a frequenter of dark alleys, then, Lady Mary? I generally avoid them--though I confess I'm always on the prowl for a good story."

Her surprise at his knowing her name must register on her face, because he smiles--smirks, rather; in either case, dimples form beneath his high cheekbones.

"Ah, yes," he says silkily. "Lest you think me too uncouth, I did ask our mutual friend Lady Belcher--"

*Lady Agnes*, Mary, twice shy, resists the urge to correct him.

"--for your name and an introduction. But I grew impatient with waiting."

"For a story? I'm afraid I must disappoint you on that score, Sir Richard, for I'm quite the blank page."

He draws a step nearer to her, and though again Mary's instinct is to recoil from him, she instead digs her heels into the floor to hold her ground. "Actually it was your dance card I hoped to find blank."

He's being honest; Mary can read the hope as plainly on his face as if it were printed in black typeset, through the softening of the strong masculine features. A very handsome face, she thinks again, though he must be near to Papa's age and uses far too much pomade--but that's not the reason her heartbeat quickens. Sir Richard Carlisle isn't as confident about his place in the world as he'd like
everyone to think with his talk about his newspapers, and it's exhilarating to have that sort of power over a man like him. How silly she'd been to allow him to alarm her before, when it had been her who'd provoked such a reaction from him in the first place.

"It is," she tells him, savouring the pleasure of watching his smile stretch and settle into the cocksure one he'd worn when talking of his social and political influences before adding, "Because I'm in mourning, I would have thought my wearing a black gown to a ball made it obvious that I don't intend to dance tonight. It did to the other men."

Her gaze wanders over Sir Richard's shoulder to the centre of the ballroom, where the men and their young ladies seem to float upon clouds of light colours and even lighter fabrics in the golden sunset glow of candelabras and electric chandeliers reflecting off the gilt mouldings.

"I'm so terribly sorry," she says, swinging her back to Sir Richard.

"Don't be." Apart from stepping back from her again, he shows no sign of being disappointed. Which, if she's honest, rather disappoints her. His lips curve in a pale smile. "You've given me a story, after all."

"Oh?" Her voice pitches higher than usual, as she hopes he's only joking, and not nursing resentment for her earlier dig, after all. "I'm intrigued."

"As am I. Tell me: why would Lady Mary Crawley attend a ball when she's in mourning?"

Because she's bored, she wants to tell him. Because she can't stand being home any longer, with the endless talk of poor lost Patrick and the entail and what man is now to inherit what ought to be hers. Because, like Sir Richard, she is tired of rules and of being governed by them, and this one is easy to break.

"Because it's my dear friend's engagement party," she says instead. "It wouldn't do to short-change Lady Agnes' joy just because I'm a little sad, now, would it? Hardly a story. Not even a juicy blurb for one of your ladies' journals."

Sir Richard lifts his chin and his eyebrows. "No, indeed. How kind you are, to make such a sacrifice for a friend. Only..." His dimples deepen with his smirk, and his shrewd eyes sweep appraisingly over her, lingering a little longer than they ought over the modest neckline of her mourning gown. "I'm not certain it is such a sacrifice. You don't seem even a little bit sad, as you claim to."

I know you're sad about Patrick, Sybil's voice whispers in Mary's mind. Whatever you say, I know it.

But Sir Richard Carlisle is not the soft-voiced, sweet-faced darling her little sister is, and Mary wants to clap her hands over her ears to shut out his words, her own words: I'm not as sad as I should be. That's what makes me sad. She was so ashamed of the pale girl dressed in black staring at her from the mirror of her dressing table that night, and her flight to London has only brought her face-to-face with her again, in the mirror of this man.

This man. Who doesn't belong here. Who shouldn't have any right at all to see her, much less straight through her, or to speak of it as plainly as if he's known her all her life, more plainly than anyone who has known her all her life.

She draws up her shoulders and gives him a narrow smile. "My lot don't, you know," she says, and turns to go, not caring any longer whether she makes a spectacle of herself or not.

But Sir Richard doesn't let her. Before she can take one step away from him, his gloved fingers close around her upper arm, their grip at once gentle but unyielding.
"That's not an aristocrat's stiff upper lip I see," he says in a tone so low Mary cannot be sure is meant to soothe her or scare her--or seduce her, she thinks, and immediately dismisses the thought, "but one that's never quavered at all. And why should it? We've all worn black for someone we don't care two pence about."

"Oughtn't I care about a cousin who died on the Titanic? Isn't that why your newspapers are still revelling in the gory, sentimental details of the tragedy?"

Sir Richard laughs. "I believe you're quite mistaken, Lady Mary. I'm not in the business of making people care. I'm in the business of selling newspapers. And no, I can't think of any reason why you ought to care more about a cousin because of the tragic manner of her death."

"His death. He was my fiancé."

Mary can't think why she would tell Sir Richard Carlisle, peddler of scandal, sentiment, and society gossip, what she's told no one else outside her family--except that his fingers radiate warmth through his glove on the sliver of her bare skin left exposed between the top of her black satin glove her black beaded lace sleeve--and she's relieved, so very relieved, that there exists someone in this world who doesn't think she's cold and unnatural. Or, if she is, that she's not cold and unnatural and alone.

"I see," says Sir Richard. "Not the fiancé of your own choosing."

_Only if something better didn't come along._ This time, Mary doesn't cringe from the memory of her own words, but meets Sir Richard's bright blue eyes. "He was the heir to my father's title and estate."

The lines of his face soften, and so does his hold on her arm, his thumb stroking lightly over it. An intimate and bold gesture, and one which she must not allow, no matter how comforting it may be, not having come here with the view of dancing.

"Though I don't expect a self-made man like you, Sir Richard, to appreciate the intricacies of inheritance law."

Rather than release her, as Mary hoped the tweak to his pride would make him do, Sir Richard's fingers tighten around her arm, causing the beadwork on her sleeve to dig into it.

"Perhaps not," he says in tones kinder than his touch, "though I do know most laws don't favour your sex any more than they favour those not born rich. We're not so very different, you and I, and I can imagine that were I in your position, I wouldn't be sorry to see distant cousins drowned in the icy waters of the Atlantic rather than inherit what was rightfully mine."

"You are quite the sensationalist, aren't you? I hope I won't open the morning paper to find a story that puts your words in my mouth."

Sir Richard's smirk is less than reassuring, and Mary's arm is left suddenly cold as he unwraps his fingers from around it. However, his voice is warm as he again slips his hands into his trouser pockets and says, "I'll make you a deal."

"A deal?" Mary repeats. "Dear me, Sir Richard--do you always speak to ladies as if they were business associates?"

"Only the ones I deem equal to it, Lady Mary. And I assure you, there haven't been many."

It is, no doubt, the strangest compliment a man has ever paid her, but the best one she can imagine in this moment. A shrewd man like Sir Richard must know it, too.
Nevertheless, she says, "What do you propose, then?"

"That you reserve a place for me on your dance card the next time you're in town and not not-mourning. I assure you, I may not be one of your lot, as you say, but I dance as well as any man born into a title."

"I've had my dancing shoes trod on by many an aristocrat," Mary replies, "so you've hardly instilled me with confidence. But all right--if it keeps me out of the papers."

She extends her hand, and Sir Richard shakes it as firmly to seal the bargain as if he'd made her a business deal--though with a tenderness in his eyes Mary doubts many of his business associates have seen.

"Just so you know," he says, having the grace--for once--to look a little embarrassed, "I wouldn't have printed a story about you."

"Of course not. Why would anyone find a woman being a victim of unjust laws newsworthy?" That sounds so frightfully self-pitying that Mary can just hear Granny scolding her for sounding middle class. Which will never do in front of Sir Richard. So she flashes a smile and adds, breezily, "Though I will be telling my grandmother you asked me for a dance."

Sir Richard looks so ridiculously pleased, his chest puffing out and his grin stretching, that Mary nearly laughs at him. Another thing her lot don't do, but it feels good to restrain a different emotion, for once, than bitterness and betrayal.

"Will she be impressed that a newspaper magnate sought you out?" he asks. "Or is new money more scandalous than anything she could read in my papers?"

"She'd be impressed if one of the footmen sought me out. No one wants to kiss a girl in black, she said before I came."

She tries to pull her hand from Sir Richard's but once again he draws her back to him. Closer than she'd stood to him before, so that her skirts whisper against his trousers, as they would if she was waltzing with him. The ballroom even seems to swirl around her like it must to the dancers.

"I can't say it ever made much difference to me what colour a girl was wearing."

"No," says Mary, struggling to keep her bearings when he releases her hand abruptly and steps back from her. "Of course it wouldn't."

"But remember," he says, smiling at her over his shoulder as he takes his leave, "I wasn't the one who brought up the subject of kissing."
Three months after she met Sir Richard, Mary returns to London to find an invitation waiting for her which she cannot refuse.

September, 1912

As Mary steps off the train at King's Cross, the very last person in the world whom she expects to see through a haze of brownish smoke, waiting on the platform, is Aunt Rosamund. Not the least bit surprising, however, is the sight of her swiping soot or dirt or some other railway station grime, real or imagined, off the shoulder of her fawn-coloured suit before she looks up again, arching her eyebrows as she spies Mary amid the other disembarking passengers.

"You never meet me at the station," Mary remarks as her aunt's lips brush her cheek in a cool kiss of greeting. "Has someone died back home while I was on the train and sent you to give me the bad news?"

"Is there someone you wish had died at home?" Rosamund draws back, lips quirked and cool blue eyes crackling like Granny's, though she would hate to hear the comparison made. "The new heir, perhaps?"

"Heavens, no. The next one will probably turn out to be a chimney sweep from Solihull."

"Which would be worse than a lawyer from Manchester."

Rosamund starts to say something else, but the hoot of a train whistle and a blast of steam drown out her voice, so she gestures for Mary to follow her through the terminus' shifting maze of passengers and people sending them off or welcoming them home, porters carrying bags and hatboxes or pushing trolleys piled high with suitcases and steamer trunks, including the man who'd collected Mary's own luggage, their conversations an unintelligible din that echoes off the high walls of brown brick and the vaulted glass roof crisscrossed with steel beams. The instant they've broken free of the throng at the ticket counters, however, Rosamund resumes their chat as if there has been no break in it.

"They are trying to talk you into marrying this Cousin Matthew, aren't they? That's why you've come to stay with me? To escape?"

"I'm your niece. Do you think I have to go to such dramatic lengths to get out of doing something I don't want to do?"

"So it really is that you can't bear to sit through another dinner in which Mister Crawley drinks the wrong wine with the wrong course?" Outside, they don't have to walk far to Rosamund's awaiting car; the chauffeur opens the door, but she lingers, pursing her lips at Mary across the open top of the motor. "How charming."
"Apparently it is charming. They've all fallen quite in love with him." She does not add, *Especially Papa*, because it is too painful to say, even to Aunt Rosamund.

"Then he hardly needs you to fall in love with him, does he?" says Rosamund, accepting the chauffeur's hand up into the car.

Mary slides onto the bench seat beside her aunt, the door shutting firmly behind her as the driver moves to help the porter load the bags. "Or another word said about him."

 Mercifully, Rosamund restricts the conversation during the half-hour drive from King’s Cross to Eaton Square to gossip about their mutual London acquaintance, which comes to Mary as a breath of fresh air when ordinarily the city odours make her long for the country. What she wants is another country, a world removed from estates and entails--and Cousin Matthew, and her traitor family--and London will do nicely.

She leans her head back against the seat, closing her eyes as she drinks it in, too relaxed for the first time since the *Titanic* sank to correct Rosamund when she notices Mary's demeanour and remarks that she must be weary from her journey from Yorkshire. At least not until they arrive at the house.

"A letter just arrived for you, m'lady," says the beanpole of a butler who, despite his lankiness, sweats profusely and reminds Mary of the Crawleys' man, holding a polished silver tray out to her before can take two steps into the front hall.

"Really, Wood," says Rosamund, "at least wait until the poor girl's had some tea. She has a frightful headache from all that lurching about on the train."

Wood makes a bobbing sort of bow as he stammers apologies. A sweaty bird, Mary thinks, as she slices open the envelope, watching him trundle off on the long legs which seem hardly to have knees.

"Don't trouble with the tea, Wood," she calls, after she has perused the contents. "My head is fine."

"Well I should like a cup," Rosamund says, and Wood spins about on his heel, his head bobbing again on his swan's neck as he glances from his mistress to her houseguest, perplexed by the conflicting instructions.

"You'll have one," Mary replies, folding her letter and sliding it back into the envelope. "At four o'clock this afternoon, at the Ritz Hotel."

Rosamund's eyebrows arch high on her forehead as she cocks her head to one side. "The Ritz Hotel? Today?"

"Sir Richard Carlisle's invited us." Mary doesn't wait for her aunt's response before she addresses Wood, who's still bobbing in the hall at a loss as to what his errand is. "If you'll just send Grace up with my things, I'll change before tea."

"Very good, m'lady."

"Sir Richard Carlisle?" Rosamund says, at Mary's heels as she ascends the staircase to the guest quarters. "The newspaper publisher?"
"No, Sir Richard Carlisle the milkman. I met him at Agnes Belcher's engagement ball last summer."

And hasn't given him another thought until this moment, except to gloat to Granny--and Edith--as she'd promised him she would--that the newly-moneyed, newly-titled Sir Richard Carlisle ignorantly asked a girl in black for a dance. Which hardly accounts for the racing of her pulse now. She runs her hand over the glossy mahogany banister, maintaining a steady climb so as not to belie her internal state.

"But you didn't dance with him, surely? You were in mourning for Patrick."

Mary glances over her shoulder, rolling her eyes. "Sir Richard's the one with no breeding, not me."

"You must have been intimate enough with him to be in contact since."

"We haven't written."

Mary doesn't need to look back at Aunt Rosamund to see the expression on her face--so like Granny's had been when she told her about the encounter at the ball--fairly salivating over the juicy bit of near-scandal even as she tries to school her features into a more properly distasteful twist of her lips.

"Then how did he know you were in town before you had even arrived?"

That is the question, though it won't do to reveal a shred of uncertainty to Rosamund, who, as Mary's chaperone, might forbid her to see Sir Richard. Or write to Papa, who certainly will.

"One of the tricks of his trade, I suppose," Mary says with a slight shrug of her shoulders, glad her back is to Rosamund as her mouth involuntarily twists in distaste at the word trade. Not that Rosamund, widow of a banker, should balk.

And if one must have a trade, better a newspaper magnate than a country solicitor. Especially a newspaper magnate who isn't stealing her inheritance or being thrust at her as a most unwanted suitor.

Rosamund does not balk; her eyes meet Mary's conspiratorially in the mirror as she sweeps into the tranquil blue room that is always hers on her visits, so much less oppressive than the red wallpaper in her own bedroom back home, seemingly larger though it is less than half the size, and seats herself at the dressing table and begins removing her hat pins.

"Somehow you made quite the impression, without a dance."

"I hardly remember what we said to each other," Mary replies, even as their conversation rushes back to her as clearly as if it were being played back to her on a phonograph. "I think I may have been rather insulting."

"Oh my dear--it is time you escaped the country. Or don't you realise that in Sir Richard's world, insults are the sincerest form of flirtation?"

~*~

Mary swirls her spoon in her teacup, adding yet another voice to the chorus of silver tinkling against china in the Ritz Hotel's full tea room. Well--she amends, putting her cup to her lips--nearly full; the
third chair at her table, between hers and Aunt Rosamund's, stands vacant.

"I thought you said insults were the sincerest form of flirtation in Sir Richard's world," Mary says, eying the tiered tray of sandwiches they have, with more courtesy toward their host than he has thus far shown them, left untouched. "Ought I to feel very flattered that Sir Richard is half an hour late?"

"I imagine vengeance is a common attitude in his world, too," Rosamund replies. "Just how insulting were you at Agnes Belcher's ball?"

As Mary replaces her cup and saucer on the immaculate ivory linen tablecloth, she catches sight of a reflection behind her own in one of the mirrored wall panels of a tall, trim man hurrying up the white marble steps that lead into the raised Palm Court. Without waiting for the footman to assist him, he removes his hat and shrugs out of his greatcoat, though he continues to wear his scowl as he shunts them off to the young man dressed in hotel livery. Sir Richard Carlisle ignores the stares of inquisitive tea-takers who have noticed the latecomer, and appears oblivious to the maître d'hôtel who no doubt means to direct him to the table he reserved. Mary avoids his gaze as it rakes the room for her himself, sipping her tea as if it, and her surroundings, do not impress her; as if tea at the Ritz is passé for the Earl of Grantham's daughter, when in fact it is an extravagance to be afforded but once every season, and she's indulging the romantic notion that everything in the room--chandeliers, wall sconces set in carved panels, columns, statues, even the draperies and upholstery, and the borders of the table settings--is not merely gilt, but truly golden in the dim of the early autumn sunset.

Most especially she tries not to look impressed with him as he approaches the table with his proud stride, his irritation masked now by dimples and charm.

"Lady Mary," he says, taking her hand and making a slight bow. "I'm delighted to meet you again. And to make your acquaintance for the first time, Lady Painswick," he adds, turning to her aunt.

"Lady Rosamund," she corrects, her gaze touching Mary's briefly over the centrepiece of pink-tipped roses before she redirects her attention to their host.

Mary fancies two spots of colour appear on his cheekbones, which, along with his chin, appear suddenly as sharp as his voice as he addresses the waiter who has chosen that dire moment to pour Sir Richard a cup of tea. "Is there no champagne?"

He unfurls his napkin with a snap, and the waiter scurries off with a start as if he's felt the lash of a whip. Shaking his head, Sir Richard snatches a smoked salmon sandwich off the tray, which Mary watches him devour in two bites. Though she expects him to speak with his mouth full, he at least has the grace to swallow before he speaking again, and Mary catches herself following the roll of his throat into the starched white collar of his shirt.

"Ah, yes, Lady Rosamund. Your late husband was not Sir Marmaduke Painswick, to my recollection? He was a prominent banker, but never knighted for his success?"

"It would appear you've done your detective work," Rosamund replies as the waiter returns carrying a tray of champagne and three glasses. Sir Richard doesn't give him so much as a glance of acknowledgment as he pours first for the ladies; Aunt Rosamund holds up a hand to decline champagne, so he pours her a fresh cup of tea from the gleaming silver pot. "I doubt Sherlock Holmes himself would have discovered my niece's arrival in town so quickly."

Sir Richard smiles. "I imagine there are times when the newspaper business isn't greatly different to being a private investigator."
"My," says Mary. "You are quite the Renaissance man. I remember you also said it was a bit like being a politician and a murderer."

Her lips curve in a smirk around the rim of her champagne flute as, at the word murderer, the waiter startles and overfills Sir Richard's glass, earning a dark look.

"I'm most inclined to believe the latter," she goes on, "given your knowledge of my whereabouts. Are you Jack the Ripper?"

"If I am, then what does that make you?"

Across the table, Aunt Rosamund draws in a sharp breath, but Mary doesn't bat an eyelid.

"Any number of things, though a victim isn't one of them. I find it's not a style that suits me."

"No," replies Sir Richard. "That was evident when you attended a ball after your fiancé died aboard the Titanic."

The approval in his blue eyes as they regard her makes Mary's pulse quicken, and she looks away, steadying herself with a long drink of champagne. I'm not as sad as I should be, she repeats over to herself in her mind, and that's what makes me sad. She shouldn't want approval for that, shouldn't want approval from him.

"How long do you plan to grace London with your presence, Lady Mary?" Sir Richard interrupts her internal mantra.

"Why, that depends entirely on how long London can keep me entertained."

The dimples deepen beneath his cheekbones with his smile. "Perhaps I can help you with that. Would you--and your aunt, too, of course--" he adds, with a glance at Rosamund "--like a tour of my newspaper offices and the printing presses? See how the news is made?"

"Inefficiently, it would seem, given your tardiness."

Sir Richard glowers at her over his champagne, though Mary pretends not to notice as she selects a sandwich.

Rosamund maintains no such charade. "I think what my niece means to say is that there certainly has been enough news in the past several months to give you more work than there are hours in the day."

"Ah, yes," says Sir Richard, his demeanour, Mary notes, brightened by the opportunity to talk about himself. "There's nothing like shipwrecks and government scandals for making people buy newspapers."

"Your paper was the first to break the Marconi Scandal, I think?"

"You think correctly."

"And how did you come by the information?"

"Haven't you been listening, Aunt Rosamund?" Mary interjects, tired of the conversation going on
around her. "He's cleverer than Sherlock Holmes."

She looks to Sir Richard for his arrogant grin, but instead finds him frowning at his pocket watch. "My apologies, Lady Mary, Lady Rosamund," he says, abruptly pushing back from the table and standing, "but I must be off again. I have a few loose ends to tie up before the evening edition goes to press. I'll settle the bill, but do, please, take your time enjoying your tea." As he leans across the table to take another sandwich, he catches Mary's eye. "Can I expect to see you tomorrow?"

It's probably folly, but she can't resist the way his strong features soften slightly with uncertainty.

"You can," she says, adding, when his grin starts its upward pull at the corner of his mouth, "Punctually, even, if you give us a time."

Either he's not giving her his full attention, or he does take her insults as flirtation, because this time, he doesn't glare at the tweak. "Half past eleven? I'll have luncheon arranged in my office, before your tour."

"Luncheon it is," says Rosamund.

He leaves in much the same fashion as he arrived, with everyone's eyes on him, but this time, Mary's included. Only when his hat has disappeared down the staircase does she avert her eyes to her aunt.

"Well? What did you make of that?"

"I think I have a new appreciation for why men like to watch bare-knuckle boxing between two well-matched opponents."
The Tour

Chapter Summary

Sir Richard's tour of the Daily Telegram gives Mary a glimpse not only into the newspaper business, but into the man behind it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Really, my dear," says Aunt Rosamund. "If you take any more care with your toilette, one might say you were trying to impress Sir Richard."

Mary's gaze flickers briefly to her aunt's reflection in the hall mirror, noting the raised eyebrows and upturned corner of the lips, before returning to continue her assessment of her own face. "One would be wrong."

She opens her little black handbag, takes out the silver compact, and dabs the powder puff lightly over a blemish at her jaw line and a shiny spot on her forehead--it's unseasonably warm for September, a true Indian summer--closing the cosmetic case again with a clap as satisfying as her reflection before she turns to face Rosamund.

"As if I've ever had to try to impress any man," she goes on. "Or would take it as a compliment to impress one like Sir Richard."

Slipping her forearm through the strap of her bag so that it dangles from the crook of her elbow, she steps through the front door of the townhome as the butler scuttles to open it. The tang of his ever-present sweat on the hot day makes her wrinkle her nose, though she might just as likely make the same face in about the man who is the subject of conversation.

"And what sort of man is that?" Rosamund asks.

Mary puts her free hand on the iron railing as she descends the front steps. "Why, one of those self-made men with insufficient taste to distinguish between an earl's daughter and a farmhand's, even if they wore sign posts round their necks to label which was which."

"From what I understand, the Duke of Crowborough's tastes are so refined as not to make that distinction, either."

The words are so sharp that Mary stands speechless on the pavement, feeling as if they slice through her vocal cards as well as reopen the wound dealt to her pride by the Duke's rejection.

"And it isn't a farmhand's daughter Sir Richard courted at the Ritz," Rosamund goes on, stepping around Mary toward the awaiting car.

"Who said a word about courtship? I've met Sir Richard twice."

The chauffeur sweeps open the car door for Rosamund, but she spins on her heel on the pavement to
regard her niece. "And are on your way to meet him for the third time. Come, Mary, don't play at being coy. It's a game you won't win against me. Sir Richard Carlisle is a man on the rise. Surely it's crossed your mind that while a knighthood is all very well and good, he has his sights set on a peerage, and an earl's daughter is precisely the leg up he needs? And you--"

If Wood hadn't interrupted, flying out the front door, coattails flapping behind him, Mary would have.

"Lady Mary! Telephone for you!"

That makes Rosamund lift her brows again. "Perhaps the future earl of Grantham has died, after all, and your mama is ringing to tell you to snatch up a newspaper magnate before you find yourself the wife of a farmhand." Her skirt rustles as she turns to ascend the stairs to where her butler waits on the porch, Mary falling into step behind her. "This had better be more important than Cousin Shrimpy calling to catch up again, Wood, as Sir Richard Carlisle's expecting us for luncheon."

"That's just it, m'lady," Wood replies, bobbing back inside the house. "It's Sir Richard's secretary. She's calling to discuss a change of plans."

"His secretary!" Mary catches her aunt's eye as she steps around her into the hall. "A change of plans! I have made quite the impression on him."

She's conscious of Rosamund's scrutinising gaze on her, as well as how seldom she's used the telephone--only a handful of times on visits here; Papa's refusal to modernise Downton is so irritating--as she puts the receiver to her ear and speaks into the mouthpiece.

"Lady Mary Crawley speaking."

"Sir Richard's tied up in an important meeting," his secretary replies without preamble. "Would you and Lady Rosamund would be so good as to meet him in an hour at the Lyons on Fleet Street?"

"I'm afraid we couldn't possibly." Mary catches her reflection in the mirror above the telephone table and realising she has smiled, politely, as she would in a face-to-face conversation. As if to say she is disappointed, but understanding. She lets the smile fall; she feels neither disappointed nor understanding. Or at least will not own to either. "Please give Sir Richard our regrets."

She replaces the earpiece on the receiver and hands the telephone off to Wood, then tugs at the fingers of her gloves to remove them.

"Our regrets?" says Aunt Rosamund.

"He asked us to dine with him at Lyons."

"Did he? In that case I'm not certain our regrets were entirely necessary. Wood," she says, peeling off her own gloves as Mary unpins her hat, "would you please tell Mrs. Duncan we'll require luncheon after all?"

They've just sat down to eat when the muted rattle of the telephone sounds in the hall, followed by Wood's urgent footsteps approaching the dining room.

"Sir Richard Carlisle calling for you, Lady Mary," he says with a bob.
"Really Wood," says Rosamund, setting her teacup down hard enough for it to clink against its saucer. "Lady Mary's taking luncheon."

Wood's beady eyes dart sideways to his mistress as he makes another bow. "Forgive me, m'lady, I told him so, but he's a..." His Adam's apple rolls down his long white neck as he swallows. "...a difficult man to say no to."

Mary pushes back from the table. "I'll take it, Aunt Rosamund."

"This will be a conversation I wish I could hear both sides of," Rosamund says, following suit, but Mary turns to her in the doorway, blocking her aunt's path.

"You won't hear either side. This isn't a party line. I intend to speak with Sir Richard in private."

Rosamund bites into a sandwich with a sour twist of her mouth only a daughter of the Dowager Countess of Grantham could reproduce, but she remains seated while Mary slips out to the hall to answer the phone.

Even though she already knows what the conversation will be--she knew, after all, before she ever exchanged two words with Sir Richard at Agnes Belcher's ball that he is a man who never takes no for an answer--he still takes her slightly by surprise by getting directly down to business before she can utter the entire word hello into the mouthpiece.

"It's Lyons. Isn't it? The food is really quite good--I'm a bit of a regular there, as it's just a few blocks from the office and very convenient in the middle of a hectic day--but Miss Fields says it's not posh enough for you. Is that the problem, Lady Mary?"

"Why, Sir Richard, are you calling me a snob?"

"Is that not an accurate description?"

Mary scuffs the pad of her thumb over the smooth brass base of the stick telephone, deliberating her reply. "I'm not entirely sure you can quite appreciate the quality of invitation I'm accustomed to receiving."

"It's the Ritz or nothing for you, then?"

"Or that I am not accustomed to my company being regarded as lesser importance to those who engage it than work."

"Ah," says Richard in tones that make it far too easy for Mary to imagine him drawing in a breath and puffing his chest slightly as he tilts his chin upward; belatedly, she thinks she should not know him well enough after two--brief--encounters, to produce such a clear mental image of him, but she comforts herself with the thought that she only knows Richard well because there is so little to know. "I see what you mean now by quality. You're not accustomed to receiving invitations from a common working man who has commitments essential to his livelihood."

He's goading her, like a schoolboy poking at a small animal through the bars of its cage with a stick. No doubt he thinks to intimidate her, to put her in the place he thinks her kind of people should occupy. But Mary is no caged thing; she may not be the heir to Downton, to the title, but she is, nonetheless, a territorial creature.
"You have yet to show me that such invitations are worth growing accustomed to."

No sooner have the words flown from her lips than she remembers the twist of his mouth and the gleam of his eye across the table at the Ritz, and it occurs to her that perhaps he intended to provoke her fighting instinct.

"That's why I wished to show you around the newspaper."

"Indeed?"

"If you see what my work entails, you may even find it interesting. Or at least understand why I do." The waver of insecurity in his voice. "I'll even send a car so your aunt's chauffeur won't have to put himself out again."

"That won't be necessary, Sir Richard."

"I suppose that means our acquaintance is at an end?"

"It means that it won't be necessary to save Aunt Rosamund's chauffeur being put out. After all, it's his job to be put out by our whims."

She can almost see the indentations beneath his cheekbones as he says, "Then I shall have Miss Fields roll out the red carpet."

~*~

Mary's feet, of course, do not tread upon carpet, red or any other colour, when Sir Richard pushes open the door and stands aside for her and Aunt Rosamund to enter the warehouse at the back of his Fleet Street office building. One thing, however, is rolled out before her: paper.

Miles of paper, it seems, wound around spools and stretched in a zigzag pattern across a frame of metal beams and steaming pipes that must be three storeys high. The rolls, she notes, are unwound by a series of gears and wheels and lord only knows what other mechanical bits that move together with the precision of a finely-tuned clock, at a pace so dizzying that Mary reaches for the railing the metal platform on which they stand overlooking it all to steady herself. But she startles when Sir Richard's voice sounds quite close to her ear as he leans over her shoulder to be heard over the noise of the printing presses--for two of the monstrous machines loom in the cavernous space.

"That, Lady Mary, is the Double Octuple Newspaper Press."

She stiffens at a light brush against her back. Though she tells herself it must be her aunt's handbag as she draws nearer to their host to hear him, a glance over her shoulder reveals Rosamund to be withholding herself at a polite distance. Which can only mean that Sir Richard's hand is at the small of her back.

The platform is narrow for three people, and Mary's hip presses into the rail as it is, so she cannot move away from him. Her only recourse is to look up at Sir Richard sharply, but naturally, he takes this as a sign of her interest and flashes her a grin before reverting his attention to the machines that print his newspapers.

"If we stood here for an hour, we'd see ninety-six thousand newspapers printed--on each press."

"Surely you don't expect us to stand here as long as that, Sir Richard?" Mary says, taking command of her faculties. "I can only imagine that when you've seen one newspaper printed, you've seen them
The dig is too perfect to resist, but to her dismay, it doesn't appear to have struck a nerve at all. He shifts his position at her side, but only slightly, his hand never leaving where it continues to rest lightly on her back as he angles his body familiarly toward hers, adopting a casual stance leant against the rail. The corners of his eyes, she notes, crinkle with amusement as he regards her; Aunt Rosamund's words rush to the front of her mind from the previous day, about men in his world taking insults as flirtation.

"I take it you've not yet developed an appreciation for why I find this job so interesting?" he asks.

"I have," Aunt Rosamund answers.

They both turn to look back at her, Sir Richard's hand falling from Mary's back as if he has just remembered their chaperone. Though it's steaming in the warehouse and she's dressed in her grey autumn suit, she shivers at the noticeable lack of warmth at her back.

"Is this the *Evening Telegram* being printed, Sir Richard?" Rosamund asks, loudly, stepping nearer to them, and he bends closer to listen just as he did before with Mary.

"It is, Lady Rosamund."

"It's just gone one o'clock. With two presses working at ninety-six thousand papers an hour, and the *Telegram* being delivered at six, why, your circulation must be--"

"Over a million," he finishes for her. "And growing--thanks to the Marconi scandal."

"How gallant of you to spare a lady the arduousness of working out a sum for herself," says Mary. To her surprise, *that* knocks the smile from his face; he looks at her again, eyebrows raised on a furrowed forehead. "Before you accuse me of demeaning the female intelligence, you might consider that in addition to the *Telegram*, I publish a number of suffragist magazines."

She is well aware; Sybil takes *Lady Fair*, which Papa thinks is just a fashion and society journal, and Mary reads it herself, on occasion--those occasions being more frequent since this business about the entail has come to the centre of attention at home.

"I am afraid I cannot admire that claim, Sir Richard, when I don't know whether you publish them because you support suffrage, or to appeal to the young female readership."

The lines of his brow ease with his chuckle; the low sound is lost beneath the mechanical whir and clatter of the printing presses, but Mary feels the rumble of it as he shoulder brushes hers.

"It's true, I'll publish anything people are willing to pay for," he admits, unashamedly. "But in the case of suffrage, this is one instance in which the views of the publisher match the views expressed in the material." He gives her an appraising look. "Though you ought to know that already. Or have you forgotten our conversation at Agnes Belcher's engagement ball?"

"It's entirely possible," Mary replies. "That was last May, after all. I've discussed a great many subjects with a great many people since then."

"But surely not many who share my bold and modern values?"
"Indeed. I find it difficult to imagine that I would discuss a controversial topic in such a genteel setting as a ball."

"Or even such a setting as this," Aunt Rosamund says. "Sir Richard, is it safe to go down for a closer look at how these Double Octuples work? I've long been intrigued by machinery--a lingering influence from my late husband, I suppose--but none so much as these presses of yours."

"Quite safe, Lady Rosamund." He gestures for her to lead the way down the wrought iron spiral staircase--but his eyes are on Mary, and his hand curls about her elbow as she starts the precarious descent. His breath brushes her cheek as he leans close to say in tones she--and only she--can hear, "Didn't you attend that genteel ball while in mourning?"

"I did, Sir Richard. Or have you forgotten that I turned down your invitation to dance with you?"

The muscle that ripples beneath his cheekbone as he clenches his jaw speaks plainly that he has not. No more than Mary has forgotten the discussion to which he refers. On the ground floor, Sir Richard practically shouts at Rosamund over the presses and their overall-clad operators as he explains how they work, but Mary hears only the whisper of his words snaking through her mind like the steam from the machines about the warehouse: I know most laws don't favour your sex any more than they favour those not born rich. We're not so very different, you and I..."

She'd scoffed at him then and wants to do again now, but as she watches him explain the printing process to her aunt, she finds herself equally fascinated, drawn in not by the words as Rosamund is, but by the manner in which he speaks them. He talks easily, expertly, about the mechanics of newspaper publishing, as if it is an extension of himself, though not, Mary must grant, in that arrogant way in which he does talk about himself, as she noted during the previous day's tea. Oh, he bandies about newspaper jargon freely enough, yet he does so without alienating those listening to him, pausing to define the terminology, carefully, and concisely, ensuring that his guests--or pupils, more likely, and he their tutor--understand what he means. At least, this appears to be the case with Aunt Rosamund, who gives him her rapt attention and asks questions that prove her engagement; Mary, however, comes a way not so much with an understanding of how newspaper press operates, but of how a newspaper magnate does.

Sir Richard Carlisle is proud of his work, certainly--because he loves it. That much is evident in the way he looks on the two presses as they churn out twenty-seven newspapers a second as if they are his children, his eyes shining and the harsh lines of his face eased, and the caressing tone in his voice as he pronounces such words as linotype, matrices, and casting and distribution mechanisms. The newspapers aren't merely his livelihood, they're his life's work, deemed important not only by himself, but by those who have rewarded him for it with a knighthood, and perhaps someday a peerage. And while Mary has not been of a disposition to consider them real, proper titles, in this moment she cannot help but look around the noisy, steamy, inky warehouse and think that it must seem every bit as much a legacy to Sir Richard as tranquil, graceful Downton is to Papa.

Preferring to hear about how newspapers are made than to think about Papa and the estate he won't fight to give his own child, Mary redirects her attention to Sir Richard. Catching her eye, he smiles.

"If we stay here any longer, Lady Mary really will see ninety-six thousand papers printed." The fingertips of one hand brush her back again as he gestures with the other to the set of stairs they descended into the warehouse, the door at the top which leads back to the main office building.

"Shall I show you around the offices? And if you have time," he says as Aunt Rosamund leads the way to the stairs, picking a path around a crew of workmen rolling in a spool of white paper that
must be larger than a bale of hay, "I've taken the liberty of ordering tea to mine."

Mary pauses with her hand on the stair rail and looks back over her shoulder at him, eyebrows lifted. "From Lyon's?"

Though Sir Richard's hand remains at her back, his fingers curl in on themselves. He squints just the slightest bit, clearly put out. And is that the hint of colour on his cheeks? "From my own cook at home. Or does that meet your exacting standards?"

It's rather soon after luncheon for tea, and the housemaid brought in to serve them is hardly necessary, and the flowers bring to mind any number of disparaging remarks Granny has muttered under her breath about Mama's arrangements for parties at home. However, Mary can find no fault with the sandwiches and cake--what she musters appetite for, anyway. Nor can she bring herself to sneer at the china which looks unused enough to have been purchased from Harrods that very morning, for wondering whether Sir Richard ever takes his tea in his own home, with friends or family.

She realises, then, to what effort he's gone--or, more correctly, to what effort he's had other people go--to do things properly for her, and she wonders how many of her quality invitations have been made with such an earnest desire to please. Sir Richard's chest puffs beneath his waistcoat when she asks, over a second slice of Victoria sponge that would have Mrs Patmore spitting with jealousy, "Are you sure you didn't have this sent over from the Ritz?"

"The view from your office is quite breathtaking," says Aunt Rosamund. "One understands why you might be reluctant to leave it."

Between the two slices of cake and the compliment she paid it and the cutting remarks she did not make about the flowers, Mary has had all the sweetness she can stomach.

"Yes, it must be nice always to sit five storeys up, looking down on everyone, regardless of class and rank."

Sir Richard's expression is unreadable as he chews and swallows a sandwich, washing it down with a drink that drains his teacup, his eyes never leaving Mary's face. He pushes back from the table and, standing, beckons for her to join him at the tall windows set in the brownstone wall behind his desk, which overlook Fleet Street and the towering facade of St. Paul's.

"Do you see that newsboy there on the corner?" He points to a speck of a person on the pavement below, indistinguishable from the other passersby but for the stack of newspapers under his arm.

"One of your minions?"

"That was me, once upon a time. My father was one of the linotype operators for The Scotsman, and I..." He smiles faintly, his eyes grey and faraway. "Why, I was the best newsboy in Edinburgh."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

"You see," he says, gesturing with his hands as he begins to walk about the room--a man, Mary is beginning to realise, who can never keep still, or in one place, for long--"I was the only one who ever read the papers. Not just the headlines, but every article on every page, so I knew just what it was I had to sell--and then I said whatever was necessary to sell even the dullest of newspapers. Eventually Mr Cooper, the editor at the time, realised I was better at writing headlines than his
journalists, so he pulled me off the streets and gave me my first desk job. It wasn't long before I was editor of *The Scotsman* in all but name, and the rest, as they say...

His circuit of the room has brought him back to the window beside Mary, his fingers resting scarcely an inch from hers on the stone ledge.

"So you like a view of your newsboys to keep you humble?" she says.

Sir Richard's mouth twitches at the corners. "More to remind me of how far I've come, and may yet go."

Chapter End Notes

Those interested can view the printing press mentioned in this chapter here. I think that says quite a bit about Sir Richard's manhood, doesn't it? ;)

```
The Play

Chapter Summary

Mary continues her unconventional dance with Sir Richard when news from home inspires her rebellious spirit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"It's a shame they couldn't spare Anna at home," Mary says, sighing at her reflection in the dressing table mirror.

Grace, the housemaid assisting during her stay at Aunt Rosamund's, mutters as she struggles with the scarlet plume she's attempting to arrange in Mary's coif, then asks, "She's your ladies' maid?"

"Hmm. And quite the hairdresser."

Grace's hands fall away from Mary's hair and bunch her apron in her hands in distress. "I'm sorry, m'lady. I'm not quite used to young ladies' fashions."

"Really, Grace," says Aunt Rosamund, hearing her as she enters the bedroom without knocking. "I'm not so far removed from my youth, am I?"

While Grace flushes and flusters with apologies for offending her ladyship, Rosamund's lips twitch in the slightest of smirks as she meets her niece's gaze in the mirror. Mary quirks an eyebrow at her aunt's state of dress, better suited for an afternoon's lounging than an evening at the theatre; her hair could use a little attention, in fact.

"I'm only joking, Grace," Rosamund says, coming to stand behind Mary at the dressing table. "Thank you, I'm quite the dab hand with feathers myself."

As her aunt untangles the end of the feather from her coif, Mary asks, "Why? You're not dressed, so obviously I don't need to arrange my hair for the theatre."

She's not entirely certain how she came to be invited to the theatre in the first place. One moment Sir Richard Carlisle had been espousing his view that anyone who was capable, male or female, working class or aristocrat, ought to be free to make their own way in the world, as he had done; Rosamund joked, My, do you have a position for me operating your double octuple newspaper press? No, Sir Richard replied, but I do have tickets for the premiere of Mr Shaw's new play tomorrow evening at His Majesty's Theatre if you and Lady Mary would honour me with your attendance. And here Mary is, all dressed up in her favourite best scarlet evening gown, with nowhere to go.

"I've a headache," says her aunt, pinning the feather just as Anna would have done, with almost as little effort, and adjusting the position of a curl to hide it. "That's no reason for you not to go."

Mary turns around on the bench and regards Rosamund with no small amount of disbelief.
"Unchaperoned?"

"The invitation is for the theat'r, and supper afterward. You'll hardly be alone with the gentleman."

"Of course not. He isn't a gentleman."

"But thus far he has behaved like one--even if he did ask us to luncheon at Lyons. And even though his profession is to hawk other people's scandal in his newspapers, but I've never heard of him creating any with his own behaviour."

Mary collects her gloves and bag from the table and wrap and rises from the bench. "Or at least he doesn't report it in his own papers."

"But neither do his competitors," says her aunt as she sweeps past with a swish of silk. "And you can be sure they watch him like--"

"Hawkers of newspaper scandal?"

"Please give Sir Richard my regrets," Rosamund says, turning the opposite direction in the hall to retreat to her own room, "and enjoy your night at the theatre. Pygmalion's got rave reviews and is nearly impossible to get tickets to."

"Pygmalion? The play about the man who sculpts a lady and brings her to life?"

"My. You don't read the papers at all, do you?" Rosamund paused in her doorway, resting one hand against the frame. "This is Mr Shaw's new version. About a phonologist who makes a bet that he can pass a flower shop girl off as a duchess."

"That's appropriate."

"Indeed."

"And does he succeed?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen the play. You'll have to tell me after you have."

Mary lingers in the hall after Rosamund has retired to her room, contemplating whether she really ought to flout the rules by keeping her engagement with Sir Richard--her stomach still twists with guilt whenever she thinks of being caught by Mr Bates skulking about the servants' dormitory with the Duke of Crowborough--when her aunt's door opens and Rosamund emerges again, looking a little dazed.

"You really must have a headache," Mary says.

Rosamund's eyes open a little wider as she approaches. "You thought I was making an excuse to get out of attending the theatre with Sir Richard?"

"I thought perhaps you were conspiring to leave me alone with him."

"Thought? Or hoped? In that case, it's worked out rather well for you, hasn't it?" Rosamund reached into her pocket and drew out an envelope. "I nearly forgot to give you this. It came in the evening post."
Mary squints at the return address in the dim light of the hall. "Edith? She's not in the habit of writing to me."

"Perhaps she misses you," says Rosamund, turning back to her room.

"Or perhaps she's writing to tell me Cousin Matthew's been dazzled by her beauty and asked her to be the future Countess of Grantham."

Though spoken in jest, the idea in fact turns Mary's stomach; the true contents of the letter, however, which she opens in the drawing room, make her sit down at the edge of the divan and clap her hand over her mouth lest she be sick over Aunt Rosamund's new rug.

_I hope the amusements of London are seeing you well on your way to being cured of whatever ailment prompted you to leave home. We are all very well here, this unseasonably warm and lovely weather keeping us often out of doors, more often than not in the company of Cousins Isobel and Matthew as we help them to get better acquainted with the neighbourhood. We have been over a number of the local churches, Cousin Matthew having a high appreciation for architecture. For all he's lived his entire life in the city, he proves an enthusiastic and indefatigable walker, keen to take in as many of the scenic walks this part of the country has to offer, when he can spare the time away from his work._

_Sybil and I frequently remark to each other that Cousin Matthew's presence has been the greatest comfort to us as we mourn dear Patrick, and that there is a great deal to benefit young women in having a male relative so close to our own ages nearby. Papa's burden, too, seems to lighten a little more each day that Matthew comes around to learn about the management of the estate..."

There is more, but Edith's careful script, each stroke of ink formed as deliberately as each word is chosen, swims as Mary's eyes swim before she crumples the letter in her fist. She has always prided herself on being the sharpest knife in the drawer, her wit as polished and bright as her person, but Edith's seemingly blunt weapons, disguised by her outward blandness, hit their mark with as much acuity. To anyone else, this would appear be a typical letter from home, but Mary reads the message her sister wrote between the lines:

The whole family has fallen so hopelessly in love with Matthew Crawley that she needn't bother; they will hand Downton and the title over to him without even a thought of fighting for her right to inherit.

Her breath comes in noisy wheezes and puffs from behind her hand, still pressed firmly to her face as if to dam the threatening flood of emotion, rendering her deaf to the sounds of anyone arriving at the house until the drawing room door swings open and Sir Richard strides through, stopping short just inside as Wood announces him.

"Lady Mary," he says, stepping toward her, one white-gloved hand removing his top hat, the other outstretched as if to reach for her though there is the space of a room between them. "Are you quite well?"
When she removes her hand from her mouth, she has fixed a broad smile of greeting on her lips, though Edith's letter is still balled in her fist.

"Quite," she says. "Though Aunt Rosamund has gone to bed with a headache."

"Ah. So that explains why you were sitting there looking like Cinderella after her evil stepmother told her she couldn't attend the ball after all."

"On no." Mary collects her things from the arm of the divan, discreetly stuffing the crumpled letter behind one of the cushions. "She says there's no reason why I shouldn't go with you."

"Apart from not having a chaperone?"

Mary studies him for a moment, and notes that his gaze has dropped somewhat lower than her eyes, watching her tug her black satin opera gloves over her arms. "Do we require one? It isn't as if we'll be alone sitting in His Majesty's Crowded Theatre."

His Adam's apple drops beneath the pointed tips of his evening collar, and he seems to drag his eyes back up to meet hers. "But we will be in the car. You see, I drove myself over..."

Mary blinks at him, but forces herself not to goggle; she wouldn't want to look like Mama. "Drove yourself?"

"I do have a chauffeur," he hastens to tell her, as if this is her point of concern. He strides further into the drawing room, clutching his top hat by the brim in both hands for a moment before spreading them wide. "But I have a new Rolls Royce Silver Ghost, and there won't be many warm nights left in the year..."

"And you can't drive with the top down with a chauffeur?"

"You might have noticed there are some things I rather like doing for myself," he says, though his chest doesn't puff beneath his ivory waistcoat as Mary expects. The hand holding his top had falls to his side, while the other reaches up to smooth the hair at the back of his head. "Though it would seem that tendency has rather interfered with my plans for this evening. I'm willing to overstep the bounds of propriety in taking you to the theatre, but asking you to drive alone with me is quite a leap."

Mary hesitates. He is correct, of course; Aunt Rosamund might be rather liberal in her standards, but surely even she would draw the line at this. But as her gaze drops, she spies the balled-up letter from Edith behind the cushion, and her mind is made up. The amusements of town will cure what ails her, indeed.

"How alone can we be, driving a Silver Ghost with the top down through London?"

~*~

As the curtain falls, Sir Richard folds his newspaper and pushes from his upholstered seat as the rest of the audience stands to give the actors their ovation.

"I don't know why you're applauding," says Mary, eyeing the broadsheet as he tucks it under one arm. "You stopped watching after the first five minutes."
The dimples form beneath Sir Richard's cheekbones as he inclines his head to speak to her over the
din of the crowd moving en masse toward the theatre exits, one hand coming lightly to rest on her
shoulder. "Yes, but I happened to read a review of the play which said the standing ovation it
received at its Vienna premiere was well-deserved."

It's not for the first time this evening that she's felt the rake of his voice and the warmth of his breath
so close to her ear. Before they'd even set foot outside Aunt Rosamund's house, Sir Richard stepped
in front of Wood when he bobbed forward to assist Mary with her wrap, apparently believing that
doing the work of butlers and footman was gentlemanly behaviour. Mary did not correct this faux
pas, however not simply because she preferred not to be touched by the sweaty butler, but because
Sir Richard's hands lingering on her shoulders as she fastened the wrap at her throat rendered her
speechless as he lent over her, putting his cheek close to hers to murmur, You will turn every man's
head in His Majesty's Theatre tonight. You've already turned mine.

When he at last drew back, she found her voice again--and her caution, as the giddy beating of her
heart reminded her of feeling the same rush of exhilaration with the Duke of Crowborough. I
oughtn't allow you to be so liberal with your compliments, she said. But when Sir Richard offered
his arm, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled down at her, she thought how handsome he
was and how Edith would seethe to see her receiving such marked attention from a man, and tucked
her hand into the crook of his elbow, saying, But since the theme of the night seems to be breaking
all the rules, I'll thank you, instead.

Now she brushes him off with considerably more ease. "Why, Sir Richard, I thought you dictated
popular opinion. Not the other way around."

Chuckling, his hand slides off her shoulder and he turns his attention to the bowing costumed figures
on stage. Mary follows his gaze to a particular actress with frowsy fair hair and working-class garb
whom she thinks she vaguely recognises--which is ridiculous--curtseying with considerably more
enthusiasm than is warranted a non-speaking role.

"You don't think I'd have agreed with the critics if I'd given Pygmalion my rapt attention?" he asks.

"I think the story of a flower girl who tries to pass herself off as aristocracy hit rather too close to
home, and that was why you didn't watch."

Sir Richard flinches, almost imperceptibly except to another person equally gifted at hiding her
emotions; Mary notices the deepening of the lines of his face, and her heart gives a corresponding
twine of remorse as he opens his mouth in a no doubt equally stinging retort.

"RICHARD!"

Their heads--along with a number belonging to fellow theatre-goers who have not yet left the
auditorium--both jerk in the direction of the stage. The blonde girl Mary noticed before waves
flamboyantly as she squints up at their box.

"RICHARD, DARLING! COME BACKSTAGE FOR A LITTLE CHAT, WON'T YOU? IT'S
BEEN AGES! AND BRING YOUR LADY FRIEND!"

He raises a hand to acknowledge the woman just before the lights go out on the stage but--
thankfully--does not call back to her across the increasingly empty and more echoing theatre.

"Richard darling?" Mary says.
Colour tinges his cheekbones, and he doesn't meet her gaze, though he does take her hand softly in his own and lead her out of the box, threading it through his arm as they reach the corridor where there is room to walk abreast.

"It sounds rather nicer when you say it than when Lady Diana Manners does."

"That was Lady Diana?" Mary's hand slips from the crook of his elbow as she halts. "You're friends with the Mannerses?"

Richard takes out the newspaper tucked beneath his arm and holds it up. "In the sense that I have them to thank for most of my fortune. Lady Diana in particular. So you understand why I must feel obliged to indulge her little whims from time to time?"

"Business before pleasure."

"Unfortunately."

They resume their walk to a set of doors at the end of the corridor, which seems to be utilised only by people connected with the theatre, and not other patrons. She is very nearly relieved to find herself at the top of a staircase too narrow to descend by Richard's side; she takes the steps quickly, despite her impractical evening footwear and the trailing hem of her dress which she must catch over her arm, so as to avoid the brush of his hand at her back when her conscience niggles that she oughtn't be here, with him—especially if he is the sort of man who is accustomed to being addressed as Richard darling by many women.

Although, when they reach their destination backstage, it's not her escort who would have Mama's face contorting into exaggerated expressions of shock and horror, or Granny reaching for her smelling salts. Which, Mary remembers, is rather the point of going out with Richard, isn't it?

She slips her arm through his again, allowing her body to skim against his as she takes in the crowd of mingling actors, stage hands, and others involved with the production—including the playwright Mr Shaw, who lapses in his conversation with other well-dressed patrons to acknowledge Richard. And then, Diana herself pushes through in a fashion less befitting her rank than the Cockney girl she portrayed on stage, despite having changed out of her costume. Or perhaps because she has.

Draped in a swath of pale blue fabric most inappropriate to the season, as well as to the time of day, Lady Diana looks as if she could fit quite well in the ensemble of another dramatic production, of the Greek variety; her very hair seems to be in rebellion against good taste in hairdressing, and Mary catches a glimpse of a bare foot beneath the uplifted hem, blushing at the clear evidence that no corset lies beneath the gown, either. For all that, even Mary's critical eye can find no fault with Lady Diana's natural beauty: taller than herself, and with a curvaceous figure which, frankly, doesn't require foundation garments, and blue eyes that would be blindingly bright if she weren't near-sighted and squinty.

Not that that prevents her from spotting Richard at once.

"Richard!" She flutters to them on her toes, and Mary remembers she's an accomplished ballet dancer, arms outstretched as if to take Richard's hands. Instead, she pulls the newspaper out from under his arm. "You've brought me a paper so I can have a review for my scrapbook, haven't you? You darling."
"I'm afraid I'll be firing a man tomorrow for neglecting to mention your walk-on role," Richard replies, glancing down at Mary's hand still on his arm as he slips both of his into the pockets of his trousers.

"Well you were here, so you can write one yourself!"

With a shriek of laughter, Diana tosses the newspaper into the air like a bride's bouquet. Mr Shaw stands directly in its trajectory, but steps neatly aside with a bemused expression, which is more generous than Richard's; Mary looks up at him and can scarcely contain a snort of laughter to see him looking quite as cross as Papa on the occasions when she or one of her sisters has returned a book to the library with a dog-eared page or a drop of tea on the cover, and she wonders whether Richard can bear to throw a newspaper away, or if his house is full of stacks of every one he's ever published. But she will not encourage Diana by laughing.

As if Diana needs any encouragement.

"I am so glad you came, darling!" she says, laying her hand on Richard's other arm. "When I told Mama to send you tickets she said she's never seen you at the theatre. I told her that was because I've never been in a play before. She did tell you I was going to have a part, didn't she?"

"As a matter of fact I came to see that Lady Mary is entertained during her stay in town." He evades the question with a smoothness with which even she cannot help but appreciate, and takes a neat step back to extract himself from Diana's grasp. "You do know Lady Mary Crawley, I presume?"

"Oh." Diana's smile falters as she squints at Mary as if she truly did not see her there until this moment, and then she bares her teeth again in a grin that can only mean to intimidate other females. "Of course I know Mary. Her younger sister and I were debs together."

"You attended Lady Sheffield's charity ball dressed as a black swan, as I recall?"

"The only black swan among white ones!" Diana says, proudly, referring to the hostess' request that all the débutantes wear white; she was not allowed to take part in the presentation of the "swans", though standing apart from the other girls had, of course, been rather the point. "Edith was the Ugly Duckling."

She chortles at her own joke, not noticing that Mary doesn't join in her laughter at her sister's expense.

If only she could...The mention of Edith brings back the visceral reaction to her letter as if it had somehow dislodged itself from Rosamund's sofa cushions and wended its way across London to uncrumple itself in Mary's hand and show her the hateful words written in Edith's flowing script. She doesn't realise Richard has untwined their arms until she feels the reassuring weight of his gloved hand on her shoulder; somehow this, as well as the concern etched on his features, gives her the strength to catch Diana's laughing eye.

"Well, the ugly duckling did grow up to be a swan."

Any other woman would wither at such a frosty remark from Lady Mary Crawley, but Diana only blinks, as if to deflect it with the quick flutter of the long lashes that frame her glassy eyes. "Isn't that what a débutante is? A grown up lady?"

Mary, on the other hand, starts to wilt with her slow exhalation, but Richard's hand squeezes her
shoulder before sliding down to rest lightly in the small of her back.

"Doesn't your grandmother have a little saying about girls in black, Lady Mary?" His eyes crinkle at her, the pleasure of sharing a private joke tugging the corner of his mouth upward, and Mary cannot help but smile back at him. "Diverting as this little chat has been, Lady Diana--"

"Just Di, Richard darling! We're far more intimate than all that, aren't we?"

Bristling at Diana's use of the word *intimate* in reference to Richard, Mary realises all at once that in the course of the evening she has dispensed with formality herself, ceasing to think of him as *Sir* Richard in the privacy of her thoughts.

"--but Lady Mary and I must be going--" Richard goes on, giving no indication that he has been interrupted except by increasing the volume of his voice.

"To the Cave?"

"Oh no," Richard replies, looking rather nonplussed, as he had when Mary told him Aunt Rosamund couldn't attend the play with them. "We couldn't possibly--"

"Richard, why?"

"Dare I ask what the Cave is?"

Before Richard can answer, Diana grasps Mary's hands in hers and blinks at her with wide, pitying blue eyes that would give Mama a run for her money. "The world is in a state when Lady Mary Crawley has to ask what the Cave is! Of course we mean the Cave of the Golden Calf, darling!"

~*~

"I do appreciate you being a good sport about this." Richard glances to Mary at his left as the steering wheel of his Silver Ghost glides through his gloved hand as he turns the car onto Haymarket. "The Cave can't be what you imagined from a supper invitation, but I assure you the clientele are a step or two above Lyons."

Mary can scarcely contain her surprise as she looks at him. "Have I got into the car with the right man? Only Sir Richard Carlisle *can't* be laughing at his own social ineptitude."

Though he swings his gaze back to the street, his eyes crinkle at the corners. "It's easier to laugh at myself when you aren't laughing at me."

"I confess I'd have been quite content to have supper at Lyons, if that had been what it took to avoid driving with Diana Manners."

Mary lent her head back against the seat and enjoyed the night air on her face, which only now made her aware of how claustrophobic she’d felt backstage at His Majesty's Theatre, with Diana bouncing about like a child who'd been allowed too many sweets as she hung onto Richard's arm and begged him to let her take a spin in his new Silver Ghost. He'd teased her about embarking on a career as a chauffeur, but that only encouraged her; nor was she put off by his suggestion that her company might serve as a proper chaperone.

Never before had Mary been so grateful for Diana's mother, Lady Rutland, and her contradictory
sense of propriety as when the hawkish duchess descended upon them to snatch her daughter away, rebuking her in a stage whisper for suggesting a drive with a bachelor *unchaperoned*. Diana was better bred than that, Lady Rutland added, with a pointed look at Mary, who imagined her own mother's face turning into a rubber mask of horror if she could see Mary now, driving with a bachelor to a *nightclub*. She could hear Granny's voice: *Such establishments are better suited to the Continent.* Ordinarily both would be enough to cow Mary into submission, but *ordinarily* they did not rank third cousins once removed who practiced law in Manchester as more worthy of their loyalty than a daughter and granddaughter. So here she was, alone with a man on her way to the Cave of the Golden Calf.

"Lyons isn't open for supper," Richard's voice rakes into her thoughts at a teasing pitch, the dimples deepening beneath his cheekbones. "Though I expect the hours of operation for a chain of tea shops are hardly common knowledge among the aristocracy."

"Hardly."

"Unfortunately we won't escape Diana at the Cave," he goes on, "but at least we'll have a bit of a buffer from her rather overwhelming presence. She'll be surrounded by her Coterie, as she calls her set. Aficionados of the new art, or some such pretentious rubbish. Though I hope she won't monopolise Raymond Asquith..."

His voice trails away and his brow furrows beneath the brim of his top hat, and Mary can see that Richard has more on his mind than a friendly chat.

"The Prime Minister's son, Raymond Asquith?"

"Mmm. I've wanted to have a word with him for some time...He's a barrister, you know, and neck deep in the *Titanic* investigation."

"Rather deeper than that, I should think."

Richard's chuckle rumbles with the idling engine as he pulls the car over on Regent Street, presumably because the Cave cannot boast parking attendants. However, when the leather seat creaks as he turns to face her a little more directly, Mary is surprised to see that the laughter does not reach his eyes, which seem to be searching hers for some answer. She looks away, but his hand covers hers on her lap.

"Forgive me if I'm stepping over the mark, Lady Mary, but is something the matter? You are not uncomfortable with our arrangement? Or unwell?"

"I hardly think Aunt Rosamund's headache could be catching."

"Only when Diana--Lady Diana," Richard amends, when Mary bristles, and tries to pull her hand from his grasp, which tightens in response around her fingers, "mentioned your sister, your face went quite as pale as when I found you at your aunt's."

"You're not going to let me go until I give you an honest answer, are you?" she asks, looking down at their joined hands.

"Do you want me to let go? Do you want to be honest with me?"

There is no feeling Mary hates more than being vulnerable before another person. Yet now,
strangely, with Richard's hand clasped around hers, strong and warm even through the kid gloves between them, it does not seem as though she has been laid low, or bare, but that perhaps she will be understood, and supported.

"I'd just read a letter from Edith," she admits. "Our relationship is hardly Little Women at the best of times. And she loved Cousin Patrick, you see."

"Your fiancé, whom you were not overly sorry to see drowned on the Titanic?"

His frank acknowledgment of her lack of empathy stings--though the pain is inflicted by her own conscience rather than by him.

"It seems her life's ambition is to make me sorry. She wrote to rub my nose in the fact that the new heir is like the son Papa never had."

"I see."

With a squeeze, Richard releases her hand and shuts off the motor, then opens his door and slides out of the car. Over the rumble of traffic and other people passing by on their way to restaurants and parties, Mary can make out no sound from Richard, not even the scuff of his shoes on the cobbles, as he makes his way round to her side of the vehicle. Nor, when he reaches it, can she see the expression on his face, cast into shadow by the streetlamp shining down onto his top hat. As he seems to have decided that he will speak no more on the subject, his curiosity about her mood apparently satisfied, she collects her handbag and silently curses herself a fool for being disappointed at having misjudged his empathy after all.

But when he opens the door and she places her hand in his for him to assist her from the automobile, he draws her body so near to his under the amber cascade of light that she could have read the admiration in the softened lines of his face even if he had not spoken at all.

"So it was even more admirable than I knew, the way you defended Lady Edith from insult."

"Diana Manners may say whatever she likes about her own sisters--and I'm sure she's given you a few choice morsels for your tabloid readers to chew--but Edith is my sister. Only I have the privilege of calling her an ugly duckling."

"That's the way it is between brothers, too. I may bloody George's nose, but I'll bare-knuckle box anyone else who tries."

Before Mary can look further into either of these glimpses into his personal life, Richard draws her arm through his and turns their conversation just as he turns her presumably in the direction of the nightclub.

"I can't imagine it's an easy thing for any young lady to make her debut at the same time as Diana Manners," he says. "Though you have no difficulty holding a captive audience against her theatrics."

His hand, Mary realises, never released hers after he tucked her arm through his, and his fingers gently chafe her knuckles.

"And yet," he goes on, "you've had several seasons yourself. How is it you're not settled? You must have had dozens of beaux keen to steal your hand from Cousin Patrick. Especially as you harboured little affection for him."
"I didn't want any of them."

"What did you want?"

Mary swallows, and replies, "Downton."

She feels suddenly cold as Richard holds his body a little apart from hers and he releases her hand to gesture ahead of them. "Tonight you have The Cave of the Golden Calf."

Looking up to follow the line of his hand, Mary tries not to goggle at the spotlighted sign which features a gilt cow that can only be described as well-endowed. Her struggle for control of her expression lasts only a moment, however. Then, the dazzling light of a camera flashbulb renders it impossible to see anything at all.

Chapter End Notes

While Pygmalion did not actually premiere in London until 1914, it did premiere in Vienna in the autumn of 1912. It's such a perfect fit for Richard and Mary that I couldn't resist fudging the dates a bit to make it work. Some of you history buffs might also recognize Lady Diana Manners, an actual English socialite who featured prominently in the tabloids of the day. She's one of those real-life characters who seems stranger than fiction, and I thank my self-appointed research assistant ju_dou for putting her on my radar. I hope you all enjoy reading about her as much as I enjoyed writing her. And that you'll let me know. ;)
Chapter Summary

An aptly named nightclub takes Mary even deeper into Richard Carlisle's world.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Richard's fear that Diana Manners will monopolise Raymond Asquith at the Cave of the Golden Calf proves quite unfounded. On the contrary, it is he who corners the prime minister's son--in quite a literal sense.

"There he is," Richard says almost the moment they descend into the basement-level nightclub.

Mary wonders how he can see anything at all, flashes of light from the photographer's camera outside still passing before her eyes no matter how many times she blinks, and the room wreathed in so much smoke that she's surprised the fire department has not been called. Squinting, she follows the sweep of his top hat as he removes it and sees a figure standing alone at the front of the dining room, sipping a cocktail and watching the pianist's fingers dance across the keys to a ragtime tune. Without a word Richard leaves her side to approach the younger man, and as Asquith turns to shake hands Mary sees that he wears a polka-dot ascot instead of a white evening bowtie, reminiscent of the white-clothed round tables scattered around the darkened room.

Alone, she scans the ever-shifting arrangement of mingling guests for any likely person to assist with her wrap and take it to a cloakroom, but the only staff that seem to be present are the waiters bearing trays of hors d'œuvre and drinks. She darts her eyes once more in Richard's direction, as he was keen enough to help her on with it at Aunt Rosamund's and the theatre, but his body turns almost fully away from her as he leans in to talk to Mr Asquith. With a huff, Mary raises her hands to her throat to work the clasps of her wrap herself.

"Typical Richard," says Diana Manners, sidling up seemingly out of nowhere. She looms, no longer barefoot but augmenting her not inconsequential natural height with a pair of shoes whose heels could double as weapons. Which, given some of the stories Mary has read about the younger woman's encounters with her male admirers, could be useful. "Not even I can turn his head when he gets like that. Cocktail?"

Diana fishes an olive from her empty glass with her gloved fingertips, popping it into her mouth and chewing with a sound of carnal pleasure most suited to a club named as this one is, then plonks the glass on a waiter's passing tray whilst snatching up two more, sloshing their contents on her gown.

"No, thank you," Mary says, eying the unfamiliar drink in the angular glass which Diana thrusts at her, keeping the fuller glass for herself. "I don't believe I shall." She does, however, accept the waiter's offer to take her wrap and bag to the cloakroom.

"You've never had a cocktail before, have you? Darling, that's tragic, a social injustice I simply won't tolerate! I'm a great champion of mending social ills, you know!"
Mary has no choice but to take the cocktail from Diana, lest the giggling girl splash it all over her dress. She raises the glass to her lips and takes a tentative sip, glad when the bitter liquid burns her throat that Diana managed to spill most of it.

"Richard's wild about cocktails," Diana goes on, and Mary can't help but feel a little triumphant when she looks across the room at her escort to find him so intent upon his discussion with Raymond Asquith that he remains oblivious to the cocktail waiter who approaches him.

Nor can she stop herself taking the opportunity to observe him at work, even though doing so reminds her that Diana is correct, and she does not hold his attention. He captivates hers, however, his eyes pale with intensity beneath his heavy brow, the muscles of his neck stretched taut above his collar as he bends his head, physically asserting his dominance over the conversation--as if his voice, low but focused so that it carries above the tinkling of the piano, were not commanding enough. The movement of his hands, stripped of his gloves now, catches her eye as he gestures animatedly, almost as if his very fingers draw the information he seeks from his associate.

Remembering his light touch at her back, his fingers curled around hers, Mary raises her glass to her lips to take a steadying drink. She requires another when he abruptly glances over his shoulder at her, either having caught her movement in his periphery, or aware of her watching him, the intensely drawn lines of his face relaxing into a slow smile.

"Richard, Raymond, darlings!" Diana calls out, waving to them. "Over here!"

But Richard only gives Diana a polite nod of acknowledgment and beckons to Mary, who can't resist glancing back at the other woman and saying, "It seems one of us can turn his head when he's like that, after all." She ought to have taken him at his word when he'd told her so at the start of the evening.

"Lady Mary," he says, drawing her into the conversation with his hand in the small of her back, "Raymond's been asking to meet you."

"Mr Asquith," she says as he squeezes her fingertips. "What a pleasure."

"It's all mine," replies the prime minister's son in wistful tones that match the expression in his dreamy eyes. But his smile fades and his brows knit together as he covers her hand with his other one. "Though I hope you won't mind if I also offer my sincerest condolences for your cousin. Sir Richard tells me he was one of the unfortunates who perished on the Titanic. Please assure your family that we are doing everything we can to inquire into how this awful tragedy occurred, and to compensate in whatever way we can. Of course we know that there can be no recompense for the loss of your beloved cousin's life."

"Reforming inheritance law would be a start," Mary hears herself say, her lips and tongue having formed the words without her brain giving them permission.

Nor was she aware that she's drunk more of her cocktail until she notices she's holding her glass quite near her face. Slowly, she lowers it--though ironically she feels she could stand another drink now more than ever in which to drown her embarrassment--as Richard takes two canapés from a passing tray, and hands one to her.

Luckily, Mr Asquith gives her a sympathetic smile. "Yes, there have been several instances of lines of succession being disrupted by the accident. Even before it I approached my father on a number of occasions about changing these antiquated, paternalistic notions that only persons who wear trousers
should inherit estates and titles, but to no avail."

"Your case is hardly pled with people like that Leigh woman throwing axes at his carriage on his way home from the theatre," Richard remarks.

"No," Mr Asquith agrees, paling. "Needless to say, that was one of the more horrifying incidents our family has endured during his time in office."

As he sips his cocktail, Mary pops the last bit of her canapé into her mouth to assure she won't repeat what Granny had said when she read the story: *What sort of Amazons are these suffragettes, that they are capable of heaving axes into carriages?* She makes a note to tell Richard, later. No doubt he'll appreciate the part where Granny mused that perhaps they trained by participating in the axe-throwing competition in the Highland Games.

"But fodder for your tabloids," says Mr Asquith, his drink bringing the colour back to his face. "1912's been a good year for you, hasn't she, Carlisle? Sinking ocean liners, assassination attempts..."

"Corruption in the government," Richard adds, raising his glass to his lips.

"I still want to know where you got your Marconi scoop, old boy," Mr Asquith says, clapping Richard's shoulder. "Lady Mary, can you charm the truth out of him?"

"If any woman could, it would be her," says Richard, "but I'm afraid even Lady Mary would find that I'm quite as good at keeping secrets as I am at finding them out."

"I'd best leave the pair of you to it, before you deprive me of all mine," says Mr Asquith and, turning to see Diana Manners waving for him to join her and five other men and one woman squeezed around a dining table set for half as many.

A sudden squeeze on her fingertips tangling at her side draws her attention from the other club patrons to her escort.

"Forgive me," says Richard, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he looks down at her, "I've been inattentive, and you must be famished."

"Well--I don't know how much longer one canapé will stay the effects of that cocktail," Mary allows, and falls into step with him in search of a table.

Most of the ones in close proximity to the stage have been occupied since their arrival, groups of four or six—or larger, in Diana's case—almost shouting to be heard over the driving music of the slightly out of tune piano. Some further back contain empty seats, and Mary clings to Richard's hand and pretends not to notice, for fear that someone will flag them over to join one of the parties. When they find a table laid out for two with room for not even one more, in a relatively quiet corner, no less, she lets out her breath and lets go of his hand.

"Talking of secrets," she says, picking up their earlier thread of conversation as Richard draws out a chair; she tilts her head up at him as he seats her. "How did you find out I was going to be in town?"

"Oh..." His hands linger for a moment on the back of her chair, and his eyes dart away from hers, his grin tilting in an expression she thinks might be sheepish. But as he takes his seat across from her he admits, quite unabashedly, "I obtained that information through means not dissimilar to the ones by
which I acquired evidence about the Marconi scandal. Which you will no doubt find unsavoury."

"You couldn't pick a more suitable venue than the Cave of the Golden Calf," Mary says, her attention having been caught by a commotion on the dance floor at the centre of all the dining tables, where Diana hoists the train of her gown almost to her knees, her uncorseted figure jiggling as she dances a one-step to a rag with a young man almost as dishevelled as herself.

Richard chuckles and dips his spoon into the steaming bowl of bouillon a waiter has just served each of them, but Mary is quite in earnest.

"I was honest with you," she says. "Oughtn't we to continue in that spirit?"

Though Richard still looks amused, he lays down his spoon and raises his champagne flute. "To the spirit of honesty…and equality." He takes a drink, then meets her gaze levelly. "You don't need to be Sherlock Holmes to suss how I did it, Mary. Only think for a moment. Who might I have recruited to pass along any information as to when you planned to be in town?"

Mary considers their mutual acquaintance over her bouillon, but only one name comes to mind. "Agnes Belcher?"

"I wasn't certain she would be apprised of all your travel plans."

After another brief moment's thought, Mary guesses, "Not Aunt Rosamund's chauffeur?" It's so absurd that she laughs even as she says it, but Richard leans back in his chair and nods.

"Right on the money."

"You asked him to notify you of when he was to collect me from the station, and he agreed?" After a drink of champagne, she says, "That was bold, Sir Richard, but not entirely unsavoury."

"For a price."

That causes her to swallow so quickly that she narrowly avoids choking, but even so she is not as scandalised as he clearly expects her to be. As she probably ought to be.

"It speaks more of what sort of man he is than against your character, Sir Richard. Though I should perhaps tell Rosamund she should consider a more discrete chauffeur."

The waiter returns to the table then; he collects their empty bowls, replacing them with trout a la meunière and pouring the white wine. After he has gone, they do not immediately resume talking, Richard tucking into the fish with concentration, whilst Mary picks at hers as she tries to dissect her feelings about the lengths to which he'd gone to see her again after they met last May. She can no longer deny that he is courting her, as she had when Rosamund accused him of such the day of their newspaper tour. Nor, she realises as she slowly chews, does she want to. No man has ever gone to such effort before. Not that any man she ever would have considered was in the position Richard is to do so.

At length, she lays down her fork and asks, "Am I to assume you bribed your way to the Marconi scoop, as well?"

"Richard Carlisle," a female voice says as he opens his mouth in answer, low, heavily-accented German, Mary judges from the guttural pronunciation. They look up as a woman about Mama's age
with bobbed dark hair approaches their table, gesturing with mannish hands for Richard not to stand in politeness. "You should have told me you were finally coming to the Cave. I would have reserved you a better table for your first time. Closer to the music."

"We can actually hear each other speak back here, Frida," says Richard.

Mary raises her eyebrows at him. "I didn't realise this was your first visit to the Cave."

Shrugging his shoulders slightly, he says, "Lady Mary, this is Frida Uhl. The owner. Frida, may I introduce Lady Mary Crawley. The Earl of Grantham's eldest daughter. She's staying with her aunt, Lady Rosamund Painswick."

"Charmed, Lady Mary, I am sure. I have been after your Sir Richard since we opened to come so he can give the Cave his endorsement. But he is as all these newspaper men are--my father was one, editor of the Wiener Zeitung in Austria--all work and no play."

Her thin painted lips press together in a smirk, but, apparently disappointed when Richard's only response is to look bored as he drinks his wine, she turns her attention to Mary, studying her from under her heavy lids, one of which droops lazily.

"And no girlfriends, either," she adds.

"Oh no, Miss Uhl," Mary cries, flushing at the slang term being applied to her, and by a stranger, though not five minutes ago she consciously accepted the idea of Richard as her suitor, "I'm not--"

"Frida, just Frida, and you will just be Mary, ja?" She waves a dismissive hand at Mary as she turns away again, but says, "Richard, she is simply lovely. And she must be a remarkable woman to get you out of that stuffy newspaper office of yours."

Richard's gaze rests gently on Mary as he replies, "At last, Frida, a subject we quite agree on. Lady Mary, that is," he adds, in mock-stern tones. "Not my office."

"I hope you will enjoy the Cave, Mary," Frida says, "and you will have to make Richard dance with you. I tease him that this is why he does not come before, because he does not dance. But he insists he is light-footed." She shrugs. "I do not believe what I do not see."

The waiter arrives with the veal and red wine, and Frida slinks off without another word.

"She's nice," Mary offers.

"She has her moments," says Richard cutting his veal, "when you'd never guess she fled Vienna after a scandal that involved her firing a gun at a party at which Prince Fugger-Babenhausen was present."

"Heavens."

Richard chews, then washes down the bite with his claret. "It may or may not have been a suicide attempt. She had written notes before. But she's a bit..." He waves his fork airily as he searches for the appropriate word. "...dramatic."

Mary glances at Diana Manners, who at that moment returns to her table from the dance floor and flops down upon her chair, her tongue hanging out from her grinning mouth like a dog's after a run
about the park. "A common trait among this lot."

After his low chuckle fades into the baseline of the piano and the rumble of dinner conversations all around them, no sound passes between them until after the waiter brings the salad. Perhaps Richard does not find the silence as companionable as she, because he asks, "Are you enjoying yourself? I know it's a world away from the parties you must attend at home. Or in London, for that matter."

She wanted another world, when she fled Downton, but she says, "I don't often have the pleasure of French food at home."

The legs of Richard's chair scrape against the floor as he pushes suddenly back from the table. He stands and extends his hand across the table to Mary. "And what about American dancing?"

Mary eyes his upturned palm, the pale calluses barely visible on the pads of his fingertips, faded spots of ink in the creases of his skin. "I'm afraid I've never danced to a rag."

He smiles reassuringly. "It's a simple one-step. You'll catch on in no time, if you'll just follow my lead."

"I have all evening," says Mary, placing his hand in his. "Why not carry on?"

Hand in hand he leads her out onto the dance floor, which is so packed with couples that she wonders how they will manage a dance without colliding into anybody. Without warning Richard twirls her about before drawing her into his arms to fall into step with the music. To her relief it is an easy enough dance to pick up without practice, though the bouncing footwork and swinging movements of their clasped hands necessitated by the rollicking tempo make her feel foolish and common; she dances the one-step more stiffly with Richard than she has ever waltzed with far less desirable partners.

For some reason entirely unknown to her, this train of thought takes her to Cousin Matthew. Has he ever participated in this sort of dance after a day of work in Manchester? she wonders, the answer to her own question presenting itself almost immediately as she considers the news Edith's letter brought of him today. No--any man whose idea of a fun Saturday afternoon includes touring country churches with Edith would be too tightly wound for ragtime.

Richard, however, moves with a limber fluidity she never would have associated with him that night he commanded her gaze across a ballroom. He makes her feel there might be a sort of elegance to be found in this style of dancing, after all, for its very lack of it, and she relaxes into his assured leading arm and allows herself to enjoy this new world. She doesn't even mind when Frida steals him for the next set and allows Raymond Asquith to spin her about the floor. It can't be so very common to dance ragtime with a newspaper magnate and the prime minister's son, can it?

They return to their table when a woman stands up to sing, giggling over their Crème Margot and Madeira at her slinky dress and the songs she sings in French and an even slinkier voice. The laughter and the late hour and the rich food and drink are all beginning to go to Mary's head, so that she is almost relieved when the waiter brings steaming black Turkish coffee so strong it hardly needs a cup. But after only a sip or two the music starts up again, a flutist and a violinist and a moustachioed man with an accordion joining the pianist on stage, while Diana Manners joins them at their table.

"Richard darling! Now that you've proved you really can dance, won't you dance the Argentine tango with me?"
Mary grinds her teeth when Richard stands, but he brushes past her without so much as a glance.

"You'll have to forgive me, Lady Diana, if I prefer to reserve that dance for the lady I escorted here tonight." His eyebrows arch in evident surprise when Mary doesn't hesitate to take his hand and let him lead her to where other dancers are partnering up at either end of the floor. "I imagine this is rather an unsavoury dance for an earl's daughter." His voice lilts upward at the end of the sentence, as if to ask whether she is certain she wants this.

"Actually I have danced the tango," Mary tells him, placing her hand just below his shoulder and clasping his leading hand.

"Have you?" He settles his other hand about her waist just in time to begin the first four-step sequence across the floor.

"Sybil seems to have your talent for getting hold of things she oughtn't. Once it was a book of modern dances, and she begged me to learn it with her after everyone went to bed."

They make their turn, then Richard says, "Your parents are going to wake one morning to find that their daughters have turned into proper suffragettes, throwing axes at carriages. It's a slippery slope from dancing the tango together in a locked bedroom."

Mary remembers to relate Granny's choice remarks about the assassination attempt, but she scarcely hears her own voice for the distraction of how different this tango is to the ones she danced with Sybil...The span and the masculine weight of his hand at her back...the roughness of his fingers against her skin contrasted with the lightness of his touch, his thumb stroking hers as he holds her hand high...the mingled scents of smoke and spice from cigars and cologne and even his pomade...the resonance of his laugh when his chest brushes against her breasts when they lean into each other at the turning...the power of his gaze from beneath his brow to make her breaths come quicker and shallower as he spins her at the end.

When it's over, he twirls her with an extra flourish, then holds her close for a moment longer than every other couple, his hips brushing against hers, only to release her just as abruptly.

"I'd best get you home before my Silver Ghost turns into a pumpkin."

~*~

For all his urgency at the Cave of the Golden Calf, by the time Richard pulls the Rolls Royce alongside the curb in front of Aunt Rosamund's, he seems to be in no hurry as he shuts off the engine, running his hand over the bonnet and side mirrors as he comes around to Mary's side to let her out. His careful ascent of the front steps is probably a wise choice, she muses, given how much they had to drink, but as they pause under the glow of the porch light, he leaning back with his hands gripping the wrought iron railing that separates Rosamund's front steps from the neighbours', she looks up into his eyes and sees no indication that he is not perfectly sober. He is reluctant to say goodnight.

"I hope you won't think me cloyingly sentimental," he says, the depth of his rasping voice the only indication that he may be feel the effects of the nightclub, "but tonight, and these past few days, have been the most enjoyable I've had since...."

He glances down as if considering when his previous most enjoyable day occurred, his face
shadowed by his top hat.

Mary waits patiently for several moments for him to conclude the thought, but when he does not, she says, "Enjoyable--I think I might be ill from so much sentiment."

"Frida wasn't joking about the balance of my life tilting quite decidedly toward work." He snaps his head up. "I go everywhere and know everyone, but it's always work."

"The news doesn't stop," Mary says. "How could you?"

"I could," he says, pushing off the railing, the soles of his shoes scraping the pavement as he closes the distance between them. "If I met someone worth stopping for."

He leans in, and, his fingertips just curling around her elbow, brushes his lips across her cheek.

For a heartbeat he doesn't move, his warm breath the ghost of his kiss on her skin. When he does at last draw away, he doesn't release her arm, nor does he break their gaze with so much as a blink. Mary glances down at his lips, thinking he means to kiss her again, properly. She's never known a man's kiss before, nor wanted one, until now. But no sooner has she thought it than Richard releases her, and takes a step backward from her.

She arches an eyebrow at him. "Only a kiss on the cheek, Sir Richard, after we danced a tango?"

"Dancing a tango with you is precisely the reason I only kissed your cheek."

Chapter End Notes

The previous chapter introduced real-life Edwardian socialite Diana Manners, who you met again in London's very first nightclub, The Cave of the Golden Calf, which was opened in 1912 by Frida Uhl--who was every bit the character Lady Diana was--and frequented by Raymond Asquith, both of whom appear in this chapter. The tango featured is Ángel Villoldo's El Choclo Tango, which he wrote in 1903 and was popularized in European cabarets in the 1910s.
Chapter Summary

Mary awakens to surprising news--in the literal sense--about her unchaperoned night out with Richard.

The screech of the door on its hinges, followed by a thump against the wall as it is thrown suddenly open, disrupts Mary's dream, but she dozes on until a sharp voice rouses her.

"Mary Josephine Crawley, what in heaven's name were you thinking?"

She cracks an eye open, only to immediately cover it with her hand as Aunt Rosamund flings the draperies apart, wincing at the metallic scrape of the hangers on the curtain rod, as well as the unwelcome flood of white morning light. Mary's temples throb in time to her racing pulse.

"That I had no intention of waking up until much later," she replies, her voice rasping in her parched throat.

"No." Rosamund's skirt snaps as crisply as her voice as she strides back to the bedside. "I suppose you wouldn't have, after a night of cocktails and dancing at the Cave of the Golden Calf."

Mary's heart has only just begun to slow from being startled awake when it skips a beat. Before she can muster her voice to ask how her aunt knows about her previous evening's activities, Rosamund speaks again.

"I'm afraid you have to wake up, Mary. I've just been on the phone with your Papa--"

"There's no phone at Downton," Mary says through a yawn, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"He used the one at Cousin Matthew's office. Not that that's the point."

Well Mary can imagine Aunt Rosamund having this exact conversation with Papa. She sighs. "What is the point, then?"

"That he insists you and I both be on the nine o'clock train back to Downton."

"Both of us?" Mary's mind feels as bleary as her eyes, now open just a slit and still smarting with the glare from the east-facing window.

"Do you think he'd let you go anywhere unchaperoned after last night's escapades?" Rosamund stalks back to the window, jerking the drapes together so that they block out a little more light. "I'm surprised he's not coming for you himself, except that he apparently doesn't think you can be trusted in London with me for the six hours it would take him to get here. She comes to stand at the foot of the bed, her shadow falling over the pale blue coverlet. "And I'm sure he relishes the chance to reprimand his formerly bossy elder sister in a manner befitting an errant schoolgirl."
Mary sits bolt upright in bed, the haze of sleep clearing from her eyes and head as her heart careers like a spooked horse. "Papa knows?"

"Everybody knows."

Rosamund tosses a newspaper onto the bed, and Mary claps her hand to her mouth as she sees her own pale face goggling back at her from the front page of *The Sketch*, her hands holding tight to Richard's arm as they enter the Cave. Squeezing her eyes shut again, she slowly leans back into the pillows. She presses her head hard against them, sinking all the way to the mattress, wishing as the down billows up on either side that it would swell to cover her face and suffocate her. When it does not, she contemplates grabbing the pillow on the empty side of the bed and smothering herself with it, if only her arms were not paralysed by this horrific turn her life has taken.

"It's all very well for you to make your own mistakes, Mary," says Rosamund, her hand whistling over the satin counterpane as she moves around the bed, "but I do not at all appreciate you making them mine. I trusted you...I trusted him..." Her voice rises in pitch even as she perches at the edge of the mattress, cradling her forehead in her fingertips, massaging her temples. "I'm sure a man like Sir Richard Carlisle can be quite forceful when it comes to getting his way, but--"

"Richard didn't force me to do anything."

Rosamund lifts her head, cocking it at an angle, removing her hand to reveal gingery eyebrows arched above the keen blue eyes inherited from Granny. At once Mary realises she failed to say Sir Richard. And that she has missed an opportunity to make him a very convenient scapegoat for her misdeeds. What was it she told the Duke of Crowborough? That she's in the wrong? She's not sure she is in the wrong here, or that apologies are due, but she's not about to let another person take the fall for her choices.

Not when she finally *has* choices.

And not when that person is an ally.

"Sir Richard was reluctant to go out with me at all after he learned you weren't coming along to chaperone," Mary admits, deciding to omit the part about him not having made use of his chauffeur as a substitute chaperone. "And I insisted we go to the Cave. Nothing scandalous happened there--except for Diana Manners, but isn't her life a long succession of publicised scandals?"

"I think you'd best omit Lady Diana from whatever narrative you give your parents." Rosamund gives a wry smile, which promptly falls, as if shaken off by the wagging of her head. "Why, Mary? Why would you insist on going to such a place?"

Mary's throat closes up so that she can hardly speak. "Because home was a cage. I wanted to be free."

The bed shifts as Rosamund stands. "I hope it was worth it, my dear, because I'm afraid you'll return to Downton to find it quite as confining as a gaol."

~*~

Hers is the most common feminine name in England; nevertheless, Mary's ears prick to it as it echoes through the brick and concrete and glass terminal of King's Cross Station, sharp and resonant as a shot fired from a gun further down the concourse, aimed directly for her hearing. She draws in a
sharp breath as it reaches her, sitting rigid for a moment on the bench beside her aunt, until the staccato clip of shoes on the pavement—like the intended punch of typewriter keys, she thinks, forming the carefully plotted narrative of a story—solidifies her certainty that she is, indeed, the Mary in question.

No, not in question...in demand.

She rises from the bench and turns just in time to see Richard Carlisle pushing through the crowd toward her.

"Did you phone him before we left the house?" Rosamund asks in tones as arch as Mary imagines her eyebrows to be.

"Of course not." Though Mary had not thought to inform him of her sudden hasty departure from London, she is not surprised to see him here. Perhaps her subconscious even expected him. As she steps away from her aunt, she says, "You need to fire your chauffeur."

"Miss Fields showed me this morning's Sketch," Richard says without preamble, his agitation evident in the flare of his nostrils with his rapid indrawn breaths and puffs of exhalation. Yet when his leather-gloved hand flies up to remove his Homburg, unshading his blue eyes as he dabs beads of perspiration from his brow with a handkerchief, they search her face with genuine concern.

"I intended to ring you at a reasonable hour, but then I heard..." His gaze flickers over her shoulder, where Rosamund stands guard, before he pulls it back to Mary's face. "You're returning to Yorkshire? Don't, Mary, I assure you, it's not--"

"It's not my decision. Papa--"

She shuffles back a pace, away from his hand as Richard reaches out for her; he looks down at his hands, almost as if he'd not been aware of the action, as if it were instinct, and slides his fingertips over the brim of his hat. He cannot seem to stop moving, and Mary's own pulse quickens at this ordinarily controlled man's loss of composure, almost to the point of being flustered, at her departure.

"Well," she says, "I think it's safe to say that this is the angriest he's ever been at me."

"Would it help at all if I phoned him? Explained that I never meant--"

"We don't have a telephone."

Richard's downturned eyes widen, looking at her askance as he puts his hat back on his head. "You don't have a phone?"

"We only just got electricity in the ground floor rooms. Papa believes in maintaining the integrity of the house. Mama describes him as a typical Englishman who hates comfort."

"A good old-fashioned letter, then," Richard says. "Written with a pen. Or is it quills at Downton?"

His mouth turns upward at the corner, the dimple appearing above it, and Mary cannot help but laugh softly. Even Aunt Rosamund gives a little snort of amusement at her brother's expense.

But the tension is only relieved for a moment, Richard's features thrown into harsh relief as a cloud passes over the sun, casting the shadows of the steel beams of the glass roof over the platform and
the people waiting on it.

"Our behaviour last night was above reproach," he says. "Anyone at the Cave would vouch for that. And believe you me, Mr Ingram, the editor, will know exactly how I feel about his intimation in The Sketch to the contrary. I would of course explain all of this to Lord Grantham, were I to write."

While Mary hesitates, wondering just what Richard will do to this Mr Ingram, shivering at the determination and the danger that darken his voice, Rosamund inserts herself into the conversation.

"That's very gallant of you, Sir Richard, but I'm afraid it won't help. On the contrary," she adds, stepping from behind her niece, as if to catch his attention, though his gaze never wavers from Mary's face, "it will only make it worse. My brother will think you've risen above your station and grown too accustomed to having your way simply because you can buy it."

A muscle ripples beneath Richard's cheekbone, and Mary hears the quiver of anger in his voice as he asks, very quietly, "You don't think that of me, do you, Mary?"

For a moment Mary considers the paradox that stands before her, clad in a business suit. If their interactions over the past several days have told her anything, it's that Richard very much craves a place in high society--yet having the approval of everyone in her set seems not to matter to him. She shouldn't be pleased that her approval, apparently, does. Just as she should not envy the fluidity of his position and the freedom it affords him to cobble together the bits of society he likes, piecemeal, casting aside the rest so effortlessly.

She tilts her chin and replies, "I did."

He swallows. "But no longer?"

"Of course." When his face starts to harden, she adds, trying not to smirk as her test of the power she has over him proves her hypothesis, "But I no longer see that it's a problem."

As a train whistle blasts, his face relaxes, his lips pressed together and curving upward as he raises his chin. "When may I expect the pleasure of your company again?"

His confidence ought to put her off, but instead it makes her think of the admiration and affection that shone in his eyes last night under the porch light, when he told her she was worth stopping work for, when she wished he would kiss her. Downton may not fully run on electricity, but she feels a slight shock in her heart at the thought of leaving him alone again with his work.

And Diana Manners.

"Alas, I don't foresee Papa permitting me to come to London again till I'm sixty. Even then he'll probably insist on serving as my chaperone himself."

"Mary," says Rosamund, impatiently, "It's time to board."

Mary's eyes sting--from the acrid black smoke chuffing from the train engine--and she turns away before Richard can see. But he catches her hand, tugging her back to him.

He opens his mouth to speak, though his lips and tongue don't form any words, and no sound emits from his throat.
"Goodbye, Sir Richard," Mary says.

He doesn't return her farewell as her gloved hand slides from the slackened grip of his fingers, but she feels his gaze on her retreating form as she turns and boards the first class car.

As the train chugs out of the station, she does not look back.

~*~

"Welcome home, Lady Mary," Carson greets as he stands aside for her to pass through the front door. "Lady Rosamund."

"Ordered home." Mary breezes into the vestibule, though in truth she thinks she could not be more reluctant to enter Downton than the Bastille, the stone archways and leaded glass windowpanes of her home striking her as imposing for the first time in twenty years. Even when she is set free of it, someday, her hopes will remain locked within to serve her life's sentence. "I'm not sure how welcome I am."

She falls silent as she stops to unbutton her coat, but when Carson pads softly up behind her to help her out of it, says, "I expect they're waiting for me? Judge, jury, and executioner?"

Carson's large but nimble fingers give her shoulders a light squeeze that has nothing to do with the removal of her coat; his sonorous tones rumble through her and warm her aching chest like a hot dram of brandy after a brisk winter's walk as he says, "The Dowager Countess is not here."

"Thank heaven for small favours," Aunt Rosamund says, slipping her arms out of the sleeves of her coat as Thomas holds it; Mary catches the footman's eyes dart away from her, though not quite quickly enough to hide the insolent smirk that tells her the entire household has been appraised of her scandal--no doubt by O'Brien--odious woman--who would have seen The Sketch on Mama's breakfast tray.

But Mary looks back over her shoulder at Carson and gives him a small smile. He returns it, but it's the crease between his bushy brows as they knit together above dark eyes that regard her with the same fond and conspiratorial glimmer as when she was a little girl, who came to his pantry begging for money, that emboldens her enter the library. She remains untarnished in Carson's eyes, at least.

"The prodigal has returned," she announces before Thomas has even shut the double doors behind her and Rosamund. She avoids Papa's eyes as he rises from his desk, in her periphery glimpsing Mama stretched out on the high-backed red settee like an invalid, and fixes her gaze on the tea things laid out on the side table by the window. "Only sandwiches? How disappointing. I was expecting the fatted calf."

"I think we've all had more than our fill of calf, wouldn't you agree, Mary?"

Papa's mouth is a small o between his sagging cheeks as he speaks in tight syllables. He looks at her as though he hardly knows her, as he's looked at her since he told her Patrick was drowned and she expressed her wish not to mourn him as a fiancé. I'm not as sad as I should be, she hears her own voice in her head, sees her pale black-clad reflection in the mirror of her mind, and that's what makes me sad.

"Oh, Papa," she says, rolling her eyes and turning away to pour herself a cup of tea. She adds no sugar or cream, but cradles the hot china cup of steaming black tea in both hands for a moment to
bring the life back into fingers so cold they might well have been frozen and clutching to a bit of driftwood in the north Atlantic. "You're making far more of this that it's worth."

"I don't think you grasp just how much worth we place on your reputation," Mama chokes out.

"This is the real world in 1912, Mama, not a nineteenth century novel of manners." Mary studies her mother over her teacup, and is unable to stop another roll of her eyes at the impossibly bright blue pair goggling from puffy red lids, her hands twisting a crumpled and soggy handkerchief; most likely she's been weeping since she saw The Sketch on her breakfast tray. "Even if it does rather resemble one, with the mother with the poor frazzled nerves and the house full of daughters entailed away to an undesirable middle-class cousin."

"If only you'd take the time to get to know Cousin Matthew--"

"It's my reputation," Mary cuts Mama off, though she means this is her trial, not Matthew's. "The whole family won't be ruined because I attended a rather crudely named nightclub."

"No, but you might be," says Papa. His chest rises and falls with a deep indrawn breath as he reins in his temper; as he strides slowly toward her, he clasps his hands together behind his back. "My dear, I know you never thought it mattered what anyone thinks of you, everything being settled with Patrick...But Patrick is gone, and you won't be an heiress, and your reputation is all you have. Or was, before it was splashed across the tabloids."

"On the cover of The Sketch is hardly being splashed." Mary seats herself at the edge of the sofa opposite Mama's, and sips her tea. "Or appearing in a tabloid."

"In some ways that's worse," croaks Mama, eyes welling again. "All our friends read The Sketch...Your grandmother...When I think of all the times Diana Manners' picture's been in there up to all sorts of unladylike behaviour..."

As Mary thinks of Rosamund's unnecessary admonition against mentioning Diana's presence at the club, her gaze automatically flicks to her aunt, who lingers in the corner of the library, partly obscured by one of the monstrosities Mama calls a flower arrangement.

"And what about my charm?" Mary asks. "Or my beauty? Everyone I met at the Cave seemed much more concerned with those qualities than with my reputation." Her cup chinks against her saucer as she replaces it with a little more force than she intends. "I danced with Raymond Asquith, for Heaven's sake. It was hardly a gathering of social deviants."

"The Prime Minister's son, Asquith?" Papa splutters, swinging away to look at Mama, his mouth gawping slightly as if to ask, Did I hear her correctly? Mama only shakes her head vaguely, twisting her handkerchief around her fingers.

"Mary," he says, turning back to her, his face reddening, "you do realise that man is actively seeking to limit the power of the House of Lords? Or didn't it come up when you were waltzing with his son?"

Though she's more than a little tempted to tell him of course it didn't, as she'd danced the night away to ragtime music, and ended it with an Argentine tango--he can hardly be any angrier, after all, at hearing she socialised with a Liberal politician's son--she only picks up her teacup again and says, "When have you ever known me to talk about politics, especially during a dance?"
If only he knew that last night she volunteered the subjects of inheritance law and women's suffrage.

"This tale keeps getting more and more lurid," Mama sobs into her handkerchief, which Mary can't imagine O'Brien will ever be able to iron the wrinkles out of. "Dancing with Raymond Asquith...Photographed on the arm of Sir Richard Carlisle..."

"And where were you?" Papa rounds on Aunt Rosamund, apparently not as unnoticed as she wished to be, his footsteps almost martial upon the floorboards. "Dancing with the Prime Minister himself? I expect you quite agree with Asquith's politics, in loving memory of Marmaduke."

"I was at home," Rosamund replies, steadily, giving no indication that she is cowed by her brother's domineering manner. Her chin tilts upward--in defiance, certainly, Mary thinks, but also in a recollection of the days when Rosamund was the taller sibling, as well as the elder, "in bed with a headache."

"At home, with a headache? While my daughter was off gallivanting at a cabaret called the Cave of the Golden Calf?"

"I had no knowledge of her plans to visit such an establishment. Originally Sir Richard Carlisle invited both of us to the theatre, followed by supper. As he had proved quite above board at our previous excursions with him, I saw no harm--"

"Previous excursions?" Papa is starting to sound like an echo, the impression enhanced by Mama's wuthering."You were in London for half a week, Mary," he says, stalking toward the settee again, pulling a fresh handkerchief from his breast pocket and handing it down to Mama. "What did you do with Carlisle? How does Rosamund even know him?"

"Mary knew him," Rosamund answers before Mary can. "There was an invitation waiting for her when she arrived at my house."

She might have omitted that, Mary thinks, her eyes fluttering closed. It sounds so much worse than admitting to spending an evening in the same company as Diana Manners.

"I met Sir Richard at Agnes Belcher's engagement ball last May," she says, feeling three pairs of expectant eyes watching her. "We had a rapport."

"I should say so," says Papa, "if he was apprised of your travel plans and courted you."

"He took us to tea at the Ritz, and gave us a tour of his newspaper office and printing press. Then we saw Pygmalion--"

"I read a review of that play." Mama's voice is muffled by her handkerchief. "The critic said it contains simply appalling language."

"It's a satire on social class," Mary says, rolling her eyes. "A Cockney girl passes herself off as a Duchess by learning to speak properly. Of course she must speak improperly first."

Papa snorts. "I expect the irony was lost on Carlisle?"

"I expect so, as his eyes were glued to his newspaper instead of the stage." Mary finishes her tea, sets cup and saucer on the end table, and stands to face her father, hands open at her sides. "Yes, I went out with Sir Richard without a chaperone. We saw a play. We had supper at an avant-garde
nightclub. Really, Papa, you needn't make it sound a gothic seduction."

Their heads turn as Mama makes a strangled sound in her throat. "Did Sir Richard propose to you?"

"If he had," Mary says, arching an eyebrow at Papa, "I'm sure you'd have read about it in the tabloids."

"I'm sure we wouldn't," says Papa. "Because I'm sure you wouldn't accept. He must mean to propose."

"Must he?"

"Why else would he go to such lengths and eschew the most basic rules of polite society to spend so much time in your company?"

"You needn't make him sound so mercenary, Papa. It may be that he simply likes me."

He regards her with a faint smile, a patient look which Mary well remembers from her childhood. When he speaks, however, he says, "You cannot be so naïve. You are, indeed, beautiful and charming. As well as young, and the next rung up the social ladder for climbers like Sir Richard Carlisle. And Rosamund should have been your first line of defence against a man like that."

"I trusted Mary," her aunt says, "and I trusted Sir Richard. It seems in both instances, my trust was misplaced."

"As was mine."

Mary has been braced for these words, softly spoken, since Aunt Rosamund told her Papa had called to demand she return home, yet they still strike her squarely in the stomach, knocking the breath from her. Oblivious to her pain, Papa clasps his hands together behind his back and strikes a pose befitting a lieutenant-colonel reprimanding a lower-ranking officer, pacing the length of the carpet before her.

"I suppose it goes without saying that you will have no further contact with this man? Nor will you accept any invitations from anyone without my having expressly reviewed them?"

"I thought you said it went without saying."

Papa halts on the rug, red flooding his face as his chest inflates with anger. Before he can release the hot air, the dinner gong sounds in the hall. Bless Carson and his good timing, Mary thinks, her eyes fluttering closed as if in prayer. When she opens them, her father exhales.

"It's time to dress for dinner."

"I'll just take a tray in my cell," Mary says, striding past him toward the library doors.

"Mary--"

"Let her go, Robert," Mama says.

As she slips out into the hall, Mary hears him say, "I'm afraid that was the problem to begin with."
The warmth of the fire crackling in the bedroom fireplace--a bit much for this Indian summer, though the Yorkshire nights are cooler than London--has Mary half-dozing on her cream-coloured settee when a soft knock on the door precedes Anna's entrance bearing a tray.

"Evening, Lady Mary. Mr Carson said you weren't feeling up to dressing for dinner after your journey, so I've just brought you a bit of supper."

"I'm not sure I'm up to eating dinner, either," Mary replies, not lifting her head from where it rests in the corner of the settee. "But thank you, Anna."

The maid nods as she sets the tray on the low oval table before the settee, her blue eyes darting briefly to Mary's face, searching it with concern, before she turns away to unpack the trunk brought up earlier by the footmen.

"I'm sorry your visit to London had to be cut short," Anna says after a moment.

"I have only myself to blame," Mary replies, her gaze drifting across the room to her recumbent reflection in the dressing table mirror, "for breaking the rules."

"Did you enjoy yourself, though, m'lady?"

For a moment Mary doesn't answer. She relaxes against the arm of the settee and closes her eyes, listening to the snap of the logs in the fireplace but hearing the rasp of Richard's voice last night--could it only have been less than a day ago?--and again feeling the warmth it had prickled up all over her skin: Tonight, and these past few days, have been the most enjoyable I've had...

"Yes," she murmurs, squeezing her eyes tighter shut against the sting of tears behind her lids. "I enjoyed myself very much."

"Good. I think sometimes when too many rules keep us from enjoying life, it's all right to break a few of the less important ones."

Anna continues unpacking in silence, and then Mary hears the rustle of the maid's taffeta skirt as she stands. She expects the light footsteps to carry Anna across the room to the wardrobe, but instead she approaches the sofa. Mary opens her eyes, her vision slightly obscured by the unshed tears, though not so much that she can't make out Anna's hand reaching into the front pocket of her frilly evening apron.

"Mr Carson says to tell you he probably shouldn't be giving you this, but a telegram was delivered before you arrived."

"A telegram?" Mary repeats, sitting up to take the card Anna presses into her hand.

A smile curls on her lips as she reads the brief message.

MARY STOP I WANT TO BE WITH YOU STOP I ALWAYS GET WHAT I WANT STOP RICHARD
The Talk

Chapter Summary

Following Mary's return to Downton in disgrace, her grandmother, mother, and sisters are all keen to offer commentary on her behaviour in London with Sir Richard--and, in the process, provide unintentional insight into her heart.

"If we examine the situation from a purely aesthetic standpoint," says Granny, eying the cover of *The Sketch*, which goggles up at them from the tea table in the sunny morning room of the Dower House, "which I believe is the proper way of looking at it--"

"Aesthetic?" Mama repeats, and Mary thinks, with some annoyance, that her mother's expression matches the one on her own face captured forever by a tabloid photographer, gawking at the well-endowed cow on the sign of the Cave of the Golden Calf.

"Yes, aesthetic." Granny presses her thin lips together into a colourless line. "From an objective, aesthetic standpoint, Sir Richard Carlisle is a handsome man." She looks at the newspaper again, her eyebrows arching high on her forehead. Mary notes a tinge of pink on Granny's wizened cheek as she continues, "Such striking bone structure. Are you certain he's not aristocratic stock? His bearing is certainly proud and distinguished."

"Oh, he's very proud." Mary sips her tea. "Who wouldn't be, to rise from selling newspapers on the streets of Edinburgh to publishing a million copies a day? And that's only the *Daily Telegram*, not the evening edition or his other papers."

Granny's mouth opens in a small o as her eyes dart from Mary to *The Sketch* and back to Mary again. "You don't think he's handsome? I suppose he must be near your papa's age, but--"

"Didn't you say he was objectively handsome?" Mary catches her mother's eye, twinkling for the first time since her return in disgrace. Always willing to form an alliance with anyone who will side with her against her difficult mother-in-law.

"If you're saying you're considering him for his money, Mary," says Granny, "that's an even more vulgar reason than the one I suspected. But I know that's not the case. Don't pretend otherwise."

"I'm not considering him at all, Granny. I've scarcely met the man half a dozen times."

"The most recent, unchaperoned at a place of dubious morality."

Mary purses her lips; obviously Aunt Rosamund neglected to mention Richard's rather dramatic appearance at the train station before they left London.

"Dubious?" echoes Mama, her voice taking on that choked quality that gripped it yesterday; Mary sees the blue eyes well with fresh tears, too, and barely restrains herself from rolling her own. "I should say that the morality of any place called the Cave of the Golden Calf is rather decidedly lacking."
So much for allies.

Granny *hmphs* and takes a long drink of her tea, as if to fortify herself. "O'Brien told my maid Simmons that when Robert saw The Sketch, he flung it down on the floor. A if he were Moses casting down the Ten Commandments at the sight of the Hebrews dancing around the golden calf."

"He probably saw them dancing the one-step," says Mary, "to a ragtime tune. Followed by an Argentine tango."

For a moment she thinks Mama might leave the tea table weeping. Granny, on the other hand, looks more triumphant than scandalised; she sits up straighter in her chair, as if she's a queen presiding on her throne, her mouth twisting into a smirk for half a moment before she pours herself a fresh cup of tea, dropping three lumps of sugar into it with the silver tongs.

"If tangos are being danced," she says, "then this unfortunate discussion is no longer merely a wise idea, but a necessary one."

"Discussion?" Mary says, feeling dizzy.

"Yes, my dear," Granny replies. "The one you would, ordinarily, have on the eve of your wedding, which circumstances now demand occur prematurely."

Mama draws in her breath through her teeth, through which she grinds out the words, "That talk may well be timely, but as Mary's mother *I* should still be the one to give it."

"Oh, you can still offer her whatever little gems mothers in America bestow upon their daughters on Mary's wedding night. Or whenever you deem it appropriate. But I think what she requires now is some sage English instruction."

Mary gulps her tea, and thinks longingly of the cocktail she drank at the Cave. And also that *longing* is perhaps not the ideal sentiment to express at this moment.

"My dear," says Granny, beckoning Mary's attention with the *tink* of her teaspoon against the cup, "I trust you have some notion that the male sex are afflicted with..." She raises her teacup to her lips, muffling her words slightly as she goes on. "...passions, which can only be satisfied by the feminine form."

When she lowers her cup, she looks as if she has swallowed something distasteful. Mary tries to glance away, but Granny's pale eyes pin her gaze like an insect on a school child's display board.

"A well-bred lady does not herself experience such passions--or *should not*." She glances down at the newspaper on the tea table. "No matter how appealing the notion may be when presented by a charming man who dimples beneath a stunning pair of cheekbones."

"Dimples and cheekbones? Heavens," says Mary, as coolly as the polished silver teapot reveals her complexion to be, though Mama blushes quite as red as the raspberries on the sponge. "Careful, Granny, or you may find yourself in danger of being swept away on a tide of passion and middle-class breeding."

"Mary," Mama chides, but Granny snorts.
"I paid my dues to your grandpa's passion forty years ago. Believe me, Mary, when I tell you that while men vow to worship women with their bodies, it is the wife who makes sacrifice on the altar of the marriage bed. It's an uncomfortable, untidy business, and whatever poets and gothic novelists would like you to believe, a woman's only satisfaction in the act comes when she produces an heir and her duty is thankfully at an end."

"I would have to respectfully disagree with your grandmother," Mama says through her teeth, leaning toward Mary as if Granny cannot hear this aside.

"Of course you would," replies Granny. "You're American, and you never achieved the satisfaction of giving your husband a son."

"That's rather a medieval way of looking at it, don't you think?" asks Mama, with no more reaction to the tweak than a blink.

Mary, however, winces. "It isn't, so long as medieval inheritance laws still rule the land."

Granny recoils in her chair as if serpents have sprung from Mary's coiffure. Her mouth hangs crookedly agape as her eye darts sideways at her daughter-in-law.

"It seems we have bigger matters than Mary's sexual education to concern us," says Mama, the glimmer returning to her eyes as she takes a bite of raspberry sponge. "She's made friends with Liberals."

Mary can only be grateful for her mother's bait-and-switch, though it doesn't extricate her from the subject of sex entirely.

"I probably shouldn't discuss this with you now," Mama says as they walk back to the big house from Granny's, "but don't carry your grandmother's words with you to your wedding night. Too many girls meet their husbands in terror. And while the first time is uncomfortable, it's also a new and exciting time of learning to trust and letting your husband know you in a way no other person on earth does."

Mary fixes her gaze resolutely on the lane, the brim of her hat shading her face and hopefully hiding her flush as her thoughts instantly turn to Richard. Of how easily she opened her mind and her heart to him; of how on their very first acquaintance he pegged them as the same; of how she felt in his arms, pressed close to him, and of wanting to feel his mouth on hers.

"That's why it's so very important to choose a husband you can respect as a friend and grow to love," Mama goes on. "If you don't already."

"And I suppose you think that husband should be Cousin Matthew?" Mary pauses beneath the outstretched branch of an oak that sprawls over the lane. "Wanting his house and title is hardly a good foundation for friendship."

Mama turns. "If you don't think you can ever go beyond that, you're wise to steer clear of Matthew." With a sigh of resignation, she adds, "Much as I'd like to see you always settled here, as Countess. As would your father."

"He never will, though, as I can only be Countess in the event of his death."

Harsh lines tug at Mama's features, belying her age. "That's morose."
"Isn't everything," Mary says, walking on, palms open at her sides, "since Patrick drowned in a shipwreck?"

For a moment she walks in silence, but at the turning into the Abbey park, the crunch of Mama’s shoes in the gravel brings her alongside Mary once again. "What about Evelyn Napier?"

"What about him?"

"You're good friends, aren't you? How would you like it if I invited him up sometime?"

Mary's eyes smart; after a second of feeling as if the wind has been knocked out of her, she blinks back the tears and her breath returns in short gasps, which she quickens her footsteps to match.

"You're the Countess of Grantham," she throws back over her shoulder. "Invite whomever you wish to your house, regardless of whether I like it or not. But at least be honest about the fact that you're no longer concerned about marrying me off to get me out of the way. You're worried about my virtue."

~*~

Mary strides through the front door without her customary word of greeting and smile for Carson, only to feel the brush of his hand as he presses something into hers. She glances up at him in question, his face drawn into rather grim lines, though his dark eyes dart downward, directing her gaze to the slip of paper he's given her. Another telegram, she realises, her stomach giving a little twinge.

"What's that?" asks Mama, coming in behind her, arms raised to unpin her hat.

"Oh nothing," Mary answers, quickly, glancing up at the butler again and seeing his eyebrows twitch guiltily as he takes mama's hat. "Just a scrap that fell out of my pocket earlier. Carson thought it might be important. But it's not."

"Yes, but what is it?"

"My ticket stub," Mary lies, crumpling the telegram in her fist as Mama's gaze drops to her hand. "From Pygmalion. He thought I might want it for my treasure box. But I suppose you'd rather I throw it in the rubbish bin."

"If only you could do the same with the language you heard in that play," Mama mutters on her way to the stairs, though she puts on a smile for Sybil and Edith, who are, at that moment, descending. She sweeps Sybil back up with her, an arm around her youngest daughter's shoulders as she says it's been a while since they had a good heart-to-heart chat and won't she join her in her room for a bit?

Sybil glances back at Mary with a round-eyed look that says she'd rather have a heart-to-heart chat with her big sister--they've hardly interacted since her return, almost as if their parents are keeping the impressionable younger girl from her corruptive influence--but Mary's interest is more piqued by the absence of jealousy on Edith's face as she continues downstairs without a glimmer of her usual resentment at being the overlooked middle child. In fact, her lips twist in the same self-satisfied smirk Mary imagines Edith must have worn as she penned her letter about dear Cousin Matthew.

"You're losing your edge," Edith says, pausing on the last red-carpeted step, her hand resting on the
final of the banister, as if to diminish the advantage of height Mary has over her. "A theatre ticket fell out of your walking jacket pocket? Really, Mary? Lucky for you, Mama was distracted by the hope that you've seen the error of your ways. I, on the other hand, saw the boy from the telegraph office deliver that." She nods at Mary's fist clutching the crumpled telegram. "And the other one yesterday."

A glance at Carson reveals him to blanche as he sidles past the girls toward the servants' staircase, presumably to give Mama's hat to O'Brien. Mary rolls her eyes and steps around Edith to mount the steps.

"Who's sending you telegrams?" Edith calls after her.

Mary stops on the first landing to peer down over the carved railing at her. "Believe it or not, Edith, some of us correspond with people who aren't our sisters. Much as I appreciated the charming letter you were so good as to send me."

"I imagine a newspaper magnate doesn't have much room in his schedule for lengthier correspondence than a telegram."

Bristling, Mary tries to convince herself the reaction is due to Edith's having guessed the author of the telegram, and not that she feels slighted by Richard's abrupt form of communication. A letter would be too slow, and Downton's lack of telephone leaves no other option.

"I do wish you'd stop boring me and come to the point," Mary says; Edith, like a cat, always did like to play with her food. "Which, presumably, is that you intend to tell on me. Just like when we were children, and your greatest delight was in getting me in trouble."

"On the contrary," Edith replies. "I think you're doing quite an admirable job getting yourself in trouble without my interference."

Mary watches from above as Edith turns and walks smugly across the hall; when she's just passed beneath the archway to the saloon, Mary calls out, "It's from Diana Manners. She remembered you to me the other night--as the débutante who attended Lady Sheffield's charity ball as the Ugly Duckling."

Without waiting to see Edith's stricken expression, Mary turns and resumes climbing the stairs, unfolding the crumpled telegram that is not, of course, from Diana Manners.

MARY. STOP. SKETCH EDITOR FINISHED. SEE TOMORROW'S DAILY TELEGRAM. STOP. RICHARD.

Outside her bedroom door, one hand on the knob, she re-reads Richard's telegram, trying to work out the reason why her stomach has tied itself into a knot. Is it because she is disappointed in this businesslike follow-up to yesterday's missive? Or because this is not at all what she'd imagined when he told her he would--how had he put it?--make The Sketch's editor "aware of his feelings" about their photograph being disseminated to the masses as something depicting scandalous behaviour?

Not that she's entirely sure what this means. What has Richard finished? The man's career? His reputation? Either seems rather an extreme reaction.

On the other hand, her family seem to believe her reputation may be finished.
Just as she turns the doorknob, she glimpses Mama's bedroom door down the hallway swing open.

"Mary!" Sybil stage-whispers, stepping out and quietly shutting the door behind her before fluttering over the carpet toward Mary, a newspaper to her chest.

"That was a short chat," Mary says, tucking the telegram into her pocket and turning to Sybil, eyebrows raised. "I apologise for weighing so heavily on her heart that she hasn't room to be more concerned with you."

"I think she had quite a lot to say, actually--which is why I convinced her she looked tired and should have a rest before dinner."

Sybil's blue eyes sparkle conspiratorially, and a throbbing in her temples which Mary was not till now aware of ebbs as the taut lines of her face relax into a small smile.

"It's the most likely outcome of tea with Granny."

"I hope you're not too tired for a chat with me." A tinge of uncertainty colours Sybil's breathy girlish voice.

"Never for you, darling." Mary slips an arm around her little sister's shoulders as she guides her into the bedroom.

"Good," says Sybil as they enter, uncurling the newspaper she clutches to her chest to reveal yesterday's Sketch, "because I sneaked this from Mama’s dressing room. I thought you might want it for your treasure box. To go with your theatre ticket."

Leaning back against her bedroom door to shut it, Mary contemplates for a moment the difference between her two sisters: Sybil, in whom there is no guile, accepting her words at face value, while shrewd Edith cannot be fooled, only hurt.

"I haven't kept a treasure box since I was your age," Mary says, "and even if I had, why would I want to fill it with mementos of the night that got me into the worst trouble of my life?"

"Because it was worth it," says Sybil, her voice and eyes rich with earnestness. "Wasn't it? For one night, you chose exactly what you wanted to do and who you did it with. When else have you ever been so free?"

Home was a cage, Mary told Aunt Rosamund, and the words swell in her throat again now. I wanted to be free. She reaches out her hands and presses the corners of The Sketch gingerly between her fingertips. I hope it was worth it, Rosamund replied, doubtfully as Sybil is certain. Mary doesn't know what answer to give either of them. Or herself. Was one night of freedom worth being imprisoned in her own home, shackled by her parents' disappointment?

"I don’t really look as if I wanted to be at the Cave of the Golden Calf, there, do I?"

"You do look rather like a fish out of water," Sybil says, laughing softly, though she becomes serious again, giving Mary's elbow a little squeeze. "Even things we want to do can be a little frightening at first. And I've never known you to be afraid of anything for longer than a moment. I'm sure as soon as that camera flashed, you found your courage."

Yes, in a cocktail glass, Mary thinks, but deems sixteen too young to introduce sweet Sybil to the
"Heavens, you make me sound like one of your suffragettes," she says, laughing a little as she pushes off the door and steps further into the room. She stops in front of her dressing table but doesn't sit after she places The Sketch on the tabletop, only inclines her head slightly so she can see her face as she carefully draws the pins from her hat. Behind her own reflection, Sybil takes a seat at the foot of the bed, her ankles crossing prettily where they dangle over the edge. "Although I did discuss inheritance laws with the prime minister's son. It seemed everyone I met at the Cave is a feminist. Including Sir Richard. He tells me he personally espouses the views published in Lady Fair."

"Does that mean from now on I'll have to fight you over who gets to read the latest edition?" Sybil leans to hug the bedpost. Her eyes shine in a way that Mary is intimately familiar with: she'll be peppered with questions on this subject, and she will answer--eventually. For now, she's much too tired to discuss politics. Even with Sybil.

She removes her hat, tossing it haphazardly onto the settee as she turns to face Sybil properly. "Thanks to you, I wasn't quite the fish out of water I might have been."

"Thanks to me?"

As Mary draws near, remembering how often she'd crept up beside the basinet and stood on tip-toe to stroke her sleeping baby sister's plump, rosy cheek. Sybil is almost a woman now, and beautiful, but her face still retains the roundness that belies her youth, though now instead of touching her cheek, Mary settles for stroking the thick dark curls that spill over her shoulders.

"You're the one who made me learn the Argentine tango with you."

"You danced the tango?" Laughing, Sybil hops from the bed, clapping her hands before grasping Mary's. "With Sir Richard?"

Mary rolls her eyes, but squeezes Sybil's fingertips before pulling her hands away. "Yes, with Sir Richard."

"Oh, I wish I could have been there with you," Sybil says, doing a little tango step over to the dressing table. "Promise me you'll never go to London and have so much fun without me again."

"I think Papa intends to make that a very easy promise to keep."

Sybil takes up the newspaper and studies the picture for a moment. "Does Sir Richard dance as handsomely as he looks?"

Mary turns away as heat prickles up her neck and into her face as her mind is flooded with both images and remembered touches of being swept with Richard's sure arm and fluid movements across the dance floor. She presses her cool fingertips to her skin as if doing so will stop the flush.

"Not you, too? Granny kept on about his bone structure. I think she's half-in love with him herself."

"And what about you?"

Mary glances over her shoulder and meets Sybil's gaze with an arched eyebrow.
"All right then," Sybil says, "what about him?"

Slowly, Mary turns fully around. "Do you mean did Sir Richard fall in love with me? In the course of three days?"

Sybil returns her attention to the The Sketch. After a moment, she says, "Look at his face, Mary," and holds it out to her.

Though Mary rolls her eyes again, she is, nevertheless, intrigued by whatever it is Sybil sees--or thinks she sees--in the newspaper picture, and considers it more closely herself. It's all she can do to contain a gasp as she notices Richard's expression for the first time. While she gapes up at the nightclub's sign, his gaze is entirely on her, the shadowy quality of the photograph failing to obscure that it's the same way he looked at her when he held her too long after their dance. When she asked why he kissed her on the cheek but not her lips. Warmth pulls at her belly, not unlike what she experienced as she sipped her before-dinner cocktail, as Granny's voice crackles through her memory about men and their passions.

I want to be with you, he told her in his telegram. I always get what I want.

The Sketch rustles as her hands begin to tremble, and she replaces it on her writing table, photograph side down. She stands chafing her thumbs over the outer edges of her curled index fingers as she looks into her dressing table mirror again.

"Perhaps he did--if love means finishing a man to protect a lady's reputation."

"What are you talking about?"

Mary lets out her breath, slowly, as she sinks down onto her dressing table bench. She doesn't know. She doesn't know if Richard did it for her, or for himself. Or what he did at all.

"We'll find out in tomorrow's Telegram."

"No we won't," Sybil says. "Papa cancelled his subscription."

In the mirror, Mary watches her jaw muscle work beneath her pale skin. "Of course he did."

As she slumps to rest her chin on her hands, Sybil squeezes her shoulder, the smile in her voice drawing Mary's brown eyes up to the gleaming blue pair. "Don't worry! We're bright, modern women. I'm sure we can find a way to read a forbidden newspaper!"

Mary smiles wanly at her pale reflection. "Sir Richard sells a million copies of the Telegram every day. I have bigger fish to fry than finding one of them."
The Wedding

Chapter Summary

The engagement that first brought Mary and Richard together leads to a wedding that throws them together again--this time, under the vigilant eyes of her parents...and a sister intent on watching Mary get herself in even deeper trouble.

October, 1912

"Don't turn around," Aunt Rosamund whispers to Mary as they sit on the hard pew of St Margaret's, waiting for Agnes Belcher's wedding to begin, "but I've just spied Sir Richard across the aisle." When this fails to elicit a response from her niece, she leans closer, and increases her volume to a low murmur the rest of the family to Mary's right are sure to hear. "Staring at you. Did you know he'd be here?"

Careful not to let her eyes stray even the slightest bit from the altar flowers--lilies in bridal white nestled alongside autumnal red and orange roses in boughs of greenery, which rival Mama's for splendour--Mary replies, "He attended Agnes' engagement ball. It only follows that he'd be a guest at the wedding, as well."

In fact she did know, thanks to one of several telegrams Carson smuggled to her over the course of the past month: MARY STOP VERY MUCH LOOKING FORWARD TO SEEING YOU AT BELCHER WEDDING SHOULD YOUR GAOLERS GRANT PAROLE FOR THE BLESSED OCCASION STOP RICHARD

Even now she smirks at the words that reside in her treasure box, along with the other telegrams from him, her ticket stub from Pygmalion, and the photograph from The Sketch, though she knows them by heart and knows she shouldn't. Nor should she be impressed with his persistence in the face of only receiving one reply from her in all that time. But Richard Carlisle always gets what he wants, doesn't he? Or so he says.

The trumpeting blast of the organ compels the congregation to stand for the wedding party's procession down the centre aisle of the chapel. Agnes' three younger sisters lead the way as bridesmaids, dressed in coral gowns and hats trimmed with flowers that match their trailing bouquets of tiger lilies and white roses. A small girl follows, littering the white marble floor with petals, but Mary's eyes pass over her, drawn across the aisle by Richard's. The intensity of his stare from the sharp chiselled lines of his face certainly communicates that the sentiment expressed in that first telegram remains unchanged, that he takes her lack of response to his messages for lack of freedom to answer, not lack of desire. To her chagrin, Mary allows his blue eyes to outshine Agnes as she passes by in all her bridal radiance, and wishes it were the former, and not the latter, that were true.

Piety doesn't rank high on the list of qualities Mary would ascribe to herself--unlike Edith, sat between her and Mama, who tours country churches for pleasure and looks quite transported to planes of spiritual delight as the canon intones the age-old words about marriage being symbolic of the mystical union between Christ and his Church. Nevertheless, Mary's ears prick to the part about the institution having been ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication. They so recall
Granny's words about the female passions that they put an effective stop to thoughts pertaining to how dashing Richard looks in his dark morning coat, grey pinstriped trousers, striped ascot, and black silk top hat, the gleaming watch chain draped over his waistcoat accentuating the trimness of his figure, and of what an elegant pair they would make together, she a narrow, angled silhouette in her dark blue frock, her pale complexion framed by the neat square neckline and picture hat piled high with peacock feathers. In fact they had, already, made an elegant pair--on the front of The Sketch.

Or perhaps it is the tabloid newspaper, and not the Book of Common Prayer, that brings this train of thought careening to a halt. Would Richard appreciate the irony? Likely not, given how he went to all the trouble of ruining that very newspaper's editor for her.

It was all over the Telegram--and even, eventually, the Times, so that Mary no longer had to feign an interest in mending fences at Crawley House so she could get a glimpse of Richard's Liberally-slanted newspaper--as over the better part of September the story unfolded of Mr Ingram's intimacy with an underground London society far more scandalous than the set of aristocrats and intellectuals, Diana Manners included, who assembled at the Cave of the Golden Calf to tipple cocktails and dance the Argentine tango. Though as far as her mother and grandmother are concerned, it's all part of the same world inhabited by newspaper men. "That tells us all we need to know of Sir Richard's breeding," Granny said with a sniff of her handkerchief, "no matter what his cheekbones claim. And to think he dragged you into one of those dens of iniquity."

Though Mary's experience does not incline her toward the belief that Richard's chief iniquity is fornication--she bows her head to hide beneath the wide brim of her hat as her cheeks warm with the memory of the soft touch of his lips on her skin and the warmth of his whisper, Dancing a tango with you is precisely the reason I only kissed your cheek--by no means does she view him as a paragon of virtue, either. Indeed, her family would probably be most relieved to know that this whole business with The Sketch has made her dubious about his ethics. Ingram's society gossip reporters--not Ingram himself--published a photograph which suggested a prominent public figure might be romantically linked with a member of the aristocracy, which resulted in Mary's social life being restricted; Richard had his reporters nose out Ingram's private affairs and destroyed him utterly.

None of this, however, prompts her to avoid his gaze when he catches her eye again as she files out of the pew behind her parents and sister, or stops her from giving him a small smile in return for the dimpled grin he flashes her--though it immediately falls again as he approaches her father.

"Lord Crawley?"

Papa draws up short, so that Mama bumps into him, knocking her hat askew on his shoulder as he recoils from the hand extended to him in greeting.

A twinge in Richard's cheek speaks to his awareness of his faux pas, yet he blunders on, full steam ahead, as if he hopes they somehow missed it. "Please allow me to intro introduce myself. I'm Sir Richard Carlisle--"

"Yes, I know who you are," Papa replies, his mouth a small tight circle in his broad face. "Though I believe you are somewhat mistaken."

Richard's smile hardly falters, though Mary notes the faint crease that forms between his pale brows as his eyes, so bright beneath the shadowing brim of his top hat, flick down to his own grey-gloved hand, which Papa has not bothered to take. "No…I had the pleasure of Lady Mary's company last month. And Lady Rosamund's," he adds, with a glance past Mary to where her aunt stands penned
in the pew by wedding guests locked in conversation at the end by the side aisle.

"He means his title," Rosamund says, quietly, though whether she looks more off put by Richard's mistake or Papa's rather graceless manner of pointing it out, Mary cannot say.

"Ah…" Lowering his proffered--and ignored--hand to his side, Richard rolls his shoulders back into a more erect posture and lifts his chin slightly, as if wishing to gain physical presence over the man who stands almost exactly at eye level to him. "Forgive me, Lord Grantham. I'm afraid I still make rather a hash of the intricacies of the peerage, from time to time."

"Good catch, Mary," Edith sneers through her teeth, looking back over her shoulder. "Or is it Lady Crawley?"

"Careful, dear, or I may introduce you as Lady Duckling."

Having fired her parting shot, Mary watches to see it hit the mark, Edith's reactionary face always so satisfying. But this time, as she turns away from the sight of the weak chin clenching beneath the colorless line of thin lips to give Richard a reassuring smile, she hears the whisper of his words from that first night they met. We are not so very different, you and I.

"Sir Richard," she says, in more unsteady tones than she would like, "this is my mother, Lady Grantham, and my sister, Lady Edith."

Though Edith extends her hand readily enough, keen to make a good impression no matter upon whom, she withers as Richard shakes it whilst inquiring of Mary, "I recall you mentioned another sister?" His eyes twinkle as if to say, The one who taught you to tango.

"Lady Sybil," Mama supplies. "She's at home. She won't make her public début for some time yet."

"I shall look forward to meeting her when she does," says Richard, oblivious to--or, more likely, not caring for--the round-eyed looks Mary's parents trade.

Perhaps put at ease by the small talk, he relaxes his posture, slipping one hand into his pocket and resting the other on the end of the pew--unfortunately, crushing the floral swag with his hip as he leans into it, bits of orange petals and evergreen clinging to the tails of his morning jacket. He speaks in deep yet focused tones that resonate in the high-ceilinged chapel over the rumbling conversations of the wedding guests making their way toward the three sets of doors at the back of the church.

"I don't know which papers you and Lady Grantham take--my paper, the Daily Telegram, covered the story first, though eventually the Times picked it up. After it was old news."

He glances sidelong, in polite acknowledgment of the other members of the family privy to, but not part of, the conversation, again touching Mary's gaze conspiratorially; the corners of his mouth curve upward in a smirk which her own twitch to mirror. Richard knows very well what papers Papa reads. She went to rather a lot of trouble to call on her cousins so that she could contrive to have Matthew walk her home--by way of the village, of course--so she could pop in the telegraph office with the express purpose of informing Richard.

PAPA CANCELED TELEGRAM SUBSCRIPTION STOP M CRAWLEY

Richard's reply, though succinct, impressed Mary for how clearly she could hear his voice in the words delivered to her over hundreds of miles of cable:
Even now she must press her fingertips to her lips to suppress the rising laugh. Looking away toward the doors and the men and women exiting through them for the wedding breakfast, she feigns boredom.

"Suffice it to say," Richard goes on, "the editor of The Sketch will never again publish a word, let alone a photograph, to compromise Lady Mary's virtue."

"No, indeed he won't," Papa replies through the small o of his lips, "for the editor of the Telegram will never again place Lady Mary's virtue in the position where it may be compromised."

"Robert," Mama warns through teeth bared in a tremulous smile, clutching at his sleeve. For a moment he peers coldly at Papa through the narrowed slits of his eyes beneath an imposing brow. Then, abruptly, his sharp features soften into an expression that matches his mollifying words.

"Never having been a father myself, I cannot presume quite the protective instinct you must have for Lady Mary. But I assure you, Lord Grantham," he says, tugging at the bottom of his waistcoat as he straightens up, then, glancing down, brushes the bits of petals and greenery from his tailcoat, "I hold the reputations of those with whom I associate as highly as I regard my own. You won't find any tawdry gossip about me in the papers."

"That's not such a feat when you publish the papers, surely?"

"My competitors are nearly as ruthless as I am when it comes to stockpiling ammunition against people. Not quite as ruthless, of course," Richard adds, "or I wouldn't be the best in the business. I live my life with the goal of not giving them any."

Papa snorts, but Mama leans over his shoulder to say, "Thank you Sir Richard. Lord Grantham and I appreciate your apology."

"Oh this isn't an apology, Lady Grantham. Why should it be, when Lady Mary and I have done nothing wrong?" Richard's eyes hold Mary's as he talks over her parents' spluttering. "The only thing I'm sorry about that evening with your daughter is that some enterprising member of the press thought he'd sell a few more papers by misrepresenting the truth. And I certainly can't make apologies for other men, can I? Only punish them. Which I have done."

Mary doesn't hear whatever Papa says in retort, for the pounding of her blood in her ears as she considers the two men before her: the one who talks of defending her virtue, and the other who actually did it. She's still not entirely certain that Mr Ingram deserved Richard's swift hand of justice, but at least he fought for her, while Papa only saw her as the person who deserved punishment.

"The truth," Richard says in response to whatever Papa has said before, though his gaze is all for her, "is that I think very highly of Lady Mary, and have never had a more gracious and engaging companion for a night out. And that I hope she will reserve a waltz for me at the ball tonight. At Claridge's, correct?"

Mary nods. "I think I have one or two spaces left on my card." In fact all of them were open, but Richard needn't know that. Or Edith.
"Good." Richard touches the brim of his top hat. "Then I'll bid you all a pleasant time at breakfast."

"You aren't attending the reception yourself, Sir Richard?" Aunt Rosamund asks.

"The presses don't stop for weddings, I'm afraid, and it is a weekday. I've got to get back to the office for a few hours."

As Richard strides off, caught at the doors by some acquaintance or other who greets him with a hearty handshake, Papa turns to Mary and makes a sound of disgust. "Back to the office? Really, Mary, you wish to spend another evening with a man like that?"

"I think Cousin Matthew works in an office, doesn't he?"

"I expect it's not a third as large, either," adds Aunt Rosamund as Papa stands aside for the ladies to finally exit their pew. "And I'd be careful crossing a man like Sir Richard. You heard what he said about punishment, Robbie dear."

She uses the old nickname, reserved for the express purpose of needling her younger brother, but Papa doesn't react.

"On the contrary, Ros," he says, looking pleased as she cringes. "You heard what he said about the reputations of those with whom he associates. Our family are quite safe, if he means to use us to climb up the social ladder."

As they make their way up the aisle, Papa falling into step behind the rest of the family, he adds, "Besides, he couldn't find anything in my life that would make a scintillating newspaper headline."

Mary smirks. "Then it would seem you've something in common with him."

~*~

The mirror reflects two pairs of eyebrows, one dark, the other fair, knit together to inspect Mary's coiffure. Anna attempted the style for the first time tonight, a Grecian-inspired one, to complement the flowing gown of grey-blue chiffon.

She hmms, her brow furrowing deeper as she leans over Mary's shoulder to reach for another pin from the dressing table, and sets to work smoothing a section of rolled hair that doesn't quite meet with her satisfaction.

"It's a good job you're here," Mary tells her, meeting Anna's eyes briefly in the mirror. "Last time I had to suffer Aunt Rosamund's maid, Grace. She could scarcely plait my hair for bed, much less artfully arrange a plume. I must have looked a fright at the theatre."

"Maybe that was why they wanted your photograph for The Sketch, Mary," says Edith from the bench at the foot of the bed. "It wasn't that you were out unchaperoned, but that you were out with undressed hair."

"What a pity you weren't along to detract from my faux pas."

A glance in the mirror shows Edith sucking in her lower lip before she retorts, "You do realise Anna arranges my hair, too."
"Of course, but even the most skilled hairdresser must have something to work with." Mary swings her gaze back to her own reflection, turning her head this way and that to catch all the angles of the three-sided mirror to study Anna's work. She nods, pleased, and hands Anna her pearl necklace to fasten about her. "I hope you don't mind being dragged across the country to see to it I look presentable at Agnes Belcher's wedding."

"It's almost like being on holiday," Anna replies with her characteristic cheerfulness—and something more; she bites her lower lip as if to stop her lips curving mischievously, but she can't keep the gleam from her eyes as she adds in a lower tone, "Except for sharing a room with Miss O'Brien."

"I quite sympathise with you there," Mary says, putting in her pearl earrings. 

"Has it ever occurred to you that your strategy of insulting me may be a little flawed?" Edith asks, pretending to be concerned with the lay of her salmon coloured skirt, though Mary knows Edith only averts her gaze when she's really upset. "If my presence vexes you so much, I'm not about to give you the relief of depriving you of it."

No sooner has she made this declaration than the bedroom door creaks open on its hinges and Mama peers around it, smiling softly at Edith as she says, "May I have a moment with your sister?"

"When isn't it a moment with Mary?" Edith mutters with a sigh as she gets up to obey. 

In the mirror, Mary watches Mama track Edith with a sad smile as she flaps across the room, head bent, and catches her hand as she shoves out the door. "Anna's arranged your hair so becomingly tonight, darling."

It's the worst compliment she could have paid Edith, in light of the preceding conversation; even Mary feels the prickle of shame at the back of her neck as her sister sweeps out of the room, undoubtly biting back tears. As she has before so many balls. Though the wide-eyed, open-mouthed expression of bewilderment as Mama turns to watch Edith scurry down the hallway only drives home how little understood each of the Ladies Crawley are by their parents, and how much they each stand to lose as a result.

None more than she. 

In tones as arch as the eyebrows she twitches at Mama's reflection in the mirror, Mary asks, "Come to tell me Papa's changed his mind about the ball and intends to lock me in the attic with the birds and mice instead?"

"He tried to," Mama drawls, the corners of her mouth twitching as the door clicks gently shut behind Anna, "but I convinced him a fairy godmother was liable to come to your aid and undermine his plans to keep you from Sir Richard."

"Do I need a fairy godmother to aid me when I've already promised him a dance? Though I am glad you've decided to cast Sir Richard as Prince Charming."

The smile falls as Mama assumes the bench where Edith formerly presided. "He was hardly charming this morning, when he refused to admit there was anything wrong in his behaviour."

"I don't think it's that he won't admit it so much as he truly believes there's no wrong to admit to."

"I suppose he does have his own brand of chivalry," Mama grudgingly admits.
Her bright eyes follow the movement of Mary's hand as she reaches for her perfume bottle. Dabbing the sweet floral scent onto her wrists and throat and behind her ears, Mary can't help but wonder whether Richard caught the fragrance when they danced at the Cave, or when he kissed her cheek; if her scent clung to his shoulder where her hand rested on his dinner jacket or to the skin of his palm where his pulse beat against hers...or to his memory, keeping that night with her present in his thoughts during the nights passed apart since then.

"And he seems to truly admire you."

Mary sets down her perfume bottle on the glass tabletop and swivels on the bench to look at her mother directly. "Don't sound so surprised."

"Of course I'm not surprised. And if you genuinely admire Sir Richard in return, and are seriously considering a future with this man..."

The words are conciliatory, almost as if she's beginning to accept her daughter's choice--not that Mary knows herself whether she's really chosen Richard--though Mama's expression is hidden for a moment as she bends to push herself up from the bench. When she straightens up, Mary is grateful for her practiced composure which stops her from startling at how lined her mother's face is, how much her age she looks.

And how wise.

"Mary, you must know there's more to bridging the gap between classes than learning the proper way to address aristocrats."

"You'd know."

"Yes. I would," Mama replies, sharply, though Mary didn't mean it with her usual irony. Misunderstanding yet again. "I don't want to see you unhappy. Or hurt."

As her mother's hand stretches out to touch her shoulder, Mary unfolds like a knife from her dressing table bench, catching up her gloves and handbag. "Too late for that, I'm afraid."

She tries to escape the room, but Mama's voice catches her before she can.

"And I don't want you to make a choice you may come to regret later just to hurt your father now."
The Dance

Chapter Summary

Richard and Mary dance around the truth...and find certain revelations shocking, indeed.

The soft strains of a string quartet drift down the sweeping staircase into the front hall of Claridge's Hotel as Mary enters with her family, the music reverberating through the columned archways and off the high tray ceilings and expanse of black and white marble floor. The tiles are polished to such a high gloss that they appear wet, and she catches herself taking hesitant steps across it, fearful of a humiliating fall in front of the other wedding guests as if she were a débutante at her first ball. Nerves do not become you, she thinks, catching sight of her reflection in the mirror that looms down from above the fireplace at one end of the hall. When a footman stops them to take Mama's fur stole and Papa's top hat, Mary stands up straighter, squaring her shoulders as if to shed unflattering attitude along with her own wrap.

She's not a deb now, she reminds herself, mounting the staircase to the ballroom after her parents, and even when she was, she never approached a ball with any such air of trepidation. She'll leave that to Edith, who plays the role with more aplomb than any of Diana Manners' walk-on parts on the theatre stage. Mary smirks as a sidelong glance reveals her sister to be holding her breath and focusing round eyes on the carpeted steps before her, her gloved fingers clutching the cherry railing of the wrought iron banister as if to a bit of driftwood used to keep herself afloat in the icy North Atlantic amidst the wreckage of the Titanic.

Almost at once, however, Mary regrets choosing so macabre a metaphor as the ill-fated ocean liner. A chill shudders down her spine, her heart quickens in her chest, and her knees seem likely to buckle beneath her weight as the green walls of the ballroom loom over the approaching top of the staircase. Not because her feminine sensibilities are so delicate that she finds the whole notion of shipwrecks ghastly, but because she can almost feel cold spectral fingertips at her elbow.

Patrick's fingers.

Which were always sure to curl around her hand and lead her out in the first dance of the evening. Which she always knew would someday slip a golden band onto the fourth finger of her left hand.

Which turned blue beneath the sodden kid of his gloves and froze in the shape of claws as he clung for dear life to some bit from a flooded-out room, much like this, of the unsinkable ship.

"Mary?"

She doesn't realise she halted her ascent up the steps, dropping behind the rest of the family and grasping hold of the railing, till Mama calls down to her from the landing.

"Darling, are you all right? You've gone so pale."

The haze makes Mary slow to respond, and Edith takes advantage of her lapse. "Perhaps she's realised what the two waltzes she promised to that horrible newspaperman will do to her reputation."
"At least I have a reputation." Mary snaps out of her stupor and continues her climb up the stairs. "And somebody who wants to dance with me."

"That will quite do," says Papa, eying her as she sidesteps her parents to slip ahead of them.

It was that certainty, she realises, that set her apart from the other débutantes. She cared what others thought of her, certainly, but she never worried about it, because the future that stretched out before her was the same as the life she lived up until that point. She knew who her husband would be. Where her home would be. What her title would be. None of the others did, and they trembled in their own uncertainty as well as in the shadow she cast as she swept into their ballrooms with all the radiance due the someday Countess of Grantham.

Now, all the insecurities she thought herself above at eighteen assault her, while the girls who quaked in their dancing shoes at their coming out balls bask in the light of suitors' adoring gazes and the glitter of engagement rings.

But, as Mary steps between the pillars, off the marble tiles and onto the plush red carpet of the foyer where guests mingle sipping cocktails beneath a cupola that reflects the dozens of electric light fixtures rather than the starry sky beyond, she remembers that one gaze here is for her.

All for her.

Ready to meet hers the moment her eyes drift down from the trompe l'oeil and sweep across the foyer toward the arched entryway to the ballroom, where Richard leans his shoulder against a fluted column and swirls the contents of a martini glass like liquid gold. His blue eyes hold hers unwaveringly as he raises the glass to his lips, tilting his head back just slightly as he drains it so that Mary can see the roll of his throat above his collar when he swallows, then sets it down empty on a passing tray without so much as a glance for the footman who carries it. Nor does she blink as she watches his fluid movements; he pushes off the pillar, tugging at the crisp white cuffs beneath the sleeves of his tailcoat as he weaves his way through the maze of wedding guests toward her with an effortless bearing that indicates he is so much more at ease with himself--and with her--than his attempts at charming her parents that morning would lead anyone to believe.

Whatever reservations Mama might have stirred with her speech about crossing the social divide seem unimportant as Mary's heart stills and her breaths come slower and steadier--though she's sure this is the opposite reaction to what Agnes and Diana and the other silly debs would describe happening when a handsome man catches a girl's eye from across a crowded room--and she focuses on the one certainty she has in her life: that right now, this man wants to waltz with her.

"Lady Mary." Richard scarcely stands still to greet her before he extends his gloved hand, palm up. "I hope you won't object to me claiming my promised waltz straight away?"

She quirks an eyebrow. "Waiting isn't your forte, is it?" she says, even as she places her hand in his. "I suppose it can't be, in your line of work."

His fingers close around hers with such a firm grip that Mary cannot be certain whether it is in response to her barb, or simply because he has such large, strong hands. The hands of a man who has caught hold of the edge of a dream and never let go till he clawed his way to the top of it.

"On the contrary. I've been waiting for this dance with you since last May."
"But we danced in September."

"Not a waltz."

Mary turns this over in her mind as he leads her back the way he came through the foyer. Between it and the ballroom lies a wide tiled hallway, flanked on either side by towering columns. The space bustles with footmen and waiters navigating trays of champagne and hors d'œuvre around other couples on their way to the ballroom, and reminds her more of crossing a busy city lane than a hallway.

With a flick of his fingers as they step out onto the dance floor, Richard spins her about to face him, his other hand settling between her shoulder blades as her hand finds his shoulder just in time to fall in step with the music.

"You prefer a waltz to a tango?" Mary asks, picking up the earlier thread of conversation.

"Call me old-fashioned."

Dimples and charm, she thinks as she did across a tea table at the Ritz, but she maintains her composure. "No."

"No?"

"I don't think you'd take old-fashioned as a compliment. You, with your double-octuple newspaper press."

As Richard holds her a little closer to him than is strictly appropriate for a partner who is not her fiancé, Mary feels the slight swell of his chest against the low-cut organza bodice of her evening gown; clearly, her teasing remark chuffs him as much as if she paid him a personal compliment.

"Romantic, then." His thumb chafes her knuckles through the layers of their dancing gloves, seemingly coaxing her pulse to quicken where before his presence steadied.

"My," she says, slowly, refusing to allow herself to become a simpering thing, when Richard is so obviously pleased by her own style of flirtation. "Perhaps I do believe your claim that your competitors wouldn't find a whiff of scandal about you."

"You should always believe me."

He speaks the words as tightly as the grasp of his fingers around her hand and his palm at her back suddenly become, as if she'd said something deeply offensive. But one blink and any harshness she imagines to have gripped Richard's features vanishes as his face relaxes into a polite smile.

"The ceremony this morning was nice, as far as weddings go. And so far I'm quite enjoying the ball. How was the breakfast?"

"It was..." Mary falters, as much rattled by the abrupt shifts in his mood as by the mere idea that their conversation has been, for the first time, reduced to polite small-talk. "...a wedding breakfast."

"Was it held in the foyer?" Richard asks with a gesture of their clasped hands toward the columns at the open room beyond. "How very convenient for the wedding guests, to be able to stay at the same venue where the festivities are held. Claridge's is a very comfortable and modern hotel, I've found. I
make it a habit never to stay anywhere that doesn't have lifts and en suite bathrooms."

"Papa loathes hotels," she says. "We're staying with Aunt Rosamund."

Richard leans back from her a little, looking at her askance. "I suppose that's to be expected from a man who won't have a telephone installed in his estate."

"Yes, but at least he knows that a discourse on modern plumbing hardly constitutes suitable ballroom conversation."

Frowning again, Richard's gaze drifts from hers, sweeping the ballroom. "I take it that all this is rather more bourgeois than the affair you imagine your own wedding will be?"

Mary didn't think the discussion topics could take any more surprising turns than en suite bathrooms, but apparently she was wrong.

"Do I strike you as the type of girl who sits around dreaming of her wedding day?"

Richard's eyes swing back to hers, the colour seeming to brighten as the amused glint returns. "I wasn't aware that was a type. I thought it was simply a female characteristic."

"And you call yourself a feminist."

"Isn't that all women like you are raised for? To marry your cousins and keep your crumbling estates and dwindling fortunes in the family?"

At first Mary thinks he means to get a rise out of her--and that he has succeeded, as the heat races from her neck up into her high cheekbones--but the hot words cool on her tongue as she realises that the expression on his face is not antagonistic. It's the words themselves, not his tone, that burn her, and the bald, unadorned truth behind them, which has become all too plain to her in recent weeks.

"Then surely you see why I don't romanticise it?"

Richard shrugs slightly, acknowledging--but not conceding--her point. "Lady Agnes seems to have got her happily ever after, hasn't she?"

Mary follows his gaze to the bride, radiant in her ivory gown, the train caught up elegantly around her arm as she waltzes at the centre of the floor with her new husband. "I'll give you happily, but it's rather soon for ever after, don't you think? Anyway, they're not country people."

"But Sir Charles has his country house."

"I suppose what I mean to say is that there was always an expectation that my marriage would be a local affair. A ceremony at our parish, then back home for breakfast and the ball."

Richard looks dubious. "That sounds a modest affair for an earl's daughter."

"Perhaps--to the type of person who expects his accommodations to include lifts and en suites. But for me..." Mary refrains from sighing, though she can't stop herself from saying, when he prompts her with a gentle squeeze of her hand to go on, "it would be rather like being the queen."

For the first time in her life she consciously imagines it: the ride in the closed carriage from the big
house down through the high street of the village...the stone buildings all hung with bunting...the
townsfolk leaning out windows and standing on porches to catch a glimpse of the future Countess of
Grantham in her wedding gown...their children chasing them on foot to the church waving streamers
of ribbons.

Shaking herself, she looks up at Richard, and says, "I expect that all sounds benevolent and
paternalistic to a self-made man."

"A bit," he replies, once again with no malice. "But I think you suffer as much for it as any of the
villagers. You, with a fiancé you couldn't even bring yourself to properly mourn. It's never occurred
to you that you might marry for love, has it?"

Mary might have halted right there in the middle of the floor if the music didn't end at that moment.
As it is she feels the swish of her hem about her ankles as they stop dancing, but has a sensation that
Richard continues to twirl her as she looks up at him and realises that his expression as he watches
her is the same as in The Sketch, in which Sybil read love. Nothing must be read here; he has
practically declared himself--

The sound of a man's throat being cleared nearby makes her step back, Richard's hand sliding from
her back, but she wishes she hadn't when she turns her head to see Papa glowering over his
champagne. Richard keeps hold of her hand, though, as he escorts her from the ballroom, squeezing
her fingertips as he inclines his head slightly to her father before dropping it to wave at someone he
knows. As he strides off with the other man in the direction of the gentlemen's smoking lounge,
Mary doesn't hear what Papa says to her--she can imagine it's about some acquaintance or other with
an eligible son Mama wants to introduce--but she chafes when his hand at her elbow turns her from
looking after Richard. Her gaoler, indeed.

"Oh, look," she says, digging her heels into the carpet and pulling her arm from his grasp, "Agnes is
disengaged at last. I simply must go and wish her joy."

Honeymoons and family jewels and setting up house have never been topics of interest for Mary, but
tonight the insipid chatter comes as a welcome relief. At least, for the five minutes it lasts before
Agnes is swept off to the ballroom again as the musicians strike up another waltz, and Edith slinks
alongside Mary in her place.

"Where's Sir Richard? I thought you promised him two waltzes, if you had room on your card?
Which, obviously, you do."

"Isn't it lucky I have a sister who can empathise with my plight?" says Mary, her gaze unwavering
from the direction the bride went.

Richard is right; Agnes does look happy with all of this. And it makes Mary wonder: would a
photograph would capture her face aglow with the wonder of entering into the new state of
matrimony if she wed in the same old church where she sat every Sunday? If she waltzed about the
same old ballroom where governesses had taught her to dance with Edith? If she married the same
old cousin whose death had not bereaved her of anything more personal than a title and an
inheritance which had never been hers?

"I couldn't help but notice when you were dancing that you didn't seem to be enjoying yourself very
much," Edith's voice slithers into Mary's mind, choking out her musings. "No doubt Sir Richard
waltzes as gracelessly as he speaks."
"I was quite engrossed in our conversation. Isn't that your idea of a fun time? Or is that touring country churches?"

Without a glance at Edith to see her reaction--the insults having sprung instinctively from her mouth, not uttered with any real malice or even an especial desire to wound--Mary flounces away.

It had not occurred to her that she might marry for love. For happiness, perhaps--but only the happiness her home could provide, with little thought of what happiness her husband might himself bring her. And though she talked with such bravado of only marrying Patrick if no one better came along, when one such opportunity actually came along, the Duke of Crowborough's failure to propose hurt less as a personal insult than the truth that lay behind it: that Papa did not mean to challenge the entail for her, even to better her prospects.

So absorbing are her thoughts--and, if she's honest, her vision is blurred by stinging tears--that she doesn't notice she's heading directly toward the smoking room until she blunders into Richard as he saunters out. His hands, no longer gloved, she notes, fly from his trouser pockets and catch her lightly by the shoulders.

"Sir Richard," she says, too brightly, with a smile as she blinks the last trace of emotion into submission. "That was a quick smoke."

The bitter earthy smell of his cigar clings to his jacket and wafts about him as he lowers his arms, his fingers slipping down over the sliver of skin bared by the slit sleeve of her gown. Normally smoke is an odour that turns her stomach, but now she finds it appealing because it so suits him. Mary's smile widens as all too easily she pictures him locked in conversation--perhaps even a quarrel--with acquaintances, his brow furrowed heavily above intense eyes peering even brighter blue than usual from the veil of cigar smoke.

"I was sure I'd lost you to newspaper scoops for the rest of the night."

Richard's fair eyebrows twitch higher on his forehead. "You promised me two waltzes. I can't imagine you thought I wouldn't hold you to it."

The authority he wields, even in flirtation, makes Mary's heart race with anticipation as he takes her hand and leads her back to the ballroom--claiming, rather than asking her to dance. However, as he faces her, falling into step together with the swinging string music, his features relax into an open expression that makes him look almost boyish.

"I confess I abandoned a potential headline to see who you'd partnered with in my absence."

"No one."

"I was pleased to see." Richard's hand slips down from between her shoulder blades to rest in the small of her back, his fingers and arm tightening about her with an air of possessiveness that belies the lightness with which he spoke the words. "Though perhaps I ought to do an investigative report as to why none of the other eligible bachelors asked you for a dance."

"Perhaps they all saw The Sketch and are afraid of what you do to your competition."

Surprisingly, Richard's deep chuckle does not rumble through her, but he says, in all earnestness, "In which case you oughtn't be sorry to be free of such feeble suitors. You strike me as the kind of woman who prefers a man who's willing to fight for her."
"Heavens." Mary manages a bland response despite Richard having hit rather near the mark. "You are a romantic."

"I thought balls were the appropriate venue for romanticism? But I'll be pragmatic if you think it's more fashionable."

"I don't know about that."

Richard draws back slightly from her, his eyes raking over her from head to foot. "I'd say you were quite the expert. And I've been remiss in my compliments."

A flush prickles at the low neckline of Mary's gown, where his unabashed gaze is fixed; instinctively she draws in a deep breath for control, but catches it again, only too aware of the swell of her pale breasts between the sheer v of blue-grey organza.

"Attempting to soften the blow of pragmatism with flattery?" she says. "I wouldn't have thought that was your style, Sir Richard."

He swings his gaze back up to meet hers. "I think the problem with the eligible young men, Lady Mary, is that they don't think you are an eligible young woman. They assume you mean to marry the new future Earl of Grantham. Only they don't know what we know."

"What we know?"

"Mr Matthew Crawley's recent engagement."

Mary almost falters a step, but maintains her composure; though as if having felt her hesitation, Richard's grip tightens on her hand.

"I know you've built an empire on being the first to know all the gossip, Sir Richard, but if Cousin Matthew was engaged, I assure you, I'd have beat you to the news."

"If he isn't engaged, then I didn't attend his engagement dinner last week."

This time, Mary cannot maintain the effortless steps of the simple waltz, stopping in the middle of the dance floor, her hand falling from his shoulder, her fingers a heavy, numb weight at the end of her hand. All of her feels that way.

"You're not joking."

"And you didn't know."

In another context, Mary would have taken some enjoyment in the newspaperman’s shocked realisation that he had not, in fact, broken the whole story.

"My God, Mary, I--"

"Excuse me."

She jerks away at the faintest touch of his fingertips on her elbow, spinning away from the twirling dancers. As she darts a path through the crowd of wedding guests milling about near the ballroom--
chaperoning--her eyes search wildly until they settle on Mama. Who, thankfully, stands guard duty alone, Papa nowhere about, her eyes already round with worry at whatever she imagines transpired between her daughter and Sir Richard.

"Did you know?" Mary asks breathlessly, almost toe to toe with her mother, her head tilted imposingly toward her. "About Cousin Matthew's engagement?"

Mama's mouth slowly forms a silent how that answers the question. She tries to take Mary's arm and lead her aside, but Mary shrugs off her mother's hand as she did Richard's.

Shouers--and every aging line of her face--sagging, Mama says, "Matthew spoke to your father before he went to London to propose."

"To get his blessing over the future Countess of Grantham?" Mary attempts a sarcastic puff of a laugh, but it lodges in her throat as a sob. Her knees feel weak again, for a very different reason to before, and she steps backward, hands reaching for the base of the column behind her. "Why didn't he tell me?"

"He intended to. Eventually."

"Before the banns were read in church? Before the wedding pictures appeared up the papers?" Mary whirls away from Mama. From the pity etched on her face as clearly as if the fine lines about her lips were actually the word scratched in English letters.

"He didn't know how...he wanted to protect you...

"I don't need a protector. I need someone to fight for me."

She claps a hand over her mouth, as though she's going to be sick--wouldn't that make an exciting sequel to her previous escapades in London?--and runs. Perhaps that will make the newspapers. She doesn't know whether the flashes in the corner of her eye are camera flashbulbs, or if they're the pendant light fixtures dangling from the ceiling. Doesn't know and doesn't care. Though if pressed, she leans toward caring. Hoping, even. That some society page will feature the headline Disinherited Lady Mary Crawley Succumbs to Fit of Hysteria over Earl's Betrayal.

Certainly she sounds hysterical by the time she flies through the set of French doors leading to a terrace off the corner of the foyer, which, thankfully, a couple vacates when she bursts outside, laughing or crying behind her hand. Or both.

Though after a moment, she's decidedly crying, the evening street scene a blur of light and moving colour as the automobiles pass beneath the street lamps, before she buries her face in her palms. Deep sobs that rack her slender frame, strangled cries that nonetheless deafen her ears to the opening of the door or the cuff of shoes on the concrete terrace floor. Though she is hardly surprised when she peers between her fingers to see Richard's familiar large hand resting on the railing, long fingers curled around a glass of brandy; the other reaches across his body, drawing a handkerchief from his pocket.

Mary lowers her gloved hands from her face, but does not look at him--as if she may yet hide that she has been weeping. But, as she thanks him quietly for the handkerchief, she finds herself in surprising command of her voice.

"I suppose you wouldn't believe me if I told you I was simply overcome with joy for Agnes?" she asks, dabbing at her eyes with the soft cotton.
"No."

The bluntness of Richard's reply makes her smile slightly. "But I hope you'll believe me when I say I truly never thought I'd be the first to break the news to you. My last intention was to hurt you."

So everybody claims...But Mary gives him a little nod, her eyes fixing on the shot glass he holds. "Is that for me?"

He presses it into her hand, and Mary drinks. She isn't sure whether it's the brandy or the brush of his fingertips against hers, but she feels sufficiently in command of herself—or numbed to the world—to ask the particulars.

"Who is she?"

"Miss Lavinia Swire."

Miss. Mary winces at the lack of title of any kind, though the blow is blunted by the absence of pity on Richard's face as he turns around, leaning back against the iron railing, the nighttime London street scene a backdrop behind him.

Another sip of brandy. "A friend of yours?"

"Her father. I stood up with him at his wedding, twenty years ago, now. He's given me legal counsel now and again."

A lawyer. Explains the connection with Matthew. Mary drains the glass. "What's she like?"

"Sweet, pretty, docile, obedient..." Richard ticks off the qualities as if reciting a *curriculum vitae*. "Yet also possessing a surprising fortitude and willingness to go to any lengths to help those she loves," he adds in a tone that hints at a story lurking beneath the surface, though he moves on, returning to glibness. "She'll make him a good wife."

Mary blinks, hard, against another sudden sting. Not so numb as she thought.

Obscured by her pooling tears, she can just make out Richard pushing off the rail, his shoes scraping as he takes the single step to close the gap between them.

"But she won't be half the countess you would."

The shot glass shatters on the ground as Mary forgets it, her hands flying up to cradle her face as she crumbles again. But Richard's fingers close around her wrists, drawing her hands back so she may not hide.

"Mary. There is more to you than that."

"Is there?"

She looks up at him, compelled by his voice, though her gaze stops at his mouth rather than his eyes. Before she can say which of them moves first, she tilts her face in toward his lips as Richard bends to brush them over hers, kissing her softly. His fingers still curl about her wrist as she raises her hand to rest against the warmth of his neck, his pulse beating strong above his collar.
After a moment, he draws back, and Mary meets his darkened eyes as he leans his cheek into her palm.

"A kiss on the cheek after a tango," she whispers.

"Why do you think I've been waiting to waltz with you?"

He kisses her again. The fingers of his other hand slide upward over her wrist, his palm pressed open to hers for a moment before he fits his fingers into the spaces between hers and curves them over her knuckles, drawing her body closer against him as his lips and tongue start to speak silently but clearly to her: yes, there is so much more to Lady Mary Crawley than entailed estates and heirs and their engagements.

And Edith. Mary glimpses her sister over Richard's shoulder, a shadow beneath the overhang of the doorway.

"Spying for *The Sketch*?" says Mary sharply as she breaks the kiss and steps away from Richard without a second glance. "Only you need a camera. You know what they say about how many words pictures are worth."

"Papa says it's time to go."

"You've only just arrived," Richard protests. Still, Mary doesn't look back, though Edith peers around the taller girl and raises her eyebrows at him.

"Yes, but she made rather good use of the time, wouldn't you agree?"

"If only all of us were so efficient," Mary says.

She knocks shoulders with her sister as she strides past, back into the hotel, the click of her heels on the black and white marble punctuating Edith's crisp words:

"Oh yes. You'll get into *quite* enough trouble without my help."
Mary confronts her father, and the truths the rest of the family reveal drive her to a spur
of the moment decision regarding Richard.

"I hope you girls will forgive me for taking you away from the ball at this unfashionable hour," says
Papa as he slides onto the leather seat after Edith, and Aunt Rosamund's chauffeur--or Richard
Carlisle's informant--shuts the door behind him.

"Afraid the Fiat's going to turn into a pumpkin?" Mary raises an eyebrow at her father from the seat
opposite his, pleased with the command she has over her own voice, which remains low and steady
amid the wild beat of her heart and the clamour in her head.

"I thought it best we take the early train home tomorrow," Papa replies, raising his voice over the
roar of the engine.

Mary smoothes her skirt where the organza became crumpled as she and Mama arranged themselves
on the narrow seat with some difficulty in their evening finery. "Yes, you have urgent matters to
attend. Tell me--will we have the honour of hosting the future Earl of Grantham's wedding at
Downton?"

"Mary!" Mama hisses at her in rebuke, but the bulging blue eyes go to Papa, as do Edith's brown
ones.

"Cousin Mathew is...getting married?" her tone is as genuinely stunned as Mary's was, though it is
the mid-sentence hitch in Edith's voice, the pause--no, the stumble--over the words, that really piques
Mary's interest. The poor girl actually hoped that all those walks through country churches with the
lawyer from Manchester might eventually end at the altar. Mary could almost feel sorry for her sister-
-if Edith weren't so keen on seeing her fall from grace.

Though Papa looks at her quite as if he has seen it, asking so tightly his lips scarcely seem to move,
"Where did you hear that?"

Mary lifts her chin. "Sir Richard."

"That meddling, presumptuous fool!" Papa scowls at the window as the car comes to a stop at an
intersection, as if he were driving it himself and jammed his foot on the brake in reaction to her.
When the motor rolls into motion again, he swings his head back to scowl at Mary, his voice raising
as he fumes, "Is Carlisle a newspaperman, or a private investigator?"

"I think generally they're one and the same. In this case, he's just a friend of the fiancée's father."

Mary presses her lips together against a smirk of satisfaction at how the cramped confines of the Fiat
force Papa into restraint. If she'd waited till they were back at Rosamund's, he'd be stomping about as
he spluttered. He deserves to squirm. She sits up a straighter in her seat, her chest swelling a little
with vindication.

A very little. No sooner as the thought flickered through her mind than her lungs close in on themselves again, her corset seeming unbearably tight, the boning pressing in on her like the bars of an iron medieval gibbet.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asks. "Afraid I'd be heartbroken that he chose some little nobody to be the Countess of Grantham over me?"

Out the corner of her eye, she catches Edith tucking her chin tight to her chest. Mary seems to be the only one who notices the younger girl's feelings--or even that she is here at all. She almost wishes someone would take notice of poor old Edith, who spent the night spying to distract herself from an empty dance card. But instead, Papa's pitying glances are all for her.

For Lady Mary Crawley, to whom Sir Richard Carlisle confessed to pining for a waltz for the better part of the past six months. And then he had kissed her.

"Perhaps not heartbroken," Papa interrupts the memory of Richard's arms around her, his mouth covering hers, as surely as Edith interrupted the actual kiss, "but hurt, yes. You've been spending so much time over at Crawley House lately, getting to know Matthew and Cousin Isobel, I thought--"

"You thought I'd been duly chastened and submitted to your indomitable will." Mary doesn't know whether to laugh because he has no notion of how mercenary her reasons have been for calling on the Crawleys, or to cry because he truly believes she could be hurt by Matthew for not giving her the inheritance her own father is too spineless to fight to make hers. "Are you sure it isn't your heart that's broken at Matthew's choice of bride?"

Papa's mouth falls open, his lips forming words but producing no sound.

"He's known Miss Swire for a long time," Mama steps into the gap. "He met her father while he was studying law."

"I gave Matthew my blessing," says Papa, his chest swelling beneath his smooth starched shirt and waistcoat, making his watch chain glint as the car pulls alongside the curb beneath a streetlamp, "and I will wish them both joy when he brings her to Downton next month."

Now it is Mary who sits stunned for a moment as the rest of her family move to disembark. "To Downton?"

Papa's eyes dart away guiltily as he gives her a hand down from the vehicle. "We're hosting an engagement dinner."

"The weekend of the hunt," Mama says, adding, with a too-bright smile Mary thinks must be meant to be encouraging, "Evelyn Napier's agreed to attend."

As Mary's feet find the pavement, she comes out of her stupor.

"To celebrate the engagement of a couple he's never met?" She arches her brow at each of her parents in turn, then turns and sweeps up Aunt Rosamund's front steps. "How meaningful for everyone."

~*~
The bed frame creaks, the mattress shifting with the weight of the other sleeper as she rolls onto her side, and Mary's eyes, just having begun—finally—to droop, snap wide open.

"For heaven's sake, Edith!" she cries, flopping onto her back, flinging back the coverlet which is only making the discomfort of having a bedfellow worse for trapping the body heat of two people beneath it. "Stop fidgeting! One of us may have a chance to fall asleep."

"You weren't asleep," Edith replies, mildly but for a sigh beneath the covers, which she has pulled up over her head, her pale face just visible in the dark as though peering out of a cave. "You won't sleep tonight. Not even if I lie here as still as a corpse."

A shiver courses down Mary's spine at the thought, but she tenses her body from her neck to the tips of her toes to stop herself, lest her grasping little sister seize upon the first hint of weakness. "How could anyone sleep, with you in the bed? In fact that's the very question that's keeping me awake. How do you sleep at night, being you?"

"Do come off it, Mary. We both know the only real enjoyment you get from insulting me is when you have an audience looking on to admire how terribly clever you are. Obviously I don't think you're clever at all. And anyway..." The soft swish of the sheet, and the movement of Edith's shoulder beneath the coverlet, tells Mary she's tracing a circle on the mattress with the tip of one finger. "Isn't it time we stopped the war? Joined forces against our common enemy?"

"Our common enemy?" Mary echoes. "Don't you think that kind of dramatic language is better left to the Balkan League in reference to the Turks?"

Edith's finger stills. "Do you read the papers now? Perhaps it isn't such a bad thing after all that Sir Richard Carlisle is courting you."

Mary is glad for the dark as her cheeks flush; she presses her hands hard against the hollow of her bosom, as if she can still the pounding of her heart. "Kissing me, anyway."

She is not sure whether she's being cagey with her sister about the nature of her relationship with Richard, or if she's rubbing Edith's nose in the passionate moment she witnessed.

The blanket slips down over her shoulder, revealing the high yolk of her nightgown. Wherever did Edith get such a thing, anyway? It makes her look like a maiden aunt. But there is nothing of an aunt in the shrewd gleam of her eyes as they catch the moonlight filtering in through the draperies.

"Is that your way of saying you'll throw him over if somebody better comes along?" Edith asks. "Like Evelyn Napier?"

The heat deepens in Mary's cheeks, though not for the same reason as when she thought of Richard, and her heartbeat slows, thudding against her ribcage at the sound of her own unfeeling words from months ago spoken back to her in Edith's accusing tones.

"Is a viscount better than a newspaper baron?" Mary says. "Only one must take into consideration that Mr Napier is a bore, while Sir Richard certainly knows how to captivate one's attention."

"Surely being boring is preferable to a man who makes his fortune in newspaper scandal," says Edith, sounding—and, Mary imagines, looking, a good deal like Papa. "Don't you find it rather an odd coincidence that Sir Richard just happens to know our cousin's fiancée's father?"
"Oh, Edith—that one member of the *nouveau riche* knows another is hardly the stuff of conspiracy theories."

"I suppose." Edith rolls onto her back, drawing the bedclothes up over her chest, her hands clasping them at her breast very much as if she were lying in state. "It was beastly of Papa not to tell us about Cousin Matthew. Yes, *us*," she asserts, before Mary can even remark upon this, should she wish to. "I know you and everyone else seem to believe the world revolves around you, but all our futures are tied to this entail. And I *like* Matthew."

"Like him? Or like the idea of being the Countess of Grantham and taking precedence over me at dinner?" Mary can't resist adding, "A regular little Lydia Bennet to my Jane, are you?"

"Which of us has taken up with an unsuitable man and made herself the object of censure and gossip?" Edith breezes on. "The title will go to someone. Wouldn't you rather it be one of your own blood than to--how did you put it?--some little nobody?"

Mary tries to picture it: Edith in Mama's place...going over the weekly menus...organising hunts...leading out the annual servants' ball...She tests her name in her mind: Edith Crawley, Countess of Grantham. Her heart hangs suspended in the cavity of her chest, not beating but aching as it compresses in on itself, shrinking down to nothing.

"What matters is that Cousin Matthew doesn't want you for his countess," Mary says, "so what makes you so sure Evelyn Napier will want you for his viscountess? That's what this is about, isn't it? You being a vulture, always lurking about to swoop in and sink your claws into my leavings?"

She turns onto her side again, back to Edith, jerking the tangled sheet up to her chest as she does so, unable to bear lying here so completely exposed. But she finds herself tilted back toward her sister as Edith pushes herself up on one elbow, the bed emitting another groan. *Why* could Papa not open up Grantham House for the duration of their stay, rather than force them to share a bed in Aunt Rosamund's pokey little house? They are eighteen and twenty, for heaven's sake, not eight and ten. Though she supposes she ought to be grateful they weren't put in the nursery by Rosamund's housekeeper, who'd forgotten their ages and thought _The girls will need a place to sleep, too_ meant that they were sweet young sisters and the best of friends who'd enjoy sharing whispered secrets together in the dark. Well, they are sharing secrets. Just not ones either of them enjoys.

"What else am I to do, I ask you?" A little mocking laugh tears from Edith's throat, aimed at herself or at her, Mary doesn't know. "You and Diana Manners and your ilk snap up all the young men--and now the not-so-young men, as well--and spit them out again...As if you're mother swans feeding their ugly ducklings. And do you know what the worst of it is?"

She sniffs, and the sheet tents above the sisters as Edith moves her arm, presumably to wipe her eyes. The bedclothes floating down over them once again, she goes on in a pinched voice, "My own parents think I'm beyond help, and give all their attention to *you*.

Much to Mary's chagrin, she realises for the first time that she isn't the only one of the Crawley sisters for whom the Earl of Grantham won't fight. Of course, finding a match for Edith may well be even more impossible than breaking the entail. She wonders how Sybil will fare when it's her turn--though her suffragist leanings may not incline her toward wanting a man to fight for her. So much the better.

"I don't ask for their help, you know," Mary says, quietly. Edith scoffs at that, but she goes on. "I wish Mama had left poor Evelyn out of it."
"Well, she hasn't, so if you're quite content to be your newspaperman's leg up to good society, I'd ask you to give me a chance to show Evelyn that I'm more than a wallflower at the deb balls."

*There is more to you than that,* Richard's words rumble in Mary's heart, so that she feels it swell once again within her breast, air rushing into her lungs.

Edith sighs. "If only you hadn't cared so much about getting Downton, and the title, Patrick might have seen how much I would have loved him."

Mary looks back over her shoulder at her sister, huddled under the covers again. "That wouldn't have changed anything in the end, you know. Patrick still would have died on the Titanic."

"But at least he'd have been properly mourned."

*I'm not as sad as I should be. That's what makes me sad.*

Turning away again, Mary says, "I'd no idea you were such a romantic. Perhaps I'd better leave Sir Richard to you. He talks violent love, too."

"He told you he loves you, then?"

Mary's gaze drops to her fingertips, picking at the eyelet edge of her pillowcase. "Not in so many words..."

She's surprised by her own honesty, but even more so when Edith doesn't take it as an opportunity to gloat, instead asking in genuine curiosity, "What's it like? To be kissed by a man?"

It's the sort of question Sybil would ask, sneaking into Mary's bedroom and climbing into bed with her after a ball, as has been her habit since Mary made her public debut. Suddenly she is gripped with missing her youngest sister, and glad they'll be home again tomorrow.

No doubt Sybil will want to know whether she met Richard at the ball, if she danced with him, and how many times, and whether her guess about the depth of his affection for Mary had been right. Would Mary protect the sixteen year-old darling from the rather untoward truth? Or would she flush in the dark and spare no detail of how he took possession of her the moment she stepped into the ballroom, of the insistent touch of his lips on hers, of the grip of roughened fingers around her wrists, of the rake of his voice telling her she deserved to be fought for?

Mary has never been the type to bare her soul to anyone in the dark of night, but she wants to, now. Her mouth opens to tell Edith everything...Only to close again as she pictures Edith's sneer over Richard's shoulder, the triumph with which she spoke of Mary getting herself into trouble.

She throws back the blankets, tearing them off Edith in the process, and sits up, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed.

"You'll have to find somebody else to live vicariously through. I never kiss and tell."

~*~

The hall clock chimes as Mary, in hushed tones, asks the telephone operator to put her through to the *Daily Telegram* office. Midnight, she realises, just making out the numbers in the light that falls over
"Carlisle speaking."

"Oh!" cries Mary, clutching the cold metal base of the phone tightly in her hand. "You're there."

"Mary?" Richard's voice pitches lower than usual, and a little raspier--due, no doubt, to the time, though she easily envisions him hunched over his great oak desk, a cigar smouldering in a cut-crystal ashtray from which ghostly plumes curl beneath the warm glow of the green shaded lamp.

"You're not still at the ball?"

"I didn't have a reason to be there, after you left," he replies, smoothly, though not unduly so; his next words are more teasing, even tinged with sarcasm, than flirtatious. "And obviously not, as you're calling me at the office. How did you know I'd be here, and not at home?"

"A hunch," she says, because it's close enough to the truth. Which is that it never occurred to her that he'd be anywhere but his office. "Where do you live, anyway?"

"Knightsbridge." He places a lilt upon the last syllable, almost as if he's asking a question, though he could be smiling. Mary wishes they were having this conversation face-to-face, but he speaks again, leaving her in no doubt of his meaning. "Is that fashionable enough?"

"I suppose. For some people."

Static whispers in the earpiece as Richard's chuckle rattles through it, and she presses the receiver tighter to her ear, as if to feel the pleasant rumble of his laugh.

"I'm not married to it," he says. A creak--probably the sound of his swivel chair as he leans back in it--covers the sound, and when he speaks again, it has stopped altogether. "What can I do for you, Mary? Is everything...are you all right?"

Of course he's thinking of his accidental revelation and her humiliating reaction to it--neither of which Mary wants to think of. Not now that she's made her mind up.

"Shouldn't you be asking what I can do for you?" she says, drawing up her shoulders, which briefly slumped. "Or do many people call you at midnight asking for help rather than offering scoops?"

"Most do both. It's all give and take in the world of newspapers. Do you have a scoop for me?"

"I do--Lady Mary Crawley Invites Sir Richard Carlisle to Yorkshire for Weekend at Downton."

A crackling on the other end of the line, for a heartbeat. Then Richard asks, "Will I be welcome in a house where my newspapers are forbidden?"

"Sybil still takes Lady Fair."

"Then I shall be sure to thank her for defying the Earl of Grantham to help keep bread on my table."

Mary snorts. "You do realise it's less an act of rebellion than taking advantage of Papa's being
unaware that you're the publisher?"

"Having often exploited ignorance to my own advantage, I hold Lady Sybil in the highest regard." Abruptly, he shifts subjects. "What occasions this invitation?"

"Mama's organising a hunting party. In November."

"A fox hunt?"

Mary rolls her eyes that he must even ask. "What else?"

"I don't ride..."

It's the nearest she's ever heard Richard come to sounding self-conscious, and Mary wonders what gestures accompany the tone. Fingers tugging at the curling ends of his hair? A puff on the imagined cigar? A swig from a glass of whisky?

And when did these things become more interesting to her than his lack of breeding?

"No matter," she replies. "There's more than riding to amuse you for a few days in the country. An engagement dinner for Cousin Matthew--so I expect your friend Mr Swire will attend, too."

"It'll be good to see Reggie again."

"Don't you often?"

"Not these days, no." She hears a rustling sound, as if he's rifling through a stack of papers on his desk. "A weekend in November, you say?"

Mary gives him the dates. "Saturday to Monday--that's how these things are always done. Though I suppose you'd need to get back to the paper before Monday?"

"I think I've earned days off here and there when I want them," says Richard, the words enunciated a little more deliberately, so that Mary can imagine the defensive upward tilt of his chin. Had she meant to tweak him? "And I do want them--if they'll afford me the opportunity to kiss you again."

"You seem like the sort of man who creates his own opportunities."

"Then I'll look very much forward to seeing you in November, Lady Mary."
The Houseguest

Chapter Summary

The manner of Richard's arrival at Downton comes as a surprise not only to Lord and Lady Grantham and the other guests, but to the very people in on the secret, as well.

November, 1912

Mama addresses Miss Swire in tones of sympathy about her father being too weary from the journey down from London to join them for luncheon, but it is Mary upon whom she trains her watery blue gaze across the table. Understandably so, for Mary picks at her potted shrimp and toast, ordinarily a favourite, and her eyes, when not on her plate of scarcely touched food, dart out the window overlooking the drive or to the dining room doorway. She knows her mother attributes the loss of appetite and the clear desire to escape to being forced to occupy the same room as the young woman who has usurped her position as the future Countess of Grantham--as if Lady Mary Crawley could be intimidated by Miss Swire who is, at first blush, exactly as Richard described her, docile and sweet.

Pretty, too, as he also rightly said. Her strawberry blonde hair, arranged in a sleek coif that Mary recognises seeing in The Sketch just last week, with a fringe swept across her brow, is complimented by the green drop-waist walking suit which Mary personally finds shapeless but, nevertheless, must grant is the height of fashion and brings out the flecks of green in the luminous grey eyes. Yes, Miss Swire is a pretty girl, indeed. Chic, even. But not a beauty, Mary comforts herself, catching her own reflection in the polished side of the silver soup tureen on the sideboard. Not elegant. She won't be half the countess you would, Richard's voice rumbles in her memory.

At the thought of him, she glances once again out the window, tilting her head to look over the large taffeta bow on Cousin Isobel's hat which bobs emphatically as she elaborates on Miss Swire's remark that the weak chest from which her father, Reginald Swire, suffers, is in fact tuberculosis that nearly took his life prematurely the previous year. Mary is vaguely aware of Matthew rebuking his mother for divulging medical history best kept between patients and their physicians, and of his eyes twinkling in amusement at Papa's across the table, which only serves to heighten her irritation as she wonders, for the dozenth time since the meal began: Where is Richard? Though she supposes it's best if he doesn't arrive until after luncheon now; no place is set for him at the table and Carson will, no doubt, show him straight to the library to take his repast alone until the rest of the party have finished the afternoon meal.

Laying her knife and fork across her plate, Mary balls her hands into fists in her lap, welcoming the dull ache of her fingernails carving shallow half-moons into her palms. She endured tea with Cousin Isobel yesterday and walked with her into the village to meet Matthew coming in on the train from Ripon, then subjected herself to Matthew's chatter about his plans for the weekend with Lavinia when he walked her home, all as a ruse to send Richard a telegram that he must be on the morning train so as not to miss luncheon at one o'clock sharp. Carson delivered a reply just after dinner, in which Richard promised that not even the most tantalising headline should delay him another moment from kissing her again.
"But I'm not divulging any secret of Mr Swire's," Cousin Isobel argues, her voice sparing Mary from embarrassing herself with a rising flush evoked by the memory of the typed words of the telegram or by imagining how they might find a moment alone for a romantic interlude. "I simply mention it as an example of the miracle of modern medicine. Lavinia will walk down the aisle to you on her father's arm now, when a year ago that hardly seemed likely."

Miss Swire gives her prospective mother-in-law a tearful smile.

"We certainly hope an afternoon's rest will see him recovered enough to join us for your engagement dinner, as well," Mama says, looking to Papa, who seems to be as detached from the conversation as Mary.

Thinking of walking his own daughters down the aisle? Does he imagine placing Mary's hand in the Honourable Evelyn Napier's? Or does that wistful look mean he wishes Matthew could be his son, as well as his heir, in the eyes of the law?

Or does he still grieve poor Patrick?

"We certainly hope he won't give us all consumption," Granny mutters behind her napkin.

"Sir Anthony and Lady Strallan will be in our party tonight," Mama says, too loudly, as if to speak over Granny, though Granny already said her piece and all heard it, "and his sister Mrs Chetwood and her husband. And the Russells of Haxby Park. We thought you'd enjoy meeting the neighbours."

"That sounds lovely, Lady Grantham, thank you," says Miss Swire, her smile widening, though Mama doesn't see it. She's staring at Mary, her own smile falling into an o as round as her eyes as Carson leans in to speak to her. His voice rumbles across the table, though no one on that side catches the words. May doesn't need to hear to know what Carson is telling her mother.

"And Mr Swire will have a friend at the party," Mama says when Carson has gone again, her head turned toward Lavinia, though still not her gaze. She swallows."Sir Richard Carlisle."

A paroxysm of coughing wracks Papa's frame, as if another person's hands grip him by his broad shoulders and shake him.

"Cousin Robert!" Matthew exclaims, pushing back from the table, rushing to pound on his back, while Cousin Isobel rambles inanely to Papa about raising his arms in the air. Only Sybil has the presence of mind to offer a glass of water.

"Is it consumption, do you think?" Granny asks, as the water almost instantly relieves the choking fit enough for her to be heard over it.

"I beg your Pardon," says Papa as Matthew resumes his seat, murmuring apologies. "In my haste to go to our guest, I swallowed too quickly."

Mary knows she's already perilously close to being locked in her room and not permitted to go to her guest herself without giving in to the urge to snort at Papa's tact, the irony of which is lost on the Crawleys and Miss Swire. Thankfully, Granny does it for her, though Mary does not meet her gaze--or anyone's, and especially not Papa's as she picks up her fork, at last finding the stomach for her potted shrimp.
"Daddy will be so pleased to see Sir Richard again," Miss Swire says, quietly, not sounding at all as though it's a feeling she shares. *Interesting.*

"Good." Mama's voice sounds as if she, too, has just been choking. "Good," she repeats, louder, almost harshly, as if to clear the hoarseness, nodding as if she can shake it away, neither to any avail. "We do so wish to please you."

Mary chews slowly, though the shrimp seem to have turned rancid in her mouth. She forces herself to swallow the toast though her throat feels just as dry as the stuff and it seems to catch and stick.

Potted shrimp and toast were her favourite luncheon when she was the girl who knew she would marry Cousin Patrick and be the Countess of Grantham and live at Downton ever after, at least, if not happily. When she never gave a thought to the possibility that all of it might ram into an iceberg and be lost forever beneath the frigid waters of the North Atlantic. Or to whether it not doing so would please her. Just as her mother never gave a thought to the possibility that serving Mary's childhood favourite foods at a luncheon in honour of the new heir's marriage might not please her.

She imagines the man with the striking cheekbones and boyishly dimpled smile taking the same luncheon alone in the library, and raises her glass to her lips, making a silent toast:

To pleasing herself.

~*~

Of course, what would best please her would be to go directly to Richard the moment the luncheon plates have been cleared and Mama instructs Edith and Sybil to escort the Crawleys and Miss Swire to the saloon while Carson fetches their coats and handbags--Granny is meant to be included in the group, too, Mary is sure, but she lags behind, feigning frailty or fatigue, as Papa calls Mary back to the dining room.

"What is the meaning of this, young lady?" He flings his napkin down on the white cloth as he rounds the table to her. "Inviting a gentleman to whom you are not engaged for a Saturday to Monday party without so much as mentioning it to your mother and me? Never mind asking our permission!"

Mary stands her ground, lifting her chin and arching her brows as he stops just toe to toe with her. "How nice to see you're giving Sir Richard the benefit of the doubt. Not assuming he came here uninvited. Calling him a gentleman."

Papa harrumphs. "But not well-versed enough in proper etiquette to realise that invitations are to come from the lady of the house."

"The numbers will be all off at dinner," whispers Mama, clearly having lost sight of the fact that the family has faced greater scandals and tragedies than this in recent months.

"Don't relinquish all hope just yet, Cora," says Granny from the doorway. "Modern medicine may prove not so miraculous as Mrs Crawley believes. Reggie Swire could still succumb to consumption, freeing up a place for Sir Richard at dinner."

"Thank you, Mama, for that helpful perspective," says Papa through lips that scarcely move. As the footmen step around Granny to remove the luncheon linens from the table and insert the leaves for
tonight's dinner party, he goes on in the same manner, though the rage so carefully restrained in his discreet tones flickers in his eyes.

"Do not even pretend to be ignorant of the fact that inviting Sir Richard Carlisle here is a far more serious error than his presence throwing off the numbers. Perhaps I should grant him the benefit of the doubt, as you put it, but even in doing so, the fact remains that his gross ignorance of propriety is not a quality I would wish in any suitor of yours."

Papa's gaze wavers as Thomas and William skirt by carrying the serving dishes, and, when the family remain the sole occupants of the room, he allows his control to slip, his anger increasing the volume of his voice and propelling his body into motion, his hands clasped behind his back as he stalks toward the window.

"As it is I do not grant Carlisle that leeway. Even if he had somehow managed to rise to his position without any knowledge of the inappropriateness of taking a lady out unchaperoned--"

"Surely that story is nearly as tired as the Titanic by now?" Mary says, rubbing her forehead.

Papa stamps his heel into the floorboards and spins back to face her, red with rage. "He refuses to acknowledge any wrongdoing. His intentions toward you are obvious, and in direct defiance of me. And you have not discouraged him!"

"Why should I?" Mary flings her hands open at her sides. "My fiancé is dead. I have to marry somebody. Sir Richard may not be conventional, but I like him. Which is much more than I can say for anyone you deem suitable. Evelyn Napier," she flings the name at him. "Matthew Crawley."

"Mary!" hisses Mama, all colour draining from her face as she stares over Mary's shoulder; Papa's eyes close.

Mary turns to see Cousin Matthew framed by the dark wood moulding of the doorway, wearing his overcoat and hat for the walk back to Crawley House, his head inclined slightly toward Granny as she remarks, "I'd ask whether your ears are burning, but Sir Richard's already been cast as the devil in this little morality play."

"That's just the thing," says Matthew. Smiling slightly at Mary, not quite conspiratorially, he goes on, "Not to push in, but…while Carlisle may be a bit rough around the edges, I can vouch for his character. Or rather, Reggie--Mr Swire, I mean--can. You see, it's because of Sir Richard that he's alive."

"Oh?" says Granny, leaning into the conversation on her cane; behind her, in the hallway, Mary notices Lavinia in the shadows, wearing her fur stole and clutching her reticule, ready to go. "Is he in medicine as well as newspapers?"

"Not quite," Matthew replies, approaching Papa. "Lavinia was not yet of an age to marry when Reggie received his diagnosis, and her father was all she had in the world. After the usual treatments failed, his physicians recommended he be admitted to a sanatorium in Devon that had seen some success with new methods. But Reggie had already been so ill that he couldn't take on new clients, and he exhausted his savings, including what was set aside for Lavinia."

"Let me guess," says Papa, rubbing the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, the other hand resting on the back of one of the dining chairs. "Carlisle swooped in and covered all Mr Swire's expenses."
Matthew nods. "They had grown apart over the years--as friends sometimes do, not because they fell out or anything like that," he hastens to add, "but as soon as Carlisle heard about Reggie's health through a mutual acquaintance…" A movement in the hall draws Mary's eye, and she sees Lavinia bowing her head. Overwhelmed by emotion? "…he came back into Reggie's life. And saved it."

Cora takes Papa's arm. "It seems we may have wrongly judged a book by its cover."

"Or a newspaper by its front page headline?" he replies, not looking at all convinced. He claps Matthew on the shoulder, his thick fingers squeezing lightly before falling away, then turns to Mama. "I suppose we'd best see to our guest before the next cover story of his tabloid is that the Earl and Countess of Grantham are abysmal hosts."

~*~

Richard greets them with a smile as he lays aside his newspaper, pushes back the tray from which he has taken his luncheon, and rises at his hosts' entrance into the library. The dip beneath his cheekbone, however, Mary notes, is not a dimple so much as a twinge of muscle beneath his smooth-shaven skin.

"Sir Richard," says Mama, extending her fingers to him. "How lovely to see you again."

He presses her hand. "Lady Grantham. Lord Grantham."

Granny, thankfully, did not accompany them in. Richard's light blue eyes sweep past Papa, the colour seeming to brighten as they settle on Mary, but he only nods to her, and speaks not a word of greeting. As is right and proper, but Mary cannot help but bristle at his sudden regard for decorum.

"I'm so sorry there wasn't a place set for you in the dining room," Mama goes on, clasping her hands together as Richard pulls his away. "There was some…" She looks up, as though she expects to see the word for which she is searching dancing among the swirl of dust motes in a beam of early afternoon sun that slants through the windows. "...confusion about your arrival."

"Not at all." Richard's hands find their way into his trouser pockets as he looks briefly at the shiny tops of his shoes. "I'm accustomed to taking luncheon alone and catching up on the morning papers."

"When do you catch up on the evening editions?" asks Papa, apparently compensating for Granny's absence from the scene.

The lines about Richard's eyes deepen, and Mary holds her breath in anticipation of his retort, when Mama intervenes, frowning at Papa.

"You must be feeling in rather dire need of fresh air after six hours cooped upon a train and then being shut up in a dark musty library for luncheon."

"Seven and a half," Richard corrects her, though he's looking at Mary. "We were delayed just outside of Sheffield. I never could get a straight answer as to the reason. Though I assure you," he adds, straightening up as his gaze moves about the walls of bookshelves, "I'm quite at home being cooped up in rooms like this, behind my desk in my office."

"Who wouldn't prefer an office, when the alternative is that awful London air?" Mama says, wrinkling her nose.
It's a rhetorical statement, a pleasantry, but Richard shrugs his shoulders slightly. "I've never minded it. I think of it as the sweet smell of modernity and progress."

Mama's smile hangs agape for a moment before she recovers her powers of speech. "Mary, why don't you take Sir Richard on a tour of the grounds?"

Mary's brows arch. Clearly Mama is more affected by the story of Richard's little act of philanthropy than she realised. Or Papa. For an unguarded moment he looks at Mama as if she's betrayed him, then he smiles thinly at her and makes to exit the library.

"I'll send Edith along. She's always so helpful with the historical features of the property."

"Oh, Papa, if we want to give Sir Richard a true appreciation for the country, surely boring him silly isn't the best approach?"

"Anyway," says Mama, "I was already planning to ask Edith to help me with the seating arrangements."

Papa halts in the doorway, sighs, and then turns back to face wife, daughter, and houseguest, regarding the former with as much displeasure as the latter.

"It's all the scents of ancient oaks and pines," he says, glancing sideways at Richard on his way to the writing desk positioned facing the windows overlooking the park, "though if you breathe deeply, you may get a whiff of the railway station or a factory in York."

"If only the aroma of confectionary would waft to Downton on the breeze," Mary says, to remind Papa that York's chief industry is chocolate.

At last Richard's dimples emerge with his smirk. "Then I shall endeavour not to breathe too deeply, lest I miss out on the shallow charms of the country."

The word shallow hovers in Mary's mind as they follow Mama out of the library, the deliberate way Richard's lips and tongue formed around the syllables, his eyes fixing on her as his voice raked over it. She tells herself it's ridiculous to think he would imply such about her--there is more to you than that, he told her in London, before he kissed her--but when he remains silent as they wait in the vestibule for Thomas and Carson to bring their hats and coats, fear claws at her belly that she is, indeed, the source of his offence. In an attempt to break the tension, she resorts to chatter.

"You've met Carson already, of course," she says as she slips her arms into the sleeves of her coat which the butler holds for her. "I bet you didn't realise he's the one who aided and abetted us in our illicit exchange of telegrams."

"I apologise you were made an accessory to the crime." Richard speaks without humour, though his eyes are momentarily hidden as he puts on his trilby. But as he adjusts the hat on his head and regards Carson, Mary sees that they are grey as flint, with no spark. "I take it from your obvious surprise at my arrival, you did not aid and abet Lady Mary in illicitly inviting me to Downton."

Carson's cheeks seem to droop beneath his heavy brow as he presses his lips together in a frown, his eyes flickering briefly to Mary--Apologetically? Accusatorily? She isn't sure which--before he answers, "No, Sir Richard. I was not informed of your addition to the party in advance of your arrival. However, I do assure you that you shall be no less comfortable here than any of Lord and
Richard makes no reply, though Mary senses one brewing, as surely as the rainshower they at once feel as they step outside into an autumn afternoon which proves rather too warm for their coats after all. Despite his being a guest here for the first time, he sets the destination for their walk, indicating with a peremptory gesture of his hand the bench sheltered beneath the sprawling arms of the estate's landmark Lebanon cedar. Its fragrance seems to cloy in Mary's nostrils as they come to stand under it; she wishes she could draw a deep enough breath to catch the scent of industry. Her fingers curl over the rounded back of the bench, and she closes her eyes, and in a rush the memory of such smells barrage her, how the air of London had been a fresh breath, indeed, when she fled there in September to escape Downton and Matthew and her parents...

"Lord and Lady Grantham's guests," Richard says, his voice soft but crisp as the rustle of the stray dried leaves beneath his footfalls as he comes to stand behind her, a mocking echo of Carson though minutes have elapsed since the butler uttered the phrase. "I never had any illusions that my invitation came from them and not their daughter. But I never imagined it was such a breach of protocol that you'd keep it a secret. As if my coming here were a blurb of tawdry gossip you'd read on the back page of a tabloid and torn out before anyone else might read it."

Mary's face flushes in the clammy air, so hot that it may as well be July or August and not November. She ought to turn around and tell him it isn't like that, but it's too thick for her to move, Richard stands too close. She ought to apologise, but when she opens her mouth a nervous laugh puffs from her breathless lungs instead.

"Surely that's a little dramatic," she hears herself say, "even for a hawker of newspaper scandal, as Granny calls you?" Not an apology, exactly, but he does enjoy when she quotes Granny to him. Or he did, before today.

"You know how I feel about being misrepresented. About being made to look a fool."

His fingers close around her upper arm, wrapping all the way around it even with the added thickness of her wool coat. As he turns her to face him, his free hand curls just below her other shoulder. Her backside brushes the top edge of the bench.

"Why did you want me here, Mary? To get a rise out of your parents? Or to enjoy the pleasure of my company?"

Though Richard's voice is rough, his face bent over hers to maximise the slight difference in their height, Mary does not think that her heartbeat quickens because she finds his physical dominance a threat. Quite to the contrary, in fact, her gaze lingering for a moment on his lips, the image of him leaning in to kiss her on the Claridge's terrace flashing at the front of her mind before she drags her eyes up to meet his. Only then does something akin to fear steal through her, not because she sees that she has angered him, but because the harsh lines are a thin mask for hurt. A wounded animal, lashing out--a creature with whom she is well acquainted, after a lifetime with Edith.

The difference being that Richard never did anything to provoke her.

"Richard, I--"

"The truth now." His fingers press into her arms. "Pay me that compliment, at least."

She would look away in shame, were it not for the rush of exhilaration that accompanies the
realisation. To have the power to hurt a man like him makes her an equal partner in this relationship. Would she have been that with Patrick? With Matthew? With the Duke of Crowborough or Evelyn Napier or any of the aristocrats her parents welcomed here as worthy suitors?

"Must it be one reason or the other?" she asks.

Richard's eyes flicker. "Yes, it must." He releases her, abruptly, so that she bumps back into the bench, and he turns back to the house, arms akimbo as he shoves his hands into his pockets. "Fortunately you have until Monday to make up your mind."
The Storm

Chapter Summary

The storm that began to brew with Richard's arrival at Downton breaks after a clash at a dinner party.

Given Richard's tempestuous mood at the end of their walk, Mary does not entirely trust her own eyes when she enters the drawing room before dinner and sees him smiling benignly at Isobel Crawley as she engages him in conversation, her pompadour having taken over bobbing duty from the hat she wore to luncheon.

"I told you we should have got down here sooner," whispers Sybil at her side, and Mary swings her gaze to where her little sister's rests in the pink-papered room, on their parents holding court before the fireplace with Cousin Matthew, Miss Swire, and her father. "After the way they reacted to Sir Richard's arrival," Sybil goes on, "I knew they'd ignore him. Thank goodness for Cousin Isobel treating him decently."

Mary would have thought the longstanding friend Reggie Swire would be the one to do that, though Richard's philanthropy, she supposes, reaches only so far as to pay a friend's medical expenses, and not to subject himself to the company of mutual acquaintances who plainly don't want him in their home.

"On the contrary," she replies, breezily, as if none of these thoughts went through her head. "She's done him no favours."

Sybil looks up at her from beneath knit eyebrows for an explanation.

"If Cousin Isobel continues to act as though she likes Sir Richard. Granny will loathe him on principle."

"That's true. In which case we ought to go rescue him. Besides," Sybil adds, looping her arm through Mary's with a grin, "I'm dying to meet the man who's in love with you."

As the sisters approach him now, it seems that Sybil may very well be in danger of expiring, as Richard doesn't spare so much as glance in their direction--though Mary notes the twitch in his cheek and thinks he must have glimpsed them in his periphery--never mind the certainly failed expectation of meeting a man in love--until Mrs Crawley interrupts herself to greet them.

"Ah, Cousin Mary, here you are. Good evening, Sybil. I've just been telling Sir Richard how I've been pestering you and Matthew to tell me about him. I'm so pleased to have the opportunity to say in person how much I enjoy the new style of journalism and how accessible it is to readers from every walk of life."

"You're very kind, Mrs Crawley," says Richard, slipping his long fingers into his trouser pockets in the way Mary has come to recognise as a self-conscious mannerism--and a telltale sign that he is not one of her lot. Not truly.
"Is she?" *That* catches his eye, at last. "Or was that just a nice way of saying the *Daily Telegram* appeals to the lowest common denominator?"

The colour drains from Cousin Isobel's cheeks as she hastens to say, "Oh no, Sir Richard, I hope you know that's most assuredly *not* what I meant to imply."

"I do, Mrs Crawley," he says, removing one hand from his pocket to give her a reassuring touch on the arm, seemingly all dimples and charm, though Mary's heart quickens as his eyes rake slowly over her. "That's a lovely gown, Lady Mary," he says. "The art nouveau fashions suit you--it would seem."

"Thank you, Sir Richard." Her fingers stray to the end of the beaded necklace that falls down over the bodice of her green gown with the overlay of sheer grey crape embroidered with golden sunbursts. She took even more care with her toilette than usual tonight--thus Sybil's admonishment that they ought to have joined the party earlier--in the hope that Richard might be distracted from questioning her motive for inviting him and simply appreciate that she had. It's a vain hope, he quickly shows her. In every sense.

"Or perhaps that's just a nice way of saying sunbursts are an appropriate fashion choice for a woman who believes the universe revolves around her."

His pale eyebrows twitch upward at her in a clear challenge which Mary, to her dismay, is unable to meet. She glances away, feeling, for the first time in her life, that someone has seen her. The real her, ugly beneath her beautiful clothes and coiffed hair, which prompt her to look so often into mirrors to check that she hasn't begun to crack through the mask. Like Dorian Gray's portrait in that illicit book Sybil once got hold of and sneaked into her room late at night to read by candlelight.

Avoiding Richard's gaze unfortunately draws her to Papa's, watching her with a furrowed brow from where he leans against the mantel, his attention having wavered from Matthew's bride-to-be. Quickly May looks away, back at Richard, shrugging as she puts on her smile once again as if it were a shawl that slipped off her shoulders and simply needed readjusting.

"How can I not think so, when newspaper photographers want my picture for the society pages?"

"Not *my* photographers," Richard replies, the edge in his voice no longer present in the lines of his face, and his throat bobs as he swallows hard, looking a little pained, before he goes on, huskily, "I suppose you ascribe to Mr Wilde's observation that the only thing in the world worse than being talked about is *not* being talked about?"

Masking her surprise that, though they have fallen out of step with each other in this little dance they've been doing, their thinking should still be so alike that they would both think of the same book, Mary gives a vague little shake of her head. "Oh, Sir Richard--surely you can't expect that *well-bred* young ladies have read the work of moral reprobates."

"Yes, Lord Grantham does seem to pass that judgment quite readily, and censor your reading material accordingly."

They stand, eyes locked for a moment before Mrs Crawley says, as if the curtain just went down on a theatre stage and she is standing as the lights go up for the ovation, "Well. That's exactly the kind of razor sharp wit I've come to expect from your papers."
"Or biting social commentary?"

At the addition of a third, shrewish, female voice to the conversation, Mary whips her head around to see Edith standing at Cousin Isobel's shoulder. Despite her efforts to maintain a cool expression, she cannot stop her cheeks burning at the unmistakable smirk of enjoyment that twists Edith's mouth at having witnessed a ruthless man intent on taking her down a few pegs. Just as Mary thinks her two sisters could not be more opposite, Sybil speaks up.

"As a matter of fact, Sir Richard," she says, "we have read a deal of Wilde."

Her naturally breathy voice pitches secretively low as her blue eyes dart sidelong at Papa; Richard's lips curve in a gentler smile as he extends his hand to her by way of introduction. "Indeed, Lady Sybil?"

He leans in, conspiratorially, as she clasps his hand and says, "Our footman, Thomas, always seems to be reading the most scandalous books. They circulate amongst the servants, and Gwen--one of the maids--always passes them along to me whenever she's finished."

"It seems Downton harbours quite the little crime ring," Richard says, clearly amused, as he draws his hand from Sybil's grasp.

"Gwen ought to watch herself," says Edith, "or she's liable to find herself looking for work elsewhere."

"She already is," Sybil replies. "And don't pretend to be so righteous, you know you read Wilde as eagerly as Mary and I did."

"Oh my," Cousin Isobel says. "So many secrets revealed. I feel I should extricate myself from this conversation at once, lest I find myself in possession of information that may one day incriminate me."

As she reiterates again to Richard the pleasure of meeting him, expressing her hope that they may speak again after dinner, before she finally takes her leave, Edith continues to bicker with Sybil.

"Only as a sort of morbid curiosity to see what all the fuss was about."

"And what was your conclusion, Lady Edith?" asks Richard.

Edith's posture unfolds, reminding Mary of a wilted flower revived by a gardener's attention, with the evident pleasure of having her opinion solicited. "I hardly think Mr Wilde is worth the fuss. I don't think he's worth reading at all."

"That's unfortunate, Lady Edith," Richard says, and returns his attention, and his smile, to Sybil. "Did you know Wilde got his start as a journalist? He edited The Woman's World, for a time."

"Did he?" Sybil's eyes shine. "I'm an avid reader of your Lady Fair, you know. Papa thinks it's a fashion magazine."

"Yes, your sister told me you were something of a rebel." He looks at Mary, his face softening; his thoughts must turn, as hers do, to their tango at the Cave of the Golden Calf, during which Mary told him how she learned the illicit dance with Sybil. "Though I think politics are a subject to be avoided at dinner parties? Along with religion?"
"What's this about avoiding religion?" asks Matthew, at that moment approaching their group with his fiancée, her parents occupied with the other guests who arrived while she was caught up in her verbal sparring with Richard—the Strallans and the Chetwoods; the Russells have yet to appear.

He nods his greeting to the ladies, but as he and Richard shake hands and exchange the pleasantries of meeting again, it is Miss Swire's ivory gloved fingers that catch Mary's attention, clutching tighter to the crook of Matthew's elbow and tucking her body close against his, hold herself conspicuously away from Richard when she finds herself standing between the two men. Not the reaction Mary would expect toward the man who saved Daddy Dearest's life. Unless Matthew's got it a bit wrong?

"Only Lavinia and I thought we'd invite you and Lady Mary to tour a few of the local churches with us tomorrow after services," he goes on, oblivious to Miss Swire's discomfort. "We're taking a picnic."

"A picnic," Richard echoes, eyebrows raised.

"That is, of course, unless you planned to join the hunt?"

"I can't speak for Lady Mary," Richard answers, hands going once more to his pockets, "but while I don't hunt, I've never taken a recreational interest in God, either."

"That certainly explains the lack of scruples," Miss Swire mumbles. Then, as if realising she spoke aloud a thought she intended to keep to herself, her eyes widen, as do everyone else's—including Richard's, though not in surprise so much as in an expression meant to warn.

"I only mean," Miss Swire says, lifting her head and looking steadily back at him in a way Mary would not have expected of a woman Richard himself described as docile and obedient, "that you live in a very tough world of selling newspapers."

"We all live in a tough world, Miss Swire. I think you understand that better than most people."

Oh yes, Cousin Matthew has got something very wrong, indeed, with regard to Richard's connection to the Swires. Or with regard to Miss Swire, at least; when Richard excuses himself to go and speak to Lavinia's father, with whom he has not yet had the opportunity to speak this evening, his old friend greets him with a ready clasp of the hand and one of the only genuinely pleased smiles in the drawing room.

What could have occurred between them that would account for this cold tension? Unfulfilled romantic notions? The notion is laughable—sweet, pretty, docile, obedient...she'll make him a good wife—yet Mary's thumbs twitch against her forefingers in her black satin gloves. Richard may not find a woman like Lavinia Swire good wife material, but Matthew does, and he will make her his Countess of Grantham.

History suddenly ceases to matter; all Mary can think of is a future in which the Saturday to Monday parties at Downton will feature sad little middle-class picnics and tours of crumbling churches as the central entertainments, rather than lords and ladies riding out on horses with bloodlines as pure as theirs to hunt foxes.

~*~
"You and Sir Richard deserve each other," Edith says under her breath as Mary slips past her into the dining room when Papa gives the signal.

"A little testy since Evelyn Napier decided not to come till tomorrow, are we?" Mary pauses to hiss back over her shoulder.

Seated across the table from each other as the oysters are brought in for the first course, however, Richard not quite managing a mask of polite amusement at Lady Strallan's incessant jokes--she seems to think the *Telegram* publisher will appreciate a synopsis of the entire previous week's political cartoons featured in the *Times*--while Mary must pretend to be as caught up in Mr Russell's play-by-play account of Billy's most recent polo match at Cambridge as if she attended herself--she is inclined to believe that her sister, however waspish, may be correct. The worst part is, even as Mary acknowledges their mutual disinterest in their dinner companions, she must also admit the accuracy of Richard's assessment of her level of self-absorption. So acutely does her own conscience prick her that even a certain trite saying about black pots and kettles provides little balm for her soul.

Her conscience isn't the only thing that pricks, fortunately, her ears at that moment filled with Lady Strallan's strident tones. Mary looks up as their neighbour, apparently cottoning to the fact that Richard is not a captive audience to her comedy act, leans over the table to join in her husband's conversation with Miss Swire a few places down.

"Don't worry, Miss Swire," Lady Strallan says, "running a country house isn't so very different from a town house, provided you've got a clever housekeeper and hard-working staff. If you need any recommendations, don't hesitate to ask me. It seems I've had nearly every girl in the county as a maid at one time or another!" She laughs at her own joke, along with her booby of a husband, and turns back to Richard. "Hiring and firing--I suppose you know all about that."

As he opens his mouth to answer, Mama abandons the last shreds of dinner conversation etiquette in an attempt to spare him awkwardness. "I may need your recommendation myself, Lady Strallan. It seems one of our maids plans to leave service for a job in town."

It's the first Mary has heard about it--another testament to her self-centredness, as Sybil reveals herself to be well abreast of the situation.

"Gwen saved up and bought a typewriter, and is taking a correspondence course in typing and shorthand. She wants to be a secretary."

"Sybil, dear," chides Papa, with an indulgent smile for his youngest daughter that Mary hasn't seen directed at her since the news broke of the *Titanic*, "this is an engagement party. I doubt very much the table at large wish to hear about the career aspirations of a housemaid."

"If I have any say as the mother of the groom," interjects Cousin Isobel, "I find it quite a scintillating subject of conversation. Class mobility is certainly a topic for the times, and this very gathering crosses social boundaries."

The last she says with a nod to Richard, who, at that moment, has just picked up his champagne glass so that he seems almost to raise a toast to her statement.

"Can we count on you, Mrs Crawley, to erect a guillotine in the village square?"

"Granny, *must* you be so dramatic?" cries Sybil in dismay, and Mary can't help but roll her eyes.
"I think it less likely Gwen intends to overthrow the aristocracy than that she'd like a job with better pay and better hours," Mary says.

Granny makes a retort about not being able to believe there could be any preferable position for a girl than working in a great country house, with which Lady Strallan and Mrs Chetwood effusively agree, while Mrs Russell eats her oysters to avoid having to express an opinion. Richard's eyes, meanwhile, twinkle at Mary as he dabs at his mouth with his napkin.

"I don't know. Perhaps she reads Marx in her spare time."

"Papa only permits our servants to read the Bible and letters from home."

Mary doesn't even bother to glance Papa's direction to gauge his reaction, or to see whether he heard her at all, for she is captivated by how Richard must lower his champagne flute, unable to sip from it for chuckling. The rumble of his laugh makes her own lips curve in a smile, and she thinks how very handsome he looks with the deepening of the criss-crossed lines at the corners of his eyes and beneath his cheekbones. But it is when he looks up, his blue eyes meeting hers as his laughter fades, that her heart misses a beat in her chest.

She's never had this before, with a man, with anyone: a companion to stand with her on the outside of her world, to look in with her on the people in it--or down on them--and laugh together at their foibles or scorn their values or even simply observe them. It's fitting, she supposes, that a newspaper man would be the one to share this peculiarity with her, though if she is honest, she's not entirely certain it's a characteristic that comes naturally to her, or if it's one she cultivated since Patrick died and she was forced off the path laid out before her from birth and to consider which one next to tread. Or perhaps it is Richard who has taught her to view the world through the objective lens of a journalist.

For the first time, too, she wonders what experience brought him to the edge, more spectator of other people's lives than participant in his own, or if he chooses to be there.

As the dinner conversation continues around them, not suffering for lack of Mary's involvement in it, she thinks that she wouldn't care whether anyone thought of her ever again, if only he always would.

He doesn't, of course.

Sybil addresses him, and though Mary can't tear her eyes from his face, Richard swings his gaze easily down the table, smiling as he answers the questions posed by the sixteen year-old with the flushed cheeks and determined tilt of her chin about the working conditions and job satisfaction of secretaries.

~*~

After the dark of the hallways and staircase, the light of the single electric lamp emanating from the centre of the library shines brightly enough by contrast to make Mary squint against it as she pushes the door open, clutching an unwieldy volume in her other hand. She stands just inside, head bent to give her eyes a moment to adjust; when they have done, she tucks her book under one arm to free both hands so she may shut the carved honeyed oak panel softly behind her. Turning, she advances further into the room and lays her book on the table beside the ledger for Carson to return to its proper shelf tomorrow, opening the leather notebook and taking the pen out of the well to draw a line through her name and the title of the novel written weeks ago in her own hand.
As she lifts her gaze to the bookshelves above to peruse the titles embossed in gold-leaf on the leather spines, a sharp spatter against the windowpanes, accompanied by a gust of cold air, turns her head. A flash of lightning illuminates the crooked paths of the raindrops down the glass, as well as droplets beading up on the moulding beneath the open window.

How unlike Carson to miss an open window during his nightly check. Brows furrowing, Mary hunches against the chill and, pulling her unseasonable loose cotton dressing gown with its eyelet-trimmed elbow sleeves tighter around herself, dances across the Oriental rug on the toes of her carpet slippers to tug at the sash.

"I opened that because of the cigar."

The window crashes closed as Mary whirls around at the rasp of Richard's voice. Across the room, he reclines on the red settee facing the library door, the high back of its twin having obscured him from view when she came in.

"Richard," she says, breathlessly, her heart pounding in her chest and in her ears. "I didn't realise you were there."

She does now, however, and as he folds his newspaper, she takes him in. Still dressed in the foundations of his evening clothes, he leans his head against one arm of the sofa and stretches out his long legs across the length of the cushions and props his stocking feet on the other end. His shiny black patent leather shoes are aligned neatly on the rug beside the settee, though his dinner jacket and ivory waistcoat are nowhere to be seen, nor is his bowtie, his collar open at the neck and the cuffs of his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows. Mary's eyes follow the pale, muscular line of his forearm as he stretches it out to lay his newspaper on the coffee table, which has been pulled closer to the settee than it usually resides; next to the newspaper, in a cut crystal ashtray, grey wisps of smoke curl upwards with hypnotic movements from the smouldering cigar.

Somehow, his state of undress serves only to make her self-conscious about her own, and she draws her thin dressing gown more securely closed about herself; if only there was something she could do about the length, a downward glance reminding her that her ankles are bared between the hem of her nightgown and the tops of her slippers.

"Hence I announced my presence." Richard picks up the cigar and gestures expansively with it, the smoke wreathing around his hand, before he puts it to his lips and takes a draw.

Mary marvels for a moment at his audacity to make himself at home in a strange house long after the family are in their beds, and of not restricting this activity to the room designated for the purpose; although she supposes it would be even more audacious for him to wander about in the dark until he found the smoking room.

"You might have announced it a bit sooner."

"And miss the opportunity to observe Lady Mary Crawley skulking about Downton Abbey in her nightdress after midnight, and ponder why she could possibly find it so urgent to leave her bed and return Wuthering Heights to the library?"

"Dear me, Sir Richard, I'm afraid you don't know me at all if you think I've ever done anything so inelegant as skulk. Aren't you a man to whom the correct words mean everything?"

The windowpanes rattle in their frames with the roll of distant thunder, though the latter sound
doesn't reach her ears beneath Richard's low chuckle as he exhales a puff of smoke.

"Yes," he says, scuffing the backs of his fingers over his chin, shadowed with stubble in the lamplight. "I suppose you're more the type who slinks."

"How did you know it was Wuthering Heights?" Mary hastens to change the subject.

"I read it in the ledger."

"The ledger." She rolls her eyes. "Papa claims it's because he lends books out to the servants--"

"Checking up on them in case the peons are reading Marx or his ilk?"

"--but he started it when I was nine and blamed Edith for losing a book I misplaced. He still insists we sign for every book we borrow, and we're only permitted one at a time." She sweeps her gaze over the shadowed shelves of books that cover every wall in the vast space, floor to ceiling. "As if he'd notice."

As she speaks she approaches the settee, and Richard swings his feet down from the arm and sits up, turning to replace his cigar in the ashtray. When he looks up at her again, his eyes reflect a flash of lightning from out the windows behind her.

"You scoff, yet here you are, returning your book and crossing your name off the ledger. At nearly half-past twelve."

"I finished my book, but I still couldn't sleep. So I came down for another." She moves around the settee, running her fingertips along the upholstered arm, and perches at the edge of the cushion beside him. "What are you doing in the library in the middle of the night?"

"Catching up on the evening editions."

Mary's mouth twitches at his reference to Papa's earlier remark, but it is with genuine curiosity that she asks, "How did you get them? As Papa no longer subscribes to any of your papers. And the evening ones aren't available in the village."

"I made it worth your chauffeur's while to drive my valet to Ripon while we were at dinner."

Though Mary snorts, Richard's expression is impassive as he hunches forward, elbows propped on his knees and large fingers weaving together; when he speaks, his voice drops to a lower register.

"I hope it's only the storm keeping you awake, and not the memory of my unfortunate remarks about your evening gown."

Looking down at her hands bunching her nightdress in her lap, Mary uncurls her fingers and smoothes the fabric. "It was the truth, wasn't it? Aren't I always to believe you?"

"You do think the universe revolves around you. And the thing is, Mary--I don't fault you for it."

Without straightening up, Richard turns his head to look at her over his shoulder. "It's just that I hoped you'd granted me a place a bit nearer the centre."

Compelled by his frankness, Mary confesses, "I did invite you here to annoy Papa."
The lines of Richard's face deepen and he unclasps his fingers and reaches for his cigar again, but she catches his hand.

"That's not why I want you to stay."

"Oh, I was never going to leave before Monday, no matter how my company was received." Richard belies the challenging words by adjusting his fingers so that they wrap around her hand, the callused pads stroking over her knuckles. "I learned a long time ago that even when other people make you an unwilling player in their little games, you can still win."

"I'm relieved to hear you intended to make the best of it," comes Mary's dry reply. But she means it when she says, "Perhaps it can still be better than that? For both of us?"

"That depends."

"On?"

To her chagrin, Mary feels bereft when Richard releases her hand and sits up. However, as he turns slightly on the settee and slips an arm behind her, propping himself on his elbow against the cushioned back, his warmth touches her even though his body does not. He meets her gaze levelly.

"Why do you want me to stay?"

Though she hates the answer she must give, and knows Richard won't much like it, either, she owes him the dignity of the truth and can only hope that it will count for something.

"I don't know." Relieved that he doesn't flinch, she goes on, "I'm afraid it's all rather new to me, knowing what I want. Knowing that I can want."

Is it her imagination that his face draws closer to hers now? She feels his breath on her skin, smells the earthiness of his cigar, and imagines she can taste it, too, as her gaze drops to settle on his lips. He raises his other hand from where it rests on his thigh to her cradle her neck, his thumb pressing lightly against the roll of her throat as she swallows.

"I was rather hoping you could teach me." She leans in to him. "Since you always know what you want."

"And always get it," he says against her mouth, almost too gently for the possessive words—but then, as if hearing her thoughts, he tilts his head to the side and claims her lips with his own.

Mary's hand goes to his neck, as it did the last time he kissed her—though this, she quickly becomes aware, is the only similarity between the two experiences. In fact she may as well consider herself to have no prior experience kissing a man whatsoever, as the soft yet insistent press of his lips, coaxing hers apart, gives way to the tip of his tongue meeting hers. Richard seems to savour this touch for a moment before pushing fully into her mouth, at which point her breath hitches and she pulls back from him, dizzy, a flush burning over her skin.

Until now, she never considered what parts of the mouth other than the lips could be involved in a kiss. Richard must think her so naïve, so young. Why, her hair is partially tied back from her face with a ribbon, she recalls as his fingers, which still rest at the base of her neck, not allowing her to shy very far away from him, weave through her hair and brush the grosgrain.
"I'm afraid that was rather improper," he murmurs against her cheek.

Fighting a shiver induced by his breath in her ear, Mary draws a long breath to school her blush into submission. The edges of her mouth seem to prickle with the lingering warmth and moisture of his covering them. She places a hand to the front of his shirt and feels his firm chest beneath the fine cotton, his heartbeat startlingly steady given the circumstances, which make her own pulse erratically behind her ribcage, and pushes against him back so she may look him in the eye.

"I want improper." Mary presses her mouth hard against his; beneath her fingertips, his pulse accelerates with the bold push of her tongue between his lips, and his throat rumbles with a low sound of pleasure.

He slides his hand down the side of her neck, and though once she would rather have died than own to it, she can't deny how much she likes the roughness of his skin against hers, for once unimpeded by gloves. Two fingers slip into the notches at either side of her collarbone, chafing the sensitive skin as his palm settles at the neckline of her nightgown, just skimming the dip in her chest. When she clasps her hand over his, pressing the heel of his hand into the valley between her breasts, he bites down on her lower lip, raking his teeth across it as his other arm moves from the back of the settee to wrap around her shoulders. Instinctively Mary leans back in his embrace, but Richard pushes back, holding her firmly upright.

His mouth leaves hers and for a moment she fears she has gone too far, that he is bringing the passionate moment to an end. But his eyes remain closed, she notes, and then he abruptly dips his head, his hair tickling her cheek as he kisses a path along her jaw and down her neck. The day's growth of beard on his chin stings her collarbones where his fingers rubbed it, only for him to soothe it with his lips.

Mary bites back a groan that forms in her own throat, Granny's words suddenly leaping to the front of her mind about females not being meant to experience passions in the same way that men do. As Richard's passions compel him to slip long fingers beneath the lace edge of her dressing gown, the heat of his palm reaching her breast through the thin cotton of her nightdress as he curves his hand over it and squeezes lightly, she shoves aside that most unwelcome voice and allows her own to speak, instead. "Richard..."

As pleasant as his kisses are in the hollow of her throat, she wants his attentions on her mouth again. She cups his jaw in one hand, tilting his head up toward her face. At once he acquiesces, but just as they lean in to seek each other's lips again, a clap of lightning flashes the library bright as day and shakes the house on its foundations. The lightbulb in the lamp sizzles and goes out with a pop, and they leap apart as though they have been struck.

Mary twists around on the settee, grateful for Richard's hand resting on her shoulder as they peer out the windows, watching the storm she all but forgot about rage. Silhouetted against the white sheets of lightning, the boughs of the centuries-old cedars in the park whip about with all the suppleness of saplings.

"Do you think someone's warning us against our improper behaviour?" she asks.

"You heard what I said before dinner about my belief in God, didn't you?" Richard's hand slides off her shoulder as he stretches his arm across her still rapidly rising and falling chest, drawing her back against him.

"You said you weren't interested in God." Mary turns her head, their noses bumping as at the same
moment he leant in to kiss her cheek. She pecks his lips, then, curling her hands over his forearm, returns her gaze to the windows. "I'm not, either, particularly."

"But you do believe he exists." It's not a question, and Richard doesn't wait for an answer before he does ask, "Do you believe he cares what improper things you get up to with men in the library?"

"Or do I care if he does?"

"Mm. I suppose that is the philosophical angle I find most compelling at the moment. Do you?"

"Not whether God does, no. But Papa..."

With a sigh, Mary disentangles herself from Richard's embrace and turns to sit the right way around on the settee. She eyes the door, the intermittent flashes of lightning in the dark casting weird shadows over the carvings. She sands and smooths her nightdress and draws the folds of her dressing gown more properly around herself once more.

"We're probably not the only people the storm's keeping awake," she says.

"You're right. You should go. Wouldn't want to be caught in a compromising position with the undesirable suitor."

"Don't be like that," Mary says heavily. But, turning back to him, she sees how he sits hunched with his arms on his knees much as during their earlier discussion, and softens.

"I mean I don't want to give Papa any more reasons to think you undesirable."

Richard lifts his head, enough light filtering in through the windows that she can make out his expression, a smirk at the corner of his mouth seeming to pull away the lines of insecurity. "Thank you. Though it's not so much my desirability to the Earl of Grantham as to his daughter that matters to me."

"I should think I made that rather obvious a moment ago," Mary replies, grateful for the dark as her cheeks grow warm.

"Quite," Richard replies, his hand settling on her hip as she bends to brush a kiss to his mouth, her own quirking into a smile as she draws back--too soon, as indicated by his soft sigh.

"So tomorrow we'll find a place a little more private than the Downton Public Library."
The Hunt

Chapter Summary

While the Crawley family are seemingly on the hunt for Richard to err in points of country etiquette, the offenses they do each other prove much more on the mark.

"You'd never guess there was a storm last night, would you?" says Anna, drawing back the heavy drapes from Mary's bedroom window to reveal a clear sky and patches of white-gold dappling the grass. "I hope it didn't keep your ladyship awake."

"I hardly slept," Mary confesses, quite truthfully, though her lips curve in a smile as they touch the cool china rim of her teacup at the thought of how little the storm had to do with her wakefulness. What would Anna think of how she occupied herself in the small hours of the night? "In fact I went down to the library. The electricity went out."

"Yes, Mr Carson said he got up to check if everything was in order after that big crash of thunder and discovered a burnt-out bulb in one of the lamps."

Mary stifles a cough as she swallows her tea too quickly at the realisation of how close she and Richard came to being caught in the act. Not that Carson would ever betray her confidence—he proved that by delivering all Richard's telegrams to her—but still, the mere idea of being found locked in a man's passionate embrace would be as mortifying if witnessed by the butler as by her own father. And while she can roll her eyes at Papa's red-faced rage, she can imagine nothing that would shame her more effectively than Carson regarding her with disappointment between those heavy eyebrows. Though she supposes his disappointment would be more bearable than Papa's, if only it were her scandalous behaviour he disapproved of, and not the man she behaved scandalously with.

"What would you like to wear for church this morning, m'lady?"

Anna, opens the wardrobe; she herself is not wearing her uniform, but her Sunday dress and hat. She takes out the new dark green day dress Mary wore to Agnes' wedding last month, and Mary shakes her head. Richard has seen her in it—though that's not strictly the reason she rejects it.

"My brown wool walking skirt, I think. It'll hide mud better than the grey, should Sir Richard and I encounter any."

"Are you planning to take the shortcut through the pasture to church, then?"

In almost anyone else it would be impudence, but Anna's lips purse to tease Mary, not to reproach, as she hangs up the dress and gets out the requested clothing without argument. Mary looks down at the bulges of her feet, fidgeting beneath the bedclothes. When did she begin to care so much for the good opinions of the servants? She hasn't the faintest idea—unless it's that she's given up in despair of having it from the people who ought to matter.

"And I'm sure Mama has instructed you to lay out my hunting clothes in the downstairs dressing room," she says, setting her teacup on the bedside table and throwing back the coverlet to get out of
bed. "You needn't bother with that. I have no intention of riding today."

Anna is just doing up the last of Mary's buttons at the nape of her neck when a rap at the door scarcely precedes Sybil bursting into the bedroom, Edith peering in from the doorway.

"You're staying behind from church?" says the former, after a cursory sweep of her blue eyes over her eldest sister's outfit. "I don't want to go, either."

"I don't care where you go," Mary replies, pushing back her hair, which has been gathered over her shoulder to allow Anna access to the buttons, "so long as it's not with me. I'm taking Sir Richard about the grounds."

"You shan't have to worry about that," Edith says, "because she'll be attending services with Papa and me. You see, Mary, this is what comes of welcoming the attentions of godless newspaper men. You're not only corrupting yourself, but impressionable young girls, as well."

"I'm sixteen years old!" Sybil retorts. "I'm not a child."

"Of course you're not, darling." Mary seats herself on the dressing table bench, in the mirror seeing the amused twitch of Anna's pursed lips as the maid takes her place behind to arrange Mary's hair. "But you must consider Edith's viewpoint--which is that of a Victorian aunt."

Sybil giggles, but Anna's smirk fades, her gaze darting briefly from Mary's hair as Edith replies, "Of course, we must also consider the possibility that you are the corrupting influence. Sir Richard, after all, can hardly be expected to know better."

Even after her footsteps retreat down the hall, Edith's presence lingers in the form of a guilty knot in the pit of Mary's stomach.

It loosens, however, when Sybil shuts the door and says, "Edith's had a few choice words about how rude you and Sir Richard were to each other last night."

"Yes, she mentioned something to me about deserving each other." Mary's eyes left her own in the mirror to meet Sybil's bright blue ones, just to the side of Anna's reflection in the mirror. "You don't think he's rude, do you?" she asked. "I thought he'd won you over with all that talk of servants and secretaries."

"I think you and he are...very evenly matched."

"How diplomatic."

Mary turns sideways on the bench as Sybil strides to the dressing table with purposeful steps.

"I'm sure Sir Richard only said those things to you because he was embarrassed and hurt that you invited him here in secret."

Sybil has it exactly right--and she's probably the only person in the world who can utter the truth in those breathily sympathetic tones and not chafe Mary's conscience. Though that may not have been the case if she and Richard hadn't already decided to kiss and be friends.

"He must have thought you were ashamed of him," Sybil goes on. "Or...or that you don't love him. You do, don't you?"
Mary returns her gaze to her own reflection as Anna twists a section of her hair back from her face and pins it at the back of her head. "Aren't I supposed to make him court me a bit longer before I answer that question?"

"When have you ever done what you're supposed to?" Sybil's skirt flounces as she spins away to the wardrobe.

"Says the girl who secretly taught me to tango."

Plucking Mary's duster off its hanger, Sybil takes the ends of the sleeves in her hands and leads the coat back across the bedroom as if it is her partner in the illicit dance. "That may be true, Mary--but which of us went to a nightclub and danced it?"

~*~

Papa's voice drifts from the dining room to Mary and Sybil as they come down to breakfast, inquiring, with undisguised surprise, about Edith's plans to ride out with the hunt this afternoon. "That's usually more Mary's thing, isn't it?"

When Edith replies how much she's looking forward to seeing "dear Evelyn" again and meeting the Turkish Ambassador's son, whom she's "certain will prove a fascinating conversationalist." Mary very nearly does an about-face back upstairs to catch Anna and tell her she'll need her riding clothes after all, when she notices that the very person for whom she has declined the hunt is absent from the room.

"Hasn't Sir Richard come down?" she asks Carson, who stands sentry by the sideboard looking not entirely comfortable in his Sunday clothes, not shirking his post until the last possible moment when he must join the rest of the staff for their walk to the village for church. "I'd pegged him for an early riser."

She does not add every day of the week or even though he isn't a churchgoer.

"He requested toast and coffee--" Carson fairly chokes out the word "--in the library, m'lady."

"Toast? And coffee?" Edith echoes the words as well as the tones of disgust.

Mary bites back a sharp retort, not wanting poor Carson to be caught in the crossfire of a shot aimed at Edith, though Papa lays down his newspaper and regards Mary as if she is to blame for this atrocity that has apparently been committed against civilised English breakfast.

"I suppose I must interrupt my breakfast to inform your houseguest that he's welcome at my table."

"Is he my houseguest? It's not my house. Nor will it ever be. So I'm told."

Following her father through the saloon, the submissiveness of the action belied by the words that preceded it, Mary's breath hitches as the carved oak library door looms ahead. She half-expects to find Richard in exactly the same manner as she left him here just a few hours earlier, stretched out on the settee in his dinner clothes. Some of them, anyway.

Edith takes one step into the library after Papa passes through, then wheels back to say in low tones to Mary, "Not interested in God recreationally, but apparently interested in recreation?"
For Richard, Mary sees as she pushes past Edith--her eyes widening, and then shutting--is *not* dressed in dinner clothes. It could hardly be worse if he was.

No, the newspaper magnate wears full tweeds, the crossed legs of his trousers encased to the knees in sturdy leather gaiters.

*Shooting* clothes.

On a Sunday.

"Didn't he say he doesn't hunt?" Edith gives a snort of laughter, clearly not appalled by Richard's *faux pas* so much as pleased with the opportunity it affords her to mock.

Though no one has ever remarked on a familial resemblance between the elder two Crawley girls, Mary gawps at her sister and wonders whether the sharp dark eyes and lips curled in a sneer are what others see when they look at her.

"Morning, Carlisle."

Papa's greeting draws Mary from her reflections, any self-examination abandoned for the more readily evident fault in his lack of warmth or even any real cordiality--to which Richard responds in kind, lowering his newspaper--he must have sent his valet to the village again for the copy of the *Sunday Telegram* which her father eyes as if the headline were a personal affront--but not rising from the settee or even arranging himself in a more respectful sitting position.

"Lord Grantham."

"I hope tomorrow's paper won't feature a story about the Downton kitchens not being able to produce a better breakfast than a piece of toast. Mrs Patmore would be mortified." Papa pauses, as if in expectation of a chuckle at his little joke; Mary smirks--at Richard's failure to gratify him with anything more than a slight twitch of the corner of his mouth. "Come, join the girls and me before service."

"I hardly doubted the bounty of your table," says Richard, still not rising from the settee as he picks up his coffee cup and saucer from the side table. "I'm not in the habit of taking more than toast and coffee for breakfast. I simply haven't the time before the morning commute to the office."

"Well you're in no rush this morning," Mary says, stepping forward with a smile as he takes a drink. "And luncheon won't be served till one, so you'll want something rather heartier than toast before we set off on our expedition."

A dimple reveals itself beneath Richard's cheekbone as he swallows his coffee.

"Expedition? You do appeal to my spirit of adventure, Lady Mary." As he uncrosses his legs and moves to sit at the edge of the sofa, hands on his thighs poised to stand, Mary thinks how strange his formal address strikes her, after the intimate moment shared here last night, though she knows he must speak to her so in company. "I thought when you invited me for a weekend in the country that you meant to amuse me with leisurely strolls about the grounds. Now I wonder if I shall have to keep an eye out for wild animals."

"Fortunately you're dressed to kill," says Edith.
Mary snaps her head toward her sister and feels her face redden, not with rage but once again with mortification on Richard's behalf; the colour burns hotter and deeper in her cheeks when his movement catches the corner of her eye and she sees him push slowly to his feet, regarding Edith a little askance. As if he understands how she has insulted him, but cannot entirely believe that she has.

He wore a similar expression yesterday, when he realised Mary did not inform anyone of his attendance prior to his arrival. It preceded grabbing her by the arms and backing her against a park bench.

"Sir Richard?" Sybil intervenes, before Richard's anger has time to take root and grow--not that Mary expects any such scene here, in the presence of others, especially not Papa. "I haven't stopped thinking about our discussion last night at dinner. About secretaries. I wondered...are you looking for one?"

Mary's eyes again flutter shut, this time with gratitude.

"Why?" Richard asks, and she opens her eyes to see him smiling slightly. "Would you like to interview for a position?"

"No, but Gwen would."

"As a matter of fact," Richard says, turning away from her to pick up his newspaper from the settee and folds it, "I'm not in the market for a secretary."

For a moment Sybil looks crestfallen, but then flashes her a broad grin. "But how can I say no to earls' daughters who want to help working class girls better themselves?"

Mary darts her eyes sidelong to see Papa glaring at Richard as he rubs the bridge of his nose between his thumb and third finger.

"Tell Miss..."

"Dawson," Sybil supplies.

"Tell Miss Dawson that should she have a free hour today, I'll meet with her." Over Sybil's exultant clasping of her hands, he goes on, his voice deepening into the professional tone Mary recalls from the tour of the Telegram offices, though amusement still lights his eyes, "I may not have a suitable position, but the experience will be invaluable. I guarantee she'll never face a more rigorous interviewer than me."

"The servants are all headed out for church," Sybil says, breathlessly, undaunted by Richard's warning. "She could do it now!"

"Tell her to bring her typewriter down," Richard says after her as she scurries toward the door. "Unless Lord Grantham has one?"

Ignoring him, Papa admonishes, "My dear, it's Sunday, for Pete's sake. Leave the poor girl alone."

"And Sir Richard," Mary says as Sybil brushes past their father, her relief that they've got past the nastiness with Edith replaced by a measure of annoyance that the one family member who supports her position will deprive her of her suitor's company more successfully than any of the others. "He finally has a chance to eat breakfast."
"As I said, I'm used to going without," Richard says, not taking Mary's hint. When she rolls her eyes, however, he draws a little nearer to her. "Though I suspect you are not used to accustomed to putting off your expeditions an hour to accommodate the whims of a working man?"

Mary lifts her chin, her lips mirroring the slightly mocking curve of his mouth. "You were late to the Ritz, and delayed our tour of the Telegram. I'd say I'm becoming quite accustomed."

In her periphery, she notices Papa's broad chest fall with a heavy exhale--as if in relief--and realises he might think this whole debacle about Richard's clothes and working habits have put her off the newspaperman. And she can't have that.

"But you do always make it up to me," she says, allowing her voice and her smile to soften.

Richard's gaze drops a little lower down than her eyes, and Mary presses her lips together, remembering the warmth of his mouth on them, how willingly they opened to his tongue...

Sybil bursts back into the library, panting. "I caught Gwen on her way out. She's just fetching her typewriter from her room. It's in the attic, so she'll be a few minutes."

"Lord Grantham," Richard says, though his eyes are once more on Mary, "I trust since you'll shortly be at church yourself, I may conduct the interview here?"

"By all means, do continue to make yourself at home." Papa makes a show of looking at the mantel clock as he turns to leave, gesturing for his daughters to follow. "I believe there's time for another cup of tea and to finish the Times."

Edith sniggers, and Mary falls into step with her as they exit the library. "What? Can't come up with any clever little remarks of your own?"

"On the contrary--there are so many potential candidates that I can't make up my mind which one to use."

"That must be why we never hear anything about your suitors."

~*~

By the time Taylor is waiting out front with the car, not a member of the family is left out of the quarrel.

"But Mama," Sybil protests as Mary comes into the saloon after breakfast, her voice so very girlish that for a moment Mary isn't sure who the young woman pleading with their mother is, for expecting to see a child in plaits and bows stamping her foot. "I simply must be here for Gwen after her meeting with Sir Richard. For better or for worse...I'm the one who asked him to interview her. This is my responsibility."

"My point exactly," Mama says.

With a sigh and a shake of her head she sinks onto one of the chairs, conceding the advantage of height and yet still maintaining authority over her daughter through the very image she projects of being weary with the argument. A tactic which Mary, in particular, has come to hate--though even she must admit it's effectiveness.
"Sybil, you're the Earl of Grantham's daughter. It's bad enough that you took a housemaid away from Sunday worship. I won't allow you to demonstrate such a blatant disregard for religious matters, too."

Sybil looks to Mary for help, and though ordinarily she wouldn't intervene, her little sister did rescue Richard from Edith's snide remarks about his clothes. Shuddering again at the thought of his tweeds, Mary welcomes the distraction of the squabble.

"Aren't you staying behind, Mama, to welcome Mr Napier and the attaché?"

"Go and get your coat and hat, Sybil," Mama says, frowning at Mary. "Gwen will be finished with her interview by the time you're home from church."

"And back to work," Sybil mutters even as she obeys. "And I can still disregard religious matters even whilst sitting in a pew, you know!"

"My," says Mary, watching her little sister storm off to the front hall. "Was I that stroppy at sixteen?"

"Worse."

Slowly, Mary turns to her mother, meeting the bright blue glower with an arched eyebrow.

"I'm not going to argue with you about church," Mama says. "There's no point, since there isn't time for you to change into something appropriate. Though I've half a mind to send you like that--if your father wouldn't be humiliated."

"He'd just be grateful not to have Sir Richard sat on the family pew in his shooting tweeds."

"Shooting tweeds?" Mama goggles, then shakes herself. "For heaven's sake, don't try to change the subject, Mary. What's this I hear about you telling Anna not to prepare your hunting things?"

Who told? Not that it matters, since Mama would have noticed Mary wasn't mounted up sidesaddle in a flowing riding skirt and tophat alongside the Right Honourable Evelyn Napier. She doesn't think for a moment Anna is the telltale. More likely O'Brien--odious woman--noticed it was Edith's clothes Anna laid out, and not Mary's.

"Why should she," Mary asks, "when I'm not going hunting?"

"You love to hunt."

For a moment Mary feels wrong-footed, unsure how to proceed from this surprising response. She expected Mama to cock her head and purse her lips, exasperated by her daughter's impertinence, not this...confusion. Not this horrid feeling that after twenty years, her own mother doesn't know her. Not now, when Mary isn't entirely sure she knows herself.

"Not for husbands," Mary says, striding past Mama's chair across the Persian rug.

"I thought that was why you invited Sir Richard?"

Stopping short at the fringed edge of the rug, Mary studies the library door she unconsciously headed
for, then faces Mama again, palms opening at her sides, the wool of her skirt substantial as her fingertips brush it.

"Wouldn't his being here indicate I don't need to hunt him? Because he is, in fact, already caught?"

"What about Evelyn?"

"What about him?"

"Don't you think the son of a viscount would be a more appropriate match for an earl's daughter?"

"There are other earls' daughters. In this very house, in fact," she adds, glancing down the hall where Papa is helping Edith into her coat, the brown eyes imploring Mary as she imagines they must have done, in the dark of Aunt Rosamund's gust room, pleading for a chance with the young man.

"Why not push Edith at him?" Mary says, because…why not? The saddest part is that Edith looks almost grateful before she turns away to be ushered out the front door by Papa. But that's all the help she'll get from her sister, because Mary can't let the earlier nastiness go unpunished, and adds, before Edith is out of earshot, "They'd make a perfectly boring couple."

"And what sort of couple do you fancy you and Sir Richard would make?" Mama asks, getting up from her chair.

"Oh…a handsome one."

"Oh, Mary." Mama raises her hands to cup Mary's cheeks, her palms cool and smooth. "There's more to you than that. So much more."

The touch feels cold now, fingers clutching around her heart, stopping its beat. Richard's words. How they made her hope, when he spoke them. And then he kissed her.

Mary shrinks back from her mother's touch. Most of all, from her pity.

"Then stop trying to give me away."
The Chase

Chapter Summary

More suitors arrive at Downton in pursuit of Mary, but which will she chase?

Richard's broad shoulders seem to fill the space between the columns where he stands in the centre of the folly, taking in the view of Downton in all its midday glory from the elevated vantage point across the east lawn. As so many other visitors to the house have done. As Mary herself has done for as long as she can remember. Not the heir to all of it, yet near enough, her eventual marriage to Patrick a sure thing.

Now, she can hardly bear to look at it. Instead, she studies Richard in profile, seeing Papa's estate anew through pale blue eyes narrowed beneath the heavy brow. Appraising, but not admiring--sizing up the Abbey, not as a hundred rooms or even as hundreds of years' history, but as if it were just another adversary to overcome, no different from the ones he faces every day on Fleet Street. Last May she balked at his presumption that his lot and hers played on a level field, much less that he could win, or should win. In any case, that she wants him to triumph is a testament to how far she's come.

Or fallen.

The latter seems to be the case for Richard at the moment. Not precisely defeated--Mary notes the ripple of taut muscle beneath his smooth-shaven cheek as he grinds his teeth, and the way the fingers of his right hand flex and then clench, white-knuckled, as he passes his fedora off to the left one; nobody that tense could concede loss--but a measure of his confidence seems to seep out of him with the long breath he exhales through his nostrils. When he strode across the ballroom to her at Agnes Belcher's engagement party, despite their not having been introduced and her being dressed in mourning, she never would have pictured him slumped against a column of a Grecian folly, the tweed rasping over the stone as his shoulder leans into it.

"I shouldn't deal too harshly with your tailor," Mary says. "It's good tweed, and a handsomely made suit." The corners of her mouth twitch to smile, and she's glad she stands behind him as she can't resist adding, "If worn for the proper occasion."

"Which is a shooting party. Which this party is not."

"Frankly I'm not sure it's been much of a party at all."

That at least coaxes Richard to turn his head so that she can see a little more of his sulky expression. It's the most he's looked at her since he concluded his interview with Gwen and Mary's innocent inquiry as to whether he was ready to explore their grounds was met with gruff sarcasm which gave way to his concern that he ought to change clothes first. Mary at first feigned ignorance as to why he should, but Richard persisted. You are as bad at lying as Lady Edith is at being subtle, he said, giving her no choice but to tell him the truth, which was no doubt as uncomfortable as being attired in the wrong outfit for the wrong occasion; as it turned out, he had the suit made especially for the weekend. Rather predictably, upon learning he wore a shooting costume, he suggested that the poor
tailor who was as ill-informed about country fashions as he might meet the same fate as the editor of *The Sketch*.

"I daresay you'll be invited to shoot one of these days," Mary says. "Your tweeds won't go to waste."

There is a deepening in his cheek that is not quite a dimple, and a curve of her lips that is not a smile, and Richard shifts, leaning back against the column. "While I appreciate your implication that my fashion *faux pas* doesn't matter to you, I don't think you entirely appreciate how very much it matters to me."

Mary slips into the space between him and the other pillar, mirroring his position, except that she clasps gloved hands before her. "Don't I? Didn't you say the very first night we met that things are the same for the daughters of aristocrats and men not born wealthy?"

"Rather a broad paraphrase."

"Nevertheless, the point stands."

She looks out across the lawn to see the staff strolling up the lane from the village, laughing and chatting and comfortable as Mary seldom sees them, in their Sunday best. A blur of red out the corner of her eye draws her attention to Gwen, dressed once more in her blue morning uniform and cap, coming round the house from the servants' entrance. She grasps Anna's hands, and the young women bounce up and down together on the gravel as the former shares the good results of her interview, to be caught in the embrace of the latter. As if they were sisters. Not that Mary has experience with such unbridled emotion; her heart gives a sharp twinge beneath her ribs as the two young housemaids retreat beyond the house, arms affectionately about one another. Not even with Sybil.

"Don't you think I realise that with my lot, life is one endless play in which we must don a succession of costumes to suit whichever part is required of us in a particular moment?"

"Have you ever worn the wrong costume, Mary? Have you been allowed to?"

"No," Mary replies, sighing. "But I think I should like to. I think I should very much like to be who I really am. I'm tired of acting a part." She swings her gaze back to Richard's: keen eyes which spied her in the midst of all the bright things who were more likely to flock around such a suitor and never once wavered in his pursuit of her. "I feel I don't have to, with you."

His shoes scuff across the paved floor as he pushes off the column and takes a step nearer to her, his lips curving upward in a slight smile. His free hand reaches out and he scuffs the backs of his curled fingers across her cheekbone. "As glad as I am that you feel that way--and I assure you, it is, entirely, mutual..." He lowers his hand, and his smile falls with it. "...alas, you and I are not the only two people in the world we have to please."

"Are you saying you mean to play by the rules?"

"Until I'm above them, yes."

"So you *are* a social climber."

"I've sold a lot of newspapers and made a lot of money." Richard's voice rises with his irritation.
"Someone thought that was worth a knighthood--and yet to the old guard I'm nothing more than an interloper."

He raises his left hand, still clutching the brim of his trilby, and braces it against the column. When he speaks again, his tone is lower, restrained once more.

"Do you remember in my office, when you looked down and saw the newsboy on the corner?"

Mary thinks he could almost be looking down on Downton from his fifth floor office window, so similar is his stance in the folly. "You said they reminded you how far you'd come. And may yet go."

"A more accurate way of putting it would be how far I must yet go. Because I can't go back."

"To Edinburgh? To your family?" His father was a printer, he told her. Though she can't remember, now, if he spoke in the past tense. "Are your parents...?"

"Still living," Richard spares her the awkwardness of the full inquiry. "I shouldn't imagine you've spent a great deal of time amongst poor people, have you, Lady Mary? And by poor I don't mean impoverished but simply...people who work for a living."

She looks away, though she knows he can't miss the high colour that burns up from her collar to her cheekbones. "I've visited the tenant cottages from time to time."

"Then you do know that the poor are not...comfortable...in the presence of wealth? And vice versa?"

If she's honest with herself, Mary hasn't thought about it quite that way before--though she will never admit it to Richard. He probably knows, anyway. Definitely knows, she amends, darting a sidelong glance and seeing his eyebrows raised above his telltale smirk. She always thought that awkwardness between herself and those of lower rank, of no rank at all, was simply the social order. Knowing one's betters.

She never considered how that divide would play out within a family when these boundaries were crossed.

Facing him again, her expression softens. "I suppose it hardly helps that you're Sir Richard now."

"Quite."

"A title's not enough to grant you full entrance into my world, though. Do you fancy a peerage will?"

"I don't know. I do know that at the moment, the only house where I really care about being accepted is Downton. Unfortunately," he says, the tenderness in his voice tinged once more with the hard edge, "your family have made it abundantly clear that I am a most unwelcome houseguest."

The downward pull of the lines of his face tugs at Mary's heart as well, and she looks at the mud-spattered toes of her walking boots beneath the hem of her skirt. She admitted last night that she invited him to annoy Papa, but it truly never occurred to her that her entire family would be so openly disapproving of him. That there might be a possibility of never seeing him again after this.

That the prospect of being separated from him could ache as much as she imagines the separation
"Sybil has never welcomed any visitor more," she says, twitching her lips in a poor attempt at humour, to which Richard responds with a mirthless puff of laughter as he removes his hand from the pillar to smooth his hair in back before donning his hat again.

"If only it was Sybil to whom I must apply for permission to marry you."

"I'm twenty-one," Mary replies. "You're a man of bold and modern values. Do you need permission?"

She surprises even herself with the steadiness of her voice against the erratic beat in her chest at Richard's unadorned declaration of intent.

He wants to marry her.

He does not expect that she will reject his offer, nor even seem to entertain the possibility.

She ought to find this attitude galling, but instead she likes his confidence. Prefers it, at any rate, to pretend humility on bended knee and assertions of unworthiness. As if she would for a moment consider accepting a man who is not worthy of her. And accept Richard Carlisle, she will.

His hands settle on her waist, his grip firm through her autumn outdoor clothing, the column hard at her back as he leans in to her.

"No," he answers. "Of course I don't need it. But I mean to do things properly."

Mary tilts her face up to his, confident that she will feel his lips on hers. Richard turns his head to nuzzle her cheek instead.

"You could be in for rather a long wait before Papa gives his cheerful consent."

"I didn't build a newspaper empire on impatience, Mary." Richard's breath is hot in the hollow between her earlobe and the curve of her jaw.

"Well, I've never been very good at waiting." She catches his chin between the tips of her fingertips. "I'm a spoiled earl's daughter."

She draws his face up to hers, allowing her palm to slide over his smooth jawline as their mouths meet not in the tentative beginnings of a new kiss, but in a continuation of the one shared last night in the library, just before the moment the lightning startled them apart. Or perhaps it is where their kiss on the balcony of Claridge's would have led, if Edith did not interrupt. Or where they were headed all along from the moment she challenged him that no man wanted to kiss a girl in black.

One of Richard's hands skims upward from her waist beneath the edge of her coat to curl over her breast as he pushes her against the column; the other drifts down to settle on the jut of her hipbone before descending still lower, cupping her bottom, lightly at first, then squeezing as he draws her leg up along the outside of his thigh and leans his hips into hers. Mary's touches are not so bold as his, though she nonetheless flouts convention by hooking her fingers over the knot of his necktie, tugging it loose so she can unbutton his collar and enjoy the swell of his Adam's apple and the vibrations of his throat as he makes low sounds of response.
That Richard desires her is evident, even from Mary's inexperienced vantage point, though what he intends to do about that, here and now in the folly when at any moment Papa and her sisters are due home from church and Mama's guests in for the hunt, she cannot see. Perhaps this, too, is simply a declaration of intent.

In any case, the decision is once again made for them--for now. If last night's interruption by the crack of lightning seemed to signify a nebulous Someone warning them apart, the roar of an engine and the crunch of gravel beneath automobile wheels reminds Mary of her inescapable motive for inviting him this weekend, whatever reasons may have blossomed for her wanting him to stay. She breaks the kiss and finds her footing.

"Come, Sir Richard," she says, the address incongruously formal in juxtaposition with her actions of doing up his collar and straightening his tie. "It's time for you to meet the man Mama wants me to marry."

~*~

Evelyn Napier's familiar drawl drifts through the blue and red marble columns and vaulted stone ceiling of the entry hall, seemingly carried on the lower murmurs of Mama and Papa, as Mary and Richard stand in the vestibule whilst Carson helps them out of their coats. When was the last time she spoke to the viscount's son? What did they talk about? She cannot remember. She only recalls thinking how the syllables glide from his mouth not in the affectation of boredom adopted by so many of her lot, but because his speech is, itself, boring.

The instant her arms slide from her coat sleeves, Mary squares her shoulders and steps forward on the crimson runner, as if braced to meet the onslaught of insipid chatter, but Richard's long fingers curl around her elbow, pulling her back to his side as Carson peers down his beaky nose at them before sweeping away to deposit their outdoor things in the cloakroom.

"Your mother wants you to marry Mr Napier." Richard stoops to speak low in her ear. "But does he want to marry you?"

"I don't think he came here to hunt foxes any more than you did."

Mary looks up to see his forehead creased as he squints down the hall to the saloon. His jealousy intrigues and amuses for how closely it follows the attitude of assurance that she will accept his offer of marriage--and though she is certain she will, she still finds it reassuring to know that Richard Carlisle is not the only man who wants her for his wife, after Papa suggested that she is worth less without Downton.

Richard's fingertips press deeper into her elbow. "Little does he realise his quarry is already caught."

Meeting his smirk with a raised eyebrow, Mary says, "Oh no. I'm the hunter."

"So long as I'm your prey," he murmurs against her mouth as he leans in to press a quick but nonetheless daring kiss to her lips, the vestibule open to the saloon--and her family.

Including Granny, Mary observes the instant they walk through, perches at the edge of an armchair, knuckles flexing around the handle of her cane as she regards Mary with pursed lips that seem to say see knows exactly what her granddaughter and the newspaper man have been up to. Exactly the expression she wore across the tea-table that day she deemed it pertinent to educate Mary about passion between the sexes.
Gripped with guilt, Mary glances behind her, checking whether Granny could have witnessed the entryway tête-à-tête. Or perhaps she saw them in the folly whilst disembarking the car after church...

Shaking off the ridiculous fear, she turns around again and nearly collides with Sybil, who's broken rank from her parents and Evelyn to rush toward Richard with shining eyes, the ends of her hair ribbon streaming out behind her.

"I knew Gwen would impress you and you'd just have to hire her!"

"On a trial basis, I hope she told you. Miss Dawson has a lot to learn, and I made that very clear in her interview." Richard's sharp features soften with an indulgent smile for Sybil. "But she's also determined and ambitious—two qualities which never fail to impress. She'll be better served learning from my own secretary Miss Fields than muddling through on her own."

"I don't imagine many correspondence courses teach secretaries how to telephone their employers' girlfriends to meet them at Lyons for luncheon," Mary says, catching Richard's eye before sweeping off to greet Evelyn.

At her approach, Papa steps back to stand beside Granny's chair, while Mama excuses herself to engage Richard in conversation about the morning's walk.

"Mr Napier," Mary says, a sideways glance revealing Richard to be more attentive to Evelyn shaking her hand than to answering Mama's inquiry as to how he found the folly. Smiling at the newcomer, she says, in a tone Richard won't be able to miss, "How we missed you at last night's little party to honour the future Earl and Countess of Grantham."

"I was just telling your mother that I hated to decline her invitation, but it felt wrong to intrude on a family affair." Evelyn's gaze also drifts to Richard, the bland smile faltering slightly as—Mary fancies—he sizes up his rival for her affections. "All the more so when I knew I'd have Mr Pamuk with me."

"If only I had your excuse." Over Evelyn's shoulder, she spies Papa's face drawn in a frown, but any pleasure she might have felt at wounding him is diminished considerably by the ache in her own chest that he is offended on Matthew's behalf.

"Where is your foreign friend?" she asks, too brightly.

"Preening. Kemal's a bit of a dandy, you see. Couldn't bear the thought of taking luncheon in travelling clothes, even though I told him we'll be changing again in an hour for the hunt."

"I appreciate the desire to make a good first impression," Richard says, leaving Mama to stand at Mary's side; the rough sleeve of his jacket rubs against her shoulder, and she glances up to see his neck reddened above his collar.

"He needn't have worried himself. I've already painted quite a vivid picture of Mr Pamuk in my mind," Mary says, hoping to alleviate Richard's resurgence of self-consciousness in his inappropriate garb with her levity. She tilts her head and gives him a smile, heedless of her other suitor. "Or perhaps that was the cartoon of the Turkish delegation that ran in last week's Times."

Satisfied to see Richard's lips curve at her reference to Lady Strallan at the engagement dinner, Mary returns her attention to Evelyn.
"I always find the caricatures of foreigners to be depicted with particular accuracy."

"Not in this case, I'm sorry to say."

"Fortunately for Mr Pamuk," Edith interjects. Has she been standing there all this while? "Our poor governesses threw up their hands in despair of Mary's ever being able to produce a good likeness."

Evelyn turns his head slightly in Edith's direction, but his eyes remain fixed on Mary. "I rather wish Lady Mary's interpretations of Mr Pamuk was accurate."

"How did you become acquainted with the Turkish ambassador's son?" Edith persists, stepping forward to insinuate herself further into the conversation. "I'm sure it must be a fascinating--"

"Ah." Evelyn looks beyond, nodding in the direction of the staircase. "Here he comes now."

The figure descending Downton's oaken staircase is so unlike the caricature of a Turk Mary envisioned that she cannot stop her eyes and mouth forming os of surprise. At the faint brush of Richard's jacket against her back, however, the beating within her breast quickens; the tall, dark, and handsome young man coming down the steps with an almost feline grace couldn't possibly make her feel what Richard did last night in the library, or this morning in the folly. Which, she imagines, is what Richard intended her to think when he moved to stand so close.

"Lady Mary," Evelyn drawls, "please allow me to introduce Mr Kemal Pamuk. Forgive me," he apologises to Richard as the attaché takes Mary's hand. "We've not been properly introduced."

"Sir Richard Carlisle."

"Lady Grantham didn't tell me she'd invited the press," Evelyn says, and Mama blusters.

"She didn't," Granny says, gripping her cane to push up from her chair, Papa's hand at her elbow to balance her.

"Sir Richard is Mary's particular friend," Edith says.

"And does he hunt as well as Lady Mary is purported to?" asks Mr Pamuk, rows of even white teeth revealed by a lopsided smile which Mary cannot decide is that of a boy or of a rake. "I have long admired Englishwomen's fondness for riding. You can imagine it's hardly the thing in Istanbul. Though I imagine sidesaddle must be rather less comfortable than astride."

Rake, then. "Alas I have no plans to ride today, Mr Pamuk."

"Surely having walked this morning, your afternoon--" Papa begins, but Mary cuts him off.

"Edith means to accompany the party." She arches an eyebrow at her sister in silent communication that this is payback for the particular friend remark. "I'm sure she can give you the full history of the English fox hunt."

Cheeks reddened, and unable to meet Mr Pamuk's gaze--even if it were not trained on Mary, dark and thick as Turkish coffee--Edith attempts to save face by addressing him. "You must be a student of history, as an ambassador's son."

"I prefer to live in the present," he says.
"Seize the moment?" Mary says.

The grin tilts at an even more seductive angle. "Precisely."

"An attitude which has served me well in the newspaper business," Richard interjects.

"Is it moments, you seize, Sir Richard," asks Granny, "or other people's servants?"

"You know I left London for a reprieve from conflict," Mr Pamuk says, leaning conspiratorially in toward Mary. "It seems I've arrived to find the denizens of Downton Abbey embroiled in a dispute of their own."

"Oh," says Mary, "Sybil was good enough to inform us all at dinner that one of the housemaids felt rather trapped here, and Sir Richard provided her a means of escape from the oppressions of the patriarchy."

She just catches Papa's eye before Granny's ostrich plumed hat blocks her line of sight.

"I don't know how it's done in Turkey, Mr Pamuk," Granny says, "but here poaching other people's servants is a sure sign of ill-breeding." Granny purses her thin lips for a moment as she appraises him before adding, "Through perhaps we shouldn't be so surprised, as you did don the appropriate costume."

A muscle tremor beneath the livid skin of Richard's cheek sends a shock of alarm through Mary that he will--deservedly--say something horrid to Granny. Before he can, however, Mr Pamuk intervenes.

"You English are a country of nannies, always trying to tell other people how to live their lives."

Richard turns rather stiffly away from Granny, but his shoulders visibly relax as he asks Mr Pamuk, "Would that be a commentary on the reason for your visit?"

"It might be."

"Are you a member of the Young Turks, Mr Pamuk?" Sybil inquires, ignoring a gentle admonishment from Mama.

"Oh dear," Mary says. "Are we going to seize the moment with politics?"

"I'd have thought you would welcome the subject of youthful rebellions," comes Edith's waspish reply.

"I know I do." Richard's gaze touches Mary briefly. "Perhaps an interview, Mr Pamuk, after luncheon? Telegram readers would like to hear yet another side of the story behind the Albanian talks."

"Another interview?" Edith voices the sentiment Mary must admit is in her mind.

"If you intend to spend your entire Sunday working, that's your affair," she says with a shrug. "I'm sure you will appreciate that Mr Pamuk needs time to dress for the hunt."

~*~
The library windows afford a full view of the hunting party convening in the drive, its ranks of members of the household and their guests padded out by neighbours, including some who attended Cousin Matthew's dinner the previous night. None of the ladies, Mary notes—especially not Edith—sits a horse quite like she does, as evidenced by the fact that the only men who attend them are the grooms, the others mounted up in pairs or trios, the rumbles of their voices just audible to Mary through the leaded glass panes in discussions she must presume to be about foxes, despite her earlier assertion that their real purpose here is an entirely different chase.

Evelyn's arm encased in a bright red sleeve draws Mary's eye. She watches him for a moment as he instructs his foreign friend in the finer points of the sport with all the authority granted him by the jacket that marks him a master hunter, comparing him to Richard in his ill-advised tweeds.

"You know if you'd wanted to ride, you needn't have stayed behind on my account," rasps the voice of the latter, at that moment striding through the library door behind her. "I could have amused myself till dinner."

"Writing up your interview with Mr Pamuk?" Mary says, not looking back at him as he approaches almost soundlessly on the Persian carpets. She runs her hand over the smooth oak window casing. "Is that how it will be?" Her definitive speculation stops just short of adding when we're married. "You'll work while I play?"

Papa suggested she do just that, when Richard intimated that his plan for the afternoon was to hole up with Gwen's typewriter, if his new employee would lend him the use of it, but Mary baulked. The future Countess of Grantham isn't hunting, she said, spitefully. Why should I?

"I hope you'll teach me to ride and hunt," Richard says, his fingers curling lightly over the window ledge next to her hands when he draws alongside her.

"Ah yes. So you can do things properly."

Richard's little finger stretches out to stroke the side of her hand. "Anyway, I wasn't really working just then."

"Oh?" Mary turns toward him as his hand wraps around hers. "You don't consider interviews work?"

"More diversionary tactics. In this case."

"Diverting who from what?"

"Why, Mr Pamuk. From you."

Richard's hold tightens around her hand, and Mary can't stop the corners of her mouth twitching at his thinly veiled jealousy.

"Did he seem interested? I hadn't noticed."

"Surely the talk about the merits of various riding styles didn't go over your head."

A hot blush prickling in her cheeks, Mary glances away, out the window. She pretends to be very interested in the hunting party moving off, Evelyn and Mr Pamuk spurring their mounts to the head
of the pack as the horn sounds above the barking of the hounds.

"As we walked through to luncheon," Richard says, "I overheard Lord Grantham remark to your mother that you had more suitors than the Princess Aurora."

"Is that why you said, Yes, won't it be interesting to see which one she accepts?"

At Richard's answering smirk, she rolls her eyes. He draws her hand up, brushing a kiss across the back.

Mary tries not to sound affected by the way his lips linger in the valleys between her knuckles. "You're awfully sure of yourself."

"Mmm. I'm also awfully sure that your father and Edith are out hunting, and that Sybil went home with your grandmother...Where is your mother?"

"Resting."

"Then it would appear we may carry on with what we started in the folly without fear of interruption."

Richard holds her hand against his chest as the fingers of his other hand cup her chin to tilt her face up for a kiss. Mary allows her lips to melt with his, but as he deepens the kiss and his hand leaves her face to settle at the small of her back, the sweep of his tongue into her mouth stirs her to decision. She breaks away, leaning back against his encircling arm.

"If you're concerned with doing things properly, oughtn't we go up to my bedroom?"

Clearly surprised--though not, Mary thinks, offended--his throat rolls as he swallows hard. "Are you suggesting a tryst?"

"Don't such things occur when couples find themselves alone in great houses?"

"They do. At least at the parties the Mannerses host at Belvoir." Richard's husky chuckle fades as he searches her eyes, his thumb tracing the bottom edge of her lower lip. "But Crawley manners are more restrained. I think I rightly assume you have not been a participant in these illicit activities?"

Mary nods, schooling a flush into submission at his only slightly delicate reference to her virginity. "Do you know precisely what those activities are?" he asks. "That is to say, it's my understanding that ladies like you receive little instruction about lovemaking until just before they are married."

Under ordinary circumstances, she would come back with a dry retort about his insinuation of her youthful naivety. But these are far from ordinary circumstances, with Richard's arm about her waist and his hand clasping hers to his chest so that she feels the strong quick beat of his heart as he scuffs his thumb over her knuckles, deep in discussion about becoming lovers, and she is quite glad that they can discuss it, that he does not simply take advantage of her ignorance as he could, so easily, do.

"Granny seemed to think it prudent to educate me before my wedding night."

"My God. You had the talk from your Victorian grandmother and didn't decide then and there to die
a spinster? I take it as a given that her advice was along the lines of lying back and thinking of England?"

"Something to that effect." Mary looks up at him for a moment, then says, "I don't want to wait for our wedding night, Richard. I want to be with you now."

She sees the flash of recognition in his eyes at her phrasing, identical to that which he used in his telegram after Papa ordered her home from London.

"Who am I to deny Lady Mary Crawley what she wants?" Richard replies, and kisses her. "Especially when it's exactly what I want?"

"And you always get what you want," Mary says, lacing their fingers together to lead him through the nearly vacant house to her bedroom.
As Mary's sexual education is put to the ultimate test, the hunt culminates in unexpected consequences.

For the first time in her life, the reflection Mary studies in her full-length mirror is not her own.

Richard followed her tentative lead through the corridor to the family rooms with due caution, but the instant they were ensconced within her bedroom the initiative was all his. He moves as confidently through it as every other space he occupies: shutting the door firmly behind them and turning the latch, striding to the mantel, then the bedside tables, where he strikes a match from his pocket to light the candles in their hurricane globes before going to the windows to draw the ivory brocade curtains shut against the daylight, finally stopping at the settee, where he shrugs out of the shooting jacket—looking rather relieved to do so—and drapes it over the curved arm.

When his fingers apply themselves to the task of unbuttoning his waistcoat, it occurs to Mary that she ought to be getting undressed, too. She raises her hands to her collar but continues to watch Richard. Waistcoat and necktie removed and folded over the jacket, he seats himself on the cream coloured cushions of the settee. He crosses one leg over his knee to unbuckle the leather gaiter and unlace his shoe; as he repeats the process on the other leg, he looks up and meets her eyes in the mirror.

"I suppose it's appallingly middle class of me to undress myself?" he asks, pulling off his half-boot. He lowers his stocking foot to the floor and places the shoe neatly beside its mate in front of the settee. "Valets and ladies' maids make for rather awkward trysts, I find."

His gaze drifts downward from her eyes, settling where her hands linger at her as yet buttoned collar, and the teasing gleam fades.

"Second thoughts?" he asks. "I swear to you, Mary, my intentions are honourable, but..." A dimple reveals itself in response to the eyebrow she lifts at his word choice, but he continues in all earnestness. "...if you are at all uncomfortable--"

Mary slips her top button out of its hole to prove that she is not. Noting the pleased curve of Richard's lips and the darkening of desire in his eyes as he pushes to his feet, she makes quick work of the rest.

He pads softly in his socks to stand just behind her, and his fingertips brush her shoulders as he eases her blouse off. She seeks his gaze in the mirror, but his eyes turn downward, fixed on the swell of her breasts above her chemise. Mary draws her bare arms out of the sleeves and reaches to undo the buttons at the back of her skirt; Richard pushes it down over her hips, then he catches her elbows to steady her as she steps out of it. Only then does he look up at their reflections, though his eyes still do not meet hers, instead raking over her figure as she stands in corset, chemise, and drawers.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to manage that myself," Mary says as he traces the delicate embroidered rosebuds about her bust line, "but I promise I won't look down on you for being too very common if
you stand in for Anna as well as your own valet." She assumes he's familiar with the operations of ladies' underpinnings.

"How very generous of you. But let's not rush things, shall we?"

Richard's fingers trail a tantalisingly slow path up from her corset, along the edge of her collarbones and up her neck to the hair coiled elaborately at her nape. He finds a pin and pulls it out, spilling a section of hair over her shoulder. He slides his fingers through the shiny dark strands, allowing them to curl around his hand as the other seeks another pin and releases more hair. How will she explain to Anna how her coif came entirely undone during a nap? When she notices the way Richard is looking at her--really at her, not just at her reflection as his hand on her shoulder turns her to face him--makes her cease to care about the consequences of this choice.

He pushes her flowing hair back over her shoulders and presses his rough palm to her cheek as she leans in for his kiss. At the urging of his other hand at the small of her back she presses her body to his, only to feel the soft brush of his shirt against her bare arms and chest. She pulls away; with a small sound of protest Richard dips his head to try and reclaim her lips, but Mary runs her hands up over his chest, holding him back.

"Once again you're not properly dressed for our activities."

"I trust you'll see to it that I am," he rasps, and she allows him to capture her mouth again, opening to the sweep of his tongue as she unfastens his buttons, working her way down from his collar.

When she reaches the top of his trousers she hesitates. Richard bites down gently on her lower lip, and, emboldened, she slips her hands inside his open shirt and traces the firm lines of his torso up to his muscular shoulders, bared by the sleeveless undershirt. His hands leave her to tug the straps of his braces down and pull his shirttails free of his trousers, though as he shrugs out of his shirt he never breaks the kiss. He circles her waist with his hands while hers slide along his well-defined biceps, which flex beneath her touch. Is he showing off? Or merely tensing in response to her? Either strikes Mary as endearing, and her lips start to curve into a smile against his until they part in an o of surprise as his fingers press into her ribcage and he spins her so abruptly away from him that she must catch the edge of her dressing table for balance.

"Remember you promised not to think this too common," he mutters, giving the ends of her corset laces a tug before he slips his long fingers beneath the criss-crossed ribbon to loosen them.

Her breath hitches. "Common isn't at all the word I had in mind."

Chuckling low, Richard leans over her shoulder to press his lips to the side of her neck. In the mirror Mary sees her skin flush above her chemise as the whites of her teeth appear to worry at her red lower lip to stifle her groan in response to him nipping at her collarbone. Wanting to feel the touch of his skin and warm kisses on every part of her body, she raises her hands to unfasten the corset's front hooks, but Richard covers them with his larger ones, stopping her from undressing further.

She looks up in question to meet the reflection of his eyes, so bright blue in the dim of the red-papered room. His answer is to lower her hands to her sides and work the clasps himself. He does so deftly--until the one beneath her breasts catches. His cheek twinges as he pulls at it; the sound of fabric giving way is followed by a tiny series of clinks as the eyelet strikes the mirror and then the top of the dressing table, skittering across the polished surface. Richard doesn't have the good grace to look even vaguely sheepish about rending the corset as he unclasps her garters, finally releasing her from the confining boning, and shucks it aside, or even to notice that he's done it at all.
Mary doesn't dwell on it, either, as he takes a step back from her to unbutton his trousers. She watches in the mirror as he pushes the tweed down his hips to reveal his long, lean legs, thighs still covered by the form-fitting cotton underpants, and then peels his undershirt up to bare the chiselled lines of his chest. Her eyes rake the muscles that ripple over his back as he bends, balancing on one foot and then the other to remove his socks.

A shiver from her own state of undress in the chilly room makes her take note of the fact that she is not warmed by a ladylike flush at her first glimpse of the nude male form apart from ones depicted in Renaissance artwork and sculpture. In fact she feels no embarrassment whatsoever even when she turns around to face him as he straightens up, her fingers grasping the silk at her hips to lift her chemise over her own head; Richard makes no move this time to help her undress, instead warming the skin of her belly and breasts with bold caresses as her slip joins the mounting pile of discarded clothing. Why should she, when she has never felt more confident of anything than their mutual desire?

His fingers fit into the valleys between her vertebrae and draw her against him, while hers slide over the notch between his collarbones as she tilts her face up toward his. Richard's breath is hot on her mouth as his lips glide with hers, teasing her by giving her nothing more than a taste of him and leaving after a moment to kiss her jaw and neck and down between her small breasts before finally kissing one. Mary gasps, as much at the feel of his rough tongue curling around the sensitive hardened peak of her nipple as at the sight of him doing so, his eyes turned up to her as he takes pleasure in--and gives pleasure to--her body. Strangely, the meeting of his gaze in the midst of such an act strikes Mary as the most intimate part of this experience yet, and a sting in her eyes makes her glance away.

The reflection in the mirror of her fingers raking through Richard's hair as he fondles her breasts does little to help her regain composure, though when she sweeps her gaze lower, the absurdity of being naked on top but still wearing her drawers and thick woollen stockings and sturdy walking boots does. Perhaps Richard has the same thought, because his mouth and hands leave her breasts and she finds him easing her down to sit on her dressing table bench before he kneels on the floor in front of her to unfasten her boots.

"Careful," Mary warns, watching his fingers fumble with the buttons. "Anna can repair an eyelet on a corset with few questions asked, but I'd have to send the boots to the mender."

"Will Anna believe you tore your corset undressing yourself for a Sabbath rest?"

Mary's cheeks redden as reality takes root in her mind that it will not be possible keep this tryst entirely secret. "Probably not."

Having divested her of her shoes, Richard places his hands on her thighs. "Are you certain wish to go on?"

Even now, he would put a stop all this if she asked him to--though rather less willingly than before, as evidenced by his fingers slipping beneath the edge of her stocking, rolling it down to the top to bare her thigh. He dips his head to press his lips to the inside of her knee. Mary's calf muscle twitches, the kiss tickling her tender skin.

"We've come this far," she says. "No turning back now. Anna will be discrete." She worries that the words and the voice in which she speaks them, tensed against her reflex to jerk her leg in response to his lips teasing the sensitive spot behind her knee, will not convince him of her certainty.
Apparently it is needless anxiety, as Richard pushes up the lacy hem of her drawers and kisses his way up her thigh. Sitting up on his knees, he hooks his fingers over the waistband of her underwear and tugs them downward. Mary's heart flutters as he removes this last modest barrier, however scant, and slips his hands beneath her bottom to lift her, naked, into his arms. He stands and carries her across the room to her four-poster bed, balancing her against the edge as he pauses to fling back the coverlet before depositing her atop the sheets.

Trembling, she tries to convince herself that she is merely cold, though she knows her nerves have at last caught up with her. She rolls onto her side, tucking one arm across her breasts and shifting one angled leg to hide her private parts as best as she can, not ashamed of being naked in front of Richard, but of turning coward now, at the crucial moment. She shuts her eyes against the sudden sting of tears, only for them to snap open again at the rustle of fabric as Richard steps out of his undershorts. To her dismay she cannot bring herself to let her gaze linger long on his distinctly male anatomy, but relief rushes through her as her eyes meet his and sees the crisscrossed smile lines at the corners as he regards her with affection--and understanding.

He slides into bed beside her, turning to face her on the pillows, lying near enough that their knees touch as he rests his hand in the dip of her waist, but with enough space between them that she doesn't feel overwhelmed to find herself in bed with a nude man. At least not any more than is necessary, and lessening by the moment as her heart gradually slows to keep time with the light stroking of his thumb along the sharp bottom edge of her ribcage.

"I hope my state of undress meets your elite standards better than my choice of country weekend attire," he says.

Mary gives a low hhm, appreciating his attempt at easing her anxiety for making a joke at his own expense, self-deprecation not being one of Richard's natural tendencies. She uncurls her arm from around herself and traces the lines of his chest down to his trim waist, enamoured with the sprinkling of soft hair, golden in the flickering light of the bedside candles, across his pale skin.

"You don't ride." She looks up at him. "How do you keep fit?"

"Boxing."

"Boxing! Against people?"

Richard shrugs faintly. "I've been known to go a few rounds with the boys in the warehouse, or with my chauffeur."

"Well. I suppose if you ever break your nose, at least I know you're attractive underneath your clothes." Mary presses her palm to Richard's skin, sliding it back up to his chest and enjoying the rumble beneath it as he chuckles low.

"That's not a very great risk, I assure you." He brushes her hair back from her face, his fingers combing downward through the length of the strands until they come to rest on her breast. "Most often my sparring partners are so terrified of bloodying the boss that the punching bag in my basement makes a better partner. In any case, it's excellent exercise, and helps reduce the tensions of work."

"So does not working."
"True. But it also reduces my income."

His thumb finds her nipple, skimming back and forth over the tip until it hardens to a peak. Mary shifts closer to him, and her knee presses between his so that their legs tangle together. Richard’s hand leaves her breast, slipping beneath her arm to settle on her shoulder blade. She feels the rumble of his voice in her chest when he speaks again.

"I play tennis, too, if that's better suited to your breeding. Though I think you've crossed the class divide by saying you'll picture me naked." When she ducks her head, blushing, Richard takes her chin between his fingers and draws her face back up for a brief kiss. "I'll happily return the favour. In fact I must confess I already have."

He hooks his leg over her hip and rolls her onto her back. Mary's stomach hitches inward with a feeling of vulnerability as Richard seems to loom over her for a moment, his gaze raking her from above as he straddles her, a knee on either side of her thighs pinning her to the mattress, strong callused fingers curling around her shoulders as he supports himself on the tight muscled coils of his arms. *Caging her.*

At once she dismisses the thought. She lifts her head off the pillows and wraps her arms about his neck, meeting him with a kiss as he lowers himself onto his elbows to claim her mouth again. She is not trapped. This is *her* choice. *She* invited him here. She enjoys the masculine weight of his body on her.

However, just as she releases her tension and gives herself over to his kiss, her fingers tangling in the curling ends of his hair in back, Richard shifts. One knee moves from the outside of her thigh to nudge at her legs, coaxing them apart. As he settles his hips against the cradle of hers, she feels his hardness at her entrance, and the vagaries of the act of love come suddenly into sharply detailed focus.

"Try and relax," Richard murmurs, nuzzling her cheek.

Mary realises that her fingers slipped from his hair to his shoulders, her nails boring half-moons into his skin as her thighs clench tight around him. She tries to loosen her grip on him, but her limbs won't obey, gripped with the concern about her realisation of what is to occur. *An uncomfortable, untidy business,* Granny told her, and Mama said, *Many girls meet their husbands in terror.*

"Mary?"

Richard pushes up on one elbow as he removes his other hand from her shoulder and slips it between their hips. At the sound of her name she lifts her gaze to meet his, tilts her chin upward in defiance even as she lies in bed, her hair fanned out over the pillows; she is not like other girls. *There is more to you than that.*

"Do you trust me?" he asks, and the heel of his hand presses into her mound as the tip of his finger finds her most intimate place.

Mary holds her breath at his touch, watches the small reflection of the candlelight glimmer in his dark, dilated pupils, like a gem. *Gems mothers in America bestow upon their daughters on their wedding nights,* Granny's scorn crackled that day across the tea table; more like pearls of wisdom, Mary thinks now, remembering what Mama said on the walk home. *The first time is uncomfortable, but it's also a new and exciting time of learning to trust and letting your husband know you in a way no other person on earth does.* Richard isn't her husband--not yet--but Mary releases her breath, and
a soft moan, and relaxes beneath him in her bed.

"Yes," she tells him. "I trust you."

At once Richard kisses her again, as if the words are a promise and he means to seal it. Not only with his lips, but with his body, his hand sliding out from between them to grasp her hip as he positions himself to enter her. So slowly, pushing in bit by bit in response to the small sounds of discomfort she can no more stop herself making than she could the ones of pleasure; the arm which holds him above her, coiled tight, quivers.

Mary places her palms flat against his shoulder blades and wraps her legs around the backs of his thighs, her feet hooked beneath them, and draws his weight down on her, his fullness into her. She gasps, and Richard remains very still.

"Are you all right?" His voice is scarcely a breath.

Mary smiles and traces a fallen lock of hair back from his forehead. "Never better."

He begins to move inside her, rocking his hips slowly down into hers and withdrawing again, his pace at first languorous but gradually accelerating—at Mary's encouragement. The pleasure coaxed by his fingers before was undeniable, and that is part of it now, but this is more than mere physical sensation.

*We're not so very different, you and I,* he told her the first night they met. Not only not very different, she's come to think in all the time they spent together since, but in fact, they are the very same.

She lifts her head to kiss his shoulder, and glimpses their reflection in the mirror.

And now they are one.

~*~

"That's not the hounds, is it?" Richard's voice rumbles into Mary's consciousness; she didn't realise she fell asleep, but her lashes tickle the edge of his chest as she opens her eyes, her head pillowed on his shoulder. "Admittedly my knowledge of the hunt is lacking, but oughtn't it last longer?"

"How long has it been?"

Mary raises her head and her left arm, which has been slung across his waist, and pokes her hand out from beneath the bedclothes to wipe the crust of sleep from her eyes, meeting Richard's gaze as he peers up at her from the pillows. Hazily, she thinks, though she can't be sure in the shifting candlelight of the darkened room, and if so whether it's a lingering trace of their lovemaking or because he, too, slept. When she starts to push herself upright on her right elbow, Richard's arm about her shoulders pulls her back down to him, reaching his other hand across to cup her cheek, threading his long fingers into her hair.

"Not long enough."

He draws her in for a kiss, his lips melting against hers and Mary's opening at once to the almost lazy sweep of his tongue. She *hmms* in contentment, and Richard responds in kind with a low sound that vibrates against her fingertips as they settle in the hollow of his throat to feel his pulse. The steady beat of it, however, reminds her that before this they were discussing the time, and she leans back
slightly in his arms, lifting her eyes to the mantel clock across the room. She can't make it out in the dim, but it doesn't really matter, the muted yaps and squeaks drifting up from the yard now unmistakably the noise of hounds returned from the hunt.

"Papa would come back early from a hunt the day I take a lover," Mary mutters, breaking the kiss, though Richard is not dissuaded, trailing his lips down her chin and jaw to her neck instead. She pushes against his chest. "You'd better go."

Richard huffs, but disengages himself from their tangle of limbs. "I suppose I had--though I doubt Lady Edith will be popping in for a sisterly chat about how the Honourable Mr Napier proposed marriage to her as they took a jump over a hedgerow?"

"I'm not sure which of those is the least likely," Mary says drily. "A jump, a proposal, or a sisterly chat."

Sitting up in bed, she drawing the sheets up to cover her nudity. Richard, she observes, does not share her concern about post-coital modesty and strides naked across the room to draw back the heavy draperies, filtered daylight illuminating him through the sheer muslin curtain beneath. She admires him from behind, swallowing when he turns to retrieve his underclothes from the floor.

"And you could always come back tonight," she says.

Stepping into his drawers, Richard's lips purse together in an expression which, by the time he's drawn his undershirt over his head, blossoms into a full smirk. He shambles to the bedside, resting his fingers on Mary's knee through the counterpane. "Lovemaking agrees with you, does it? I rather suspected it might."

"Are you remarking on my sexuality, or patting yourself on the back for your own prowess?"

For all Mary's initiative in asking him not once but twice in one day to visit her bed, she finds her confidence waning as Richard continues to dress while she remains in bed, covering herself with the sheet that is now crumpled and dampened by her fist as she clutches it higher above her breasts, hugging her knees to her chest.

"Might I trouble you to bring me my dressing gown?" she asks as she watches him tugs his braces up over his shoulders. "It's one thing for Anna to find out what I got up to this afternoon, but she needn't discover me entirely in the state in which you left me."

"Must you make me sound like some cad in a gothic novel who left you weeping in a torn dress?"

Richard pulls the wardrobe doors open, and despite Mary's instructions that her dressing gown is hanging at the end of the rack, the one she wore during their midnight meeting in the library, he does not take it down, instead flicking through the hangers to examine each article of her clothing.

"You wore this when you first caught my eye across a crowded ballroom," he remarks, fingering the beaded sleeve of her black gown. "No man wants to kiss a girl in black, you told me--but I did..." He moves on to the next gown, the one she wore to the ball celebrating Agnes' wedding. "I kissed you in green."

"And of course we mustn't forget my sunburst gown," Mary says referring to the one hung next to that, worn just last night, "which you so cleverly pointed out is a reflection of my self-centredness. Perhaps we ought to get you a matching tie."
Ignoring her, Richard holds up her ivory gown with the chiffon drape sleeves. "I've never seen you in this one. You should wear it tonight."

Mary quirks an eyebrow, uncertain what to make of a man taking such a keen interest in her wardrobe--though she suppose she oughtn't be surprised, given his attention to his own clothes.

"Wouldn't the scarlet gown be more appropriate?" she suggests. "Seeing as I'm a fallen woman now?"

Looking at her in amusement, he replies, "Hardly subtle, though. Whereas the white is so very demure. No one would suspect you're not."

"And yet you say _demure_ as though you mean just the opposite."

"Mmm. I was just thinking about how the colour would set off your hair and eyes...and compliment your skin..."

"As my skin is such a distraction--" A flush pricks up from the sheet as his eyes seem to touch her as tangibly from across the room as his fingers did in bed--_However will we sit across the dinner table from each other without giving ourselves away?_ --I must insist you hand me my dressing gown, if you really are to have a prayer of escaping without being seen."

"I'm not a praying man, remember?" Richard says as he complies--hooking her ivory gown's hanger over the wardrobe door as if wearing his choice of gown is her end of a bargain they just struck.

Mary does silently offer one or two of her own, but the prayers of a fallen woman prove to avail very little. Richard turns the lock, only for the door to swing suddenly inward and a petite figure in a pink dress to barrel into him as he steps back, sloshing water from two pails onto his shoes.

"Oh Lord a-mercy!"

"Daisy!" Mary gasps as Richard wastes no time pulling the kitchen maid roughly into the room, and nudging the door shut with his foot. "What are you doing upstairs in the afternoon?"

The scullery maid's eyes dart about from Mary, clad only in her thin dressing gown, to the pile of clothes and undergarments on the carpet, to Richard in his shirtsleeves, collar open, tweed coat and waistcoat draped over his arm, widening with realisation as her pale, mousy face flushes red.

"Well?" Richard demands, and the girl cringes. "Answer your mistress."

"G-getting Lady Edith a bath, m-m'lady!"

"Then why aren't you in Lady Edith's room?" Richard snarls, giving her a little shake as his grip tightens on her arm.

"Oh Lord!" Daisy cries again, big eyes welling. "I'm so sorry, Lady Mary, I got the rooms mixed up...I can hardly see straight since they all came back early from the hunt, shouting for brandy and baths and someone to go for the doctor..."

"The doctor?" Richard echoes. "Was someone injured?"
"Not Edith, surely!"

Daisy shakes her head, screwing her eyes shut and squeezing out tears. "No, m'lady--the Turkish gentleman. He's dead!"
Chapter Summary

As the household cope with a death at Downton, Mary is reminded that the matters which concern her are of little importance to anyone else--perhaps not even to Richard.

The rap on the bedroom door sounds a little sharper than Anna's customary knock, startling Mary upright from where she rests her chin on her hands, elbows propped on the polished cherry surface of her dressing table. Abruptness, she supposes, is to be expected from the staff of a household no doubt thrown into chaos by a guest audacious enough to spoil a house party by dying on the grounds--a thought which she instantly recognises with a shudder sounds exactly like one of Granny's caustic remarks; she can just hear the Dowager Countess of Grantham saying, \textit{How very like a foreigner.}

"Come in," Mary says, as if to silence Granny's voice in her head with her own. She's grateful for a knock at all, however abrupt, after being discovered with Richard by the scullery maid. Though her thankfulness wanes somewhat when the door swings open and Gwen enters.

"Couldn't Daisy find Anna?" Mary asks, an eyebrow lifting on her forehead as she sits up straighter on the dressing table bench. "Or is she as confused about which of you is which as she is about which bedroom is mine or Lady Edith's? It seems Mr Pamuk's demise sent her into a spin."

Or, more likely, Richard's threats did. The girl took mousey to new levels, trembling in the corner, watery eyes darting frantically about for a glimpse of escape. Richard loomed over her, pale blue eyes widened around pupils focused to pinpricks upon his prey, the corners of his mouth curved upward as he hissed that if she breathed a word about finding him in Lady Mary's room, she would discover that he had as much power to see that a girl never worked again as he did to take one into his employ. And then he took a light step back, his tone almost a purr as he told Daisy to run along and fetch Anna to help her ladyship dress for dinner.

"She found her," Gwen replies as she crosses the room with a porcelain pitcher, her husky tones and stride as confident as Daisy's wispy voice and scurrying steps are timid, "but Lady Grantham asked Anna to see to Lady Edith. She was in rather a state."

As Gwen pours the contents of the pitcher into the basin on the washstand, steam curling upward from the water, Mary thinks longingly of the bath she would have ordered even if her day's activities had only consisted of a walk about the grounds with Richard. However, she doesn't voice the request, reluctant to create more work for the staff, but even more so to draw attention to herself. She gets up from her dressing table bench, conscious not of moving through her room in nothing but chemise and drawers in the middle of the afternoon, but of the unmade bed to which she darts a sideways glance, the sheets dinted with the outlines of two occupants, along with the other traces of the activity that occurred there. \textit{Untidy}, indeed.

Mary dips her hands into the washbasin, droplets trickling as she draws them up to dab her face and neck with warm water. "Edith saw it happen, then?" she asks. "What did happen?"

"All I know's that the Turkish gentleman fell from his horse and... broke his neck."
"Heavens." Mary lathers a flannel with rose-scented soap and pats delicately under her arms. "Fell? On a jump? Or was he thrown?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, m'lady," Gwen replies. "My head's been rather in the clouds since my interview."

Indeed, Mary glances over her shoulder to see that by all appearance Gwen doesn't give a second thought to the state of the bed as she pulls up the coverlet and plumps the pillows.

"Quite." A wary eye trained on the maid, Mary bends and lifts the legs of her drawers to wash her thighs. "And what's Mr Pamuk to you, anyway? He was a visitor here for what--all of three hours? Four?"

"Yes, m'lady," is the only reply Gwen makes, though Mary can hear Richard's voice in her mind as clearly as if he were still here in the bedroom: We've all worn black for someone we don't care two pence about… I can't think of any reason why you ought to care more about a cousin because of the tragic manner of his death. And then there is sweet, sympathetic Sybil, who would no doubt stubbornly insist that beneath the stony veneer beat hearts of flesh. Could any friend of Sybil's really be as unmoved by even a stranger's death as Gwen's m'ladying implies? Is she merely being polite? Or too preoccupied to really consider Mary's words?

She wonders if the young woman realises just how tough her future employer truly is. Only during Richard's visit here has Mary seen that side of her future husband. Before she can ask Gwen about her impression of him, however, the maid inquires about Mary's choice of eveningwear.

Upon turning, she sees Gwen drape the discarded walking clothes over the bench at the foot of the bed to be sent for laundering. Including the rent corset. Good. Maybe Anna won't see it, and Mary can blame the missing hook on the overzealous laundry maid.

"Well," she says as Gwen opens the wardrobe doors, "I had thought about the ivory..." Her cheeks grow warm, and she purses her lips together against a smile at how insistent Richard was about her wearing it. "But that will hardly do now, will it?"

Will he be satisfied, she wonders, if she defers to etiquette in the case of showing respect for a stranger who died at her home? Or will he expect her to rebel against convention in this matter, too? Her pulse beats against the delicate skin of her wrists like a moth against a lighted window as her imagination takes another turn Richard no doubt would deride as gothic. She can almost feel the press of the carved edge of the boiserie at her back and the warmth of his breath on her forehead as he corners her in the drawing room after dinner and demands to know why she didn't comply with his request; she imagines how her heart would race with the exhilaration of tilting her chin to make a defiant--and flirtatious--answer: I didn't think it would matter so much to you as you'd only be taking it off me later.

"Oh, Lady Grantham said no one will dress for dinner," Gwen says, the hangers of the evening gowns scraping against the road as she pushes them aside to better view Mary's day clothing. "She asked Mrs Patmore to put out a light supper instead so everyone can eat when they feel hungry. If they feel hungry."

Practicality winning out over her initial vexation that her fantasy will not come to fruition--it will be easier to keep their tryst, if the party is limited to members of her family keen to turn in early, or too distracted to notice whether the guests keep to the guest rooms--Mary replies, "In that case, my black skirt and striped blouse, then. Keep it simple."

"I'm afraid your coif will have to be," Gwen picks up the conversation a few minutes later as Mary,
dressed, resumes her seat at her dressing table and the maid takes her place behind her. "I haven't Anna's knack for dressing hair."

"It's hardly a skill necessary to secretarial work, is it?" Mary smiles as the younger girl glances up from twisting back a section of hair, furrowed brow relaxing slightly the offered congratulations. "Tell me, Gwen--I know your new situation will be less drudgery than service, but do you think you'll enjoy working for Sir Richard?"

"Well, I think mostly I'll working for his secretary."

"Miss Fields."

"Did you meet her?" Gwen's eyes gleam, seeking Mary's almost hungrily. It would be obvious how wrong she is for domestic labour even if she were not making a hash of Mary's hair.

At the moment, however, it is still her occupation, and Mary chides her gently, keeping a watchful eye on the pale fingers that twist and pin her hair for a moment before answering.

"I spoke with Miss Fields on the phone. It seems she handles a deal of Sir Richard's personal matters as well as his business."

"But..." Her gaze having drifted up to the mirror again, Gwen quickly averts it; after a moment's hesitation, she goes on with her question. "Didn't you visit the newspaper office? Lady Sybil said--"

"I did. And I did make Miss Fields' acquaintance. We didn't sit down to tea, of course, and I'm hardly in a position to judge a good secretary."

In fact the only real thought Mary gave Richard's secretary was superficial: she recalled Miss Fields as being of about her own height, nondescript--this she noted with a slight amount of relief--though not unstylish, for a working woman.

"Sir Richard seems to find her work more than satisfactory," Mary goes on. "I believe his standards of professionalism and competency to be exacting." Quirking an eyebrow, she draws Gwen's gaze and asks, "How did you find him?"

If she is honest, she was not entirely comfortable with how aggressively Richard dealt with Daisy--though she herself had found it rather exhilarating--even arousing--to watch. But if he really means to be a gentleman, he can't bully his employees--especially not their household staff--as he may be accustomed to doing.

"What I mean, Gwen, is did you find him intimidating?"

"I wouldn't put it like that."

"You don't have to mince words because he's my..." Lover, she mentally completes the sentence, though of course she cannot say that. Suitor sounds so antiquated, and worst of all, so chaste. Frida Uhl, the proprietress of The Cave, would probably say boyfriend in her guttural Viennese accent which, ridiculously, makes Mary blush. At length, she settles for, "My beau."

"I'm not. Sir Richard was very...forthright..about my lack of experience about my shortcomings. He says I'll have to moderate my accent..."

Gwen's cheeks redden slightly at that, but Mary smirks. "Is he going to take a walk-on role as Professor Higgins?"
"I beg your pardon, m'lady?"

"Nothing. A reference to a play we saw. *Pygmalion*. Go on."

Gwen's brow wrinkles again as she places a pin in Mary's hair, then, apparently satisfied with the result, answers, "Sir Richard was very patient, too. I think he does have high expectations, as you say, but he's fair. That's not so different from what I'm used to under Mrs Hughes and Mr Carson."

"I wouldn't let Carson hear you compare him to the *nouveau riche* newspaper publisher."

Gwen smiles, though not, Mary thinks, at her quip. "Sir Richard said someone took a chance on him once, too."

"And he rose to the top of the newspaper business. He'd better watch out for you." Mary turns her head to check the different angles of her hair in the mirror. She pats the side, then swivels on her bench to look Gwen in the eye. "Good luck, Gwen."

"Thank you, Lady Mary," she replies, beaming. "I feel like the luckiest girl in England. It's all I've ever wanted." Her grin falters as she colours again, hastily adding, "Not that I'm not grateful for my time here. Especially as I'd never have had this opportunity with Sir Richard if I were anywhere else."

"We'll be sorry for you to go. Sybil, especially."

"Perhaps I'll see her when she visits you in London." Gwen's flush deepens as Mary raises her eyebrows. "I mean...forgive me, m'lady, I didn't mean to overstep...It's just downstairs there's been talk that you..."

"Of course there has," Mary says, getting up and sweeping to the door. "I invited one of England's most eligible bachelors to Downton for the weekend."

~*~

Mary's stride slows, but her heart beats quicker in her chest as she steps out of the family corridor at almost the same moment as Papa rounds the corner from the guest wing. She stops at the top of the staircase and waits for him, because she cannot very well turn and go back in the direction from which she came without finding her behaviour strange, and perhaps from there wondering how she occupied herself while everyone--except Richard--was on the ill-fated hunt. Reason takes over, too, calming her, at the observation that Papa, still wearing his hunting jacket and mud-spattered breeches and caked riding boots and a stunned expression, would hardly be of a mind to notice if she did have a scarlet letter pinned to her breast, which she doesn't. Indeed, he scarcely looks at her as he gives a perfunctory weary smile and they ascend together.

"Is Mr Pamuk in one of the guest rooms?" she asks, her voice smooth as the oiled wooden banister over which her fingertips glide, and revealing nothing of her moment's panic.

Papa nods. "I just saw Dr Clarkson up to determine the cause of death."

"The broken neck, I should think."

"Edith says he clutched his chest before the fall. Simply ghastly business." He blanches and glances back over his shoulder in the direction of the girls' rooms above. "Is she resting?"

"Bathing. Anna's with her."
"And your mama."

"Is Sybil still at Granny's?"

Papa stops on the staircase and inclines his head toward the ceiling as if in supplication before pinching the bridge of his nose. "I'd forgotten about them. I'm sure your mother has, too."

"Someone will have to go over and tell them the dinner party's off," Mary says.

Papa shakes his head. "It will only hasten the inevitable. As soon as she hears what's happened your grandmother will want to come over and offer her assessment of the situation, in perhaps not the most sensitive of ways." Mary snorts, and Papa glances down at her as he pushes off the balustrade to continue their descent. "Better for her to come later. When the dust has had a chance to settle."

Mary is guilty herself of thoughts which are perhaps not the most sensitive, chiefly that a man's death restored the rapport she and her father haven't shared since Patrick's name appeared on the Titanic casualty list--or certainly not since her picture appeared in The Sketch with Richard. The red-carpeted staircase spiralling down into the saloon below blurs with sudden tears at the thought of how quickly they would revert if he knew that it was not the Cave of the Golden Calf that was the den of iniquity, but his own house.

She blinks them back, so that the image of Richard rising from the deacon's bench tucked into the corner of the staircase is unobscured as she alights. But the sight of the man with whom she rebelled against her father does not bring the expected smile or racing of her heart; instead, the organ plunges into the pit of her stomach as her eyes take in every detail of his dark pinstriped suit.

"I know there was some confusion as to country leisure attire," Mary says, "but even you must be aware that a scarf and briefcase are unusual accessories for an informal dinner."

"I'm leaving, Lady Mary," he replies; his gaze flickers briefly to Papa behind her.

"Leaving?" she repeats, the heaviness in her stomach tightening. Her lungs won't quite fill with air, and she wants to grasp for the carved finial at the end of the banister as the saloon seems to spin around her, but she doesn't. Is this what a punch feels like? "Now?"

"As soon as Dr Clarkson has examined Mr Pamuk and I have interviewed him about his findings. If I can make the five o'clock train and write my article during the journey, I should just have time to get the story to print and break it in the morning edition."

"Really, Sir Richard," says Papa, barely moving his lips, "is this really the time or the place? Mr Napier is sitting just over there." He nods through the archways into the saloon proper, where Evelyn hunches in his shirtsleeves with his head in his hands in a wing-backed chair before the fire. "Mr Pamuk may have been a stranger to you, and to my family, but he was a friend of our friend, and you're speaking of him in this crass manner--not as a person but as a...a scoop--within his hearing."

"You might as well have sent for Granny," Mary adds, not bothering to keep the resentful edge from her voice. "It seems we've finally met her match for insensitivity."

Richard's forehead twitches as his pale eyebrows raise. "It wasn't me who introduced the gentleman's name into the conversation, Lord Grantham."

"Excuse me," Mary says, and pushes past Richard to go to Evelyn, who is oblivious to Thomas' attempt to ply him with brandy.

Before she is out of earshot, she overhears Papa address Richard: "And it would seem Mr Napier is
not the only one wounded by your business tactics."

Mary would be pleased that Papa has--inadvertently--fought for her; but when she darts a glance back at him and sees him moving away from Richard with a twist of his mouth almost like a smirk of victory, she feels instead that he has kicked her while she is already down. *Lady Mary has more suitors than the Princess Aurora*, she hears his smug voice in her head, taunting Richard earlier. This is not about her, but about his own need to put a social climber in his place.

Well. She twitches her thumbs against the forefingers and draws in a long breath through her nostrils, and straightens up. She doesn't need anyone to fight for her. Richard is wrong.

"Evelyn," she says in a low voice, touching his shoulder. "Thomas brought you a drink." She takes it from the footman's tray and he pivots away as she raises it to Richard, whose eyes narrow as he tries to work out her game. "It won't help, not really, but you'll believe it will, for a while."

He lifts his head, normally tidy hair disheveled from his hat and his fingers clutching at it; his grimace seems like an attempt at a smile as he lifts the glass to his lips.

"I must say, Lady Mary, I was initially disappointed you opted not to ride, but I'm jolly glad you weren't with us now. You'll be able to sleep tonight."

"I hadn't planned on it," Mary replies; Evelyn and Papa regard her a little askance, though Richard snorts. She goes on a little more pointedly, "But we seem all to be victims of a certain adage about the best laid plans."

"Perhaps you should ask Clarkson to give you something, old chap," says Papa. "I asked him to see to Edith after..."

Evelyn drains his glass. "No, I must be alert. I'll have to contact the Turkish embassy to speak with Kemal's father. So he'll know before he reads about it in the papers."

This comment, delivered in Evelyn's bland tones, does not seem to be particularly aimed at Richard, though Papa shoots him a glare. Richard, however, remains impassive, as if his business suit is armour to deflect any stray bullets—though a glance at his hand reveals his knuckles tensed to whiteness around the handle of his briefcase.

"Lord Grantham hasn't a phone," he says. "But if you drive with me to the station, you'll be able to use one there. Or send a telegram."

"I'll call. I can think of no more horrible way to have news delivered of a loved one's death than between stops."

"I'll go with you," Mary offers, and that seems to find the chink in Richard's armour. "No one should have to break that sort of news alone."

"You ought to change first," says Papa, patting Evelyn's shoulder and turning him to the stairs. "Carson ordered you a bath."

They start up the stairs and Mary starts to follow, only to be restrained by Richard's iron grip on her elbow. She submits to his indication that she should turn to him, but her raised eyebrow and chin are defiant as he hisses at her..

"If this is some childish attempt to punish me for not indulging you--"

"Why should I punish you for rushing off to break a story that will, presumably, sell a lot of papers
and make a lot of money to indulge me with? Or don't you still intend to marry me?"

Richard's fingers clamp harder on her arm and he pulls her against him, but as his lips part in hot retort his gaze drifts over her head and he releases her abruptly to meet Dr Clarkson on the stairs.

Of more interest to Mary is Edith at the physician's side, looking tired but otherwise distracted from the trauma of witnessing a fatal accident by the delight of watching her sister's hopes snap as surely as Mr Pamuk's neck.

~*~

"It's such a sad thing, isn't it?" Anna says when Mary makes the mistake of giving an audible sigh as the maid runs the brush through her hair and she cannot stop her thoughts turning to how she thought it would be Richard's fingers through it, not Anna plaiting it for her climb into bed, alone, and go chastely to sleep. "The Turkish gentleman, dying so suddenly as he did."

Mary lifts the lid from a small pot of cold cream and leans in toward the mirror as she applies a bit beneath her eyes and over the line of her jaw. "I'm afraid I have very little feeling about the matter. The timing of it made rather a tragic end for our house party. Call me heartless, but it's the truth."

"It's not my place to call you anything but m'lady," replies Anna. "But that's just what I mean--we may not feel sad, exactly, about a stranger's death, but it does affect us all."

"How is it affecting everybody downstairs?" Mary asks as Anna moves to lay the brush on the dressing table, then returns to stand behind the bench and gather the brushed hair at the nape of her neck. "Mr Pamuk's accident was gruesome, but it can't have cast quite the pall as, say, the news of the Titanic, surely? The little scullery maid..."

"Daisy."

"She was rather morbid about that, wasn't she? I hope Mr Pamuk's misfortune hasn't set her off again."

She watches Anna in the mirror as she deftly divides Mary's hair into three thick strands for the plait.

"Now that you mention it, Daisy did seem a bit jumpier than normal. Only a very little bit, mind," Anna adds, grinning. "Should I tell her your ladyship is concerned? It may make her feel better, poor dear. I don't think she's used to anyone being very concerned about her feelings."

"I'm not," Mary says. "More curious than anything. No, I think mentioning me would only make her even more nervous."

Or rather, mentioning her would lead Daisy to think of Richard threatening to have her fired. Which, Mary is convinced was not the right tactic to ensure the girl's silence.

"What about you?" she asks, looking up at Anna as the maid ties off the tail of the plait with a ribbon. "How does the death of a Turkish diplomat's son who never even noticed the house maid's presence affect her?"

Anna gives a little shrug as she goes to turn down the coverlet; Mary holds her breath lest she too closely inspect the sheets, though thankfully the light is poor and Anna scarcely glances down at the bed.

"I suppose it just reminds me how short life is, and how suddenly it can come to an end. I've been thinking of what's most important to me."
Mary climbs into bed, lying on her side so that her back is turned against the side Richard occupied mere hours ago, though she can feel the indentation of his body in the feather mattress pulling her toward it, almost as surely as his grasp. "I know a person who would stand to think about what's most important to him."

Sitting up all night alone in an office instead of with her this room? Hunched over a desk when he could be stretched over her in bed? Coaxing stories out of the cold keys of a typewriter instead of caressing her warm skin to evoke lovers' sighs?

"Lady Mary, did something happen with--?" Anna stops, abruptly.

"What?"

"Nothing. I was sticking my nose where it's got no business being. Good night, then, m'lady."

Mary makes no response as Anna puts out the lamps, but when she hears the creak of the doorknob turning, she rolls onto her back and confesses the words to the dark.

"We made love. And then he left."
The acquisition of new technology creates a stir at Downton, but the revelations that puts Mary off-kilter are delivered via old fashioned--yet unexpected--word of mouth.

December, 1912

Papa turns from overseeing the installation of Downton's new telephone in the front hall, unclasping his hands from behind his back to tug at his cuffs as he frowns at his daughters standing behind him in the archway leading to the saloon.

"You three can stop giggling at any time, you know."

"We're not giggling, Papa," Sybil protests, but her dancing blue eyes belie her attempt to purse her lips against her grin.

"Of course not," Mary says. "We're sniggering."

This sets them all off again, and Mama with them; Papa rolls his eyes, then returns his attention to the workmen drilling into the stone where the telephone lines will connect up with the electricity.

Mama tucks her hand into the crook of his arm and rests her chin on his shoulder. "You should just be happy they're a united front for once."

With a snort, Papa says, "I would be-if they weren't united against me."

"You poor outnumbered darling," Mama murmurs as she tilts her head to press her lips to his cheek.

But Papa shrugs away. "Oh, don't patronise me."

"In that case," Sybil pipes in, looking to Mary with eyes widened in the way she has since she was a very little girl, seeking her elder sister's approval, "I suppose you wouldn't like us to say how proud we are of you for conquering your fear of modernity?"

"Of course not." A slight smile accompanies Mary's nod. "He views it as modernity conquering him."

"Or Sir Richard," Edith adds, the words innocuous, but the look she gives Mary as she utters them quite the opposite. "Since he complained about our not having a telephone."

"Rightly so," says Sybil. "It was horrid how poor Mr Napier had to phone the Turkish ambassador from the train station to tell them about Mr Pamuk's accident."

"That's precisely why I agreed to have it installed," Papa says, rather crossly. "For emergencies."

"Hopefully emergencies won't include any more guests breaking their necks." Mary glances sideways, satisfied to see Edith blanch.

"Talking of Sir Richard," says Mama, meeting Papa's gaze briefly as he lectures the girls about his
expectations for the use of the new telephone, and giving his arm a squeeze before she turns around, "have you heard from him lately, Mary?"

A telegram came up with Mary's tea tray the Monday morning following his sudden departure from Downton:

M STOP DIDN'T WANT TO GO STOP LIKE YOUR GRANDMOTHER THE NEWS DOES NOT DISTINGUISH BETWEEN THE WORK WEEK AND THE WEEKEND STOP R

Of course she remembers him saying as much to her on Rosamund's front porch after their night at the theatre and dinner and dancing at The Cave. Then, she was most understanding-The news doesn't stop, so why should you?-and the telegram she sent him in response reflected her desire to be so now. To a degree.

R STOP THOUGHT YOU ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT STOP M

His next message arrived when she was dressing for dinner, and she tried to convince herself as she held it in her lap for a moment to steady her trembling hands that she should take it as an encouraging sign that he concerned himself with her at all in the midst of a busy news day-though she couldn't shake the image of him dictating the text of his telegrams into the mouthpiece of his office telephone whilst his eyes raked over the headlines of his rival newspapers. The typed capital letters, however, indicated just such a lack of prioritising her:

M STOP THIS IS HOW IT IS STOP JUST AS WELL YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE GETTING YOURSELF INTO STOP R

So at least she could be certain-reasonably so, anyway-that he still intended to marry her, after his failure to reassure her on that point before leaving Downton for the Daily Telegram offices. But she was less sure that the marriage he envisioned was quite what she imagined when they spoke of it that day in the folly as the natural culmination of their acquaintance. He may not be a rake, but when it came down to it, was he just what Papa suggested, a climber who saw her as the next rung up the social ladder? For the third night in a row she scarcely slept, and rose and dressed as soon as was acceptable to walk into the village to send her final response which she hoped would settle this misunderstanding once and for all.

SIR RICHARD STOP YOU GOT YOUR SCOOP STOP SUPPOSE IT'S OBVIOUS WHAT YOU WANT STOP LADY MARY

In the weeks since, no further word from him has been delivered into her hands. For a while she clung to the hope that a letter would follow, after one arrived from Mama quite properly within the week following his visit, thanking her for including him in her house party and apologiseing for both his sudden early departure as well as the events that preceded it, but none came.

"Only," Mama's voice coaxes Mary back to the present, mercifully sparing her the humiliation of answering -in front of Edith, no less-though surely her moment's hesitation is telling enough."I wondered if you know what his Christmas plans are."

Mary bites back the response that leaps to her tongue-Is this your utterly un-subtle way of asking whether you're going to be surprised with an extra guest for Christmas dinner?-and instead gives a glib answer.

"Sitting hunched over his desk surrounded by stacks of money, I should imagine. While Bob Cratchit daren't ask for one more coal for the fire or a half-day off to enjoy Christmas dinner with his family."
Papa snorts, and though Mary invited just such a reaction, she feels the implied slur against Richard keenly. Abruptly she turns and mounts the stairs, Mama at her heels.

"Actually I was hoping Sir Richard would be able to give himself a few days off to enjoy it with ours."

The words bring Mary to a halt in the middle of the staircase, but she resumes her climb, at a slower pace this time, dragging her palm along the banister so that she can feel the friction of the waxed oak burning her skin. "You want to invite him to Downton for Christmas?"

"If you want me to, I will."

It's the first time since Patrick died and the nasty business of the entail dominated their lives that anyone but Richard has expressed the notion that what she wants is of importance. Much as she would like to stop here at the landing and turn to Mama and admit that she doesn't know what she wants-how can she, when she doesn't even know what she feels?-she can't bring herself to believe that doing so will produce a satisfactory result. That it won't be met with Mama pecking her cheek in the same patronising way she did Papa's and saying to leave it all to her; she'll see that next season will place Mary in the company of all manner of suitable men.

So she crosses the landing, the hem of her skirt whispering over the red carpet, and ascends the next flight of stairs, throwing nonchalantly back over her shoulder,"Why?"

"To give you a chance to know Sir Richard better before you make up your mind to marry him."

Mary's scepticism is not misplaced, then. The corners of her mouth twitch as she pauses on the staircase, not turning until Mama catches up to her, and then pulls her lips into a smirk as they continue up together.

"You found Sir Richard's letter that charming? I still think Miss Fields wrote it," Mary remarks, ignoring a thought that her opinion might be more judicious if Richard sent her a letter. "Though that might be one reason to invite him for Christmas-for the fun of seeing whether that thank-you note comes from Gwen."

"Even if he did have his secretary write the letter, he reported Mr Pamuk's accident with great sensitivity."

"Minimized the scandal for the Earl and Countess of Grantham, anyway. Poor Evelyn didn't come out looking like such a wonderful friend to Mr Pamuk, with all the emphasis placed on the horse being his."

But even Mary's cynicism doesn't blind her to the reality that Richard did break the scoop in a manner that somehow walked the fine line between tasteful and sensational, which she never thought possible-or, frankly, his style. Which only adds to her confusion. He broke the story under the headline, EXCLUSIVE: HOURS BEFORE DEATH, TURKISH DIPLOMAT SPEAKS ON PEACE TALKS, FUTURE OF EMPIRE, and while Richard did, of course, hook the readers with the lurid details of Mr Pamuk's fall from horseback during his first English hunt following a heart attack, a tragic end to a promising young life which Richard Carlisle is thankful to have immortalised in print. Or cold, hard cash.

Apart from the necessary details of these events having occurred at Downton, the family were largely omitted. Why would Richard take the trouble, if he did not care for her?

Though if he cared for her, wouldn't he say so? But Richard Carlisle, who she believed understood
her better than anyone, who made millions selling words, couldn't be bothered to give her the few she wanted, *needed*, to hear.

Feeling Mama's gaze on her, scrutinising, Mary meets it as they reach the top of the stairs, studying her back. At length, she says, "Admit it, Mama. You want me to see that he isn't one of us. As if that wasn't apparent enough as he traipsed about in shooting tweeds?"

"That's more your father's angle than mine."

"What's yours?"

"Why, the look of the thing."

Isn't it always? Mary starts down the corridor to her bedroom, but stops beneath the shadow of the archway as Mama's voice beckons to her.

"Your relationship with Sir Richard has been very public. Not only were you photographed together under dubious circumstances, but you were seen dancing with him *twice* at Agnes' wedding, and now everyone in England who reads the newspaper knows he spent a weekend here."

*In my bed,* Mary adds silently, rubbing her skirt between moist fingertips.

"Believe it or not," Mama goes on, "I am keeping an open mind about the likelihood of you marrying Sir Richard."

"Then I suppose I'll keep an open mind about inviting him for Christmas," Mary says, and continues on her way to her bedroom.

"Oh good," she says, entering to find Anna within, tidying up. "I don't have to ring for you. Would you please fetch my blue coat and hat? I feel rather in need of a walk."

Anna leaves off making the bed to go to the wardrobe for the desired items. "It's nice, isn't it, after our long summer, that autumn's properly arrived."

"Just in time for winter?" Mary says over her shoulder as she slips her arms into the sleeves as Anna holds the coat for her.

"I can hardly believe it's time to begin Christmas preparations already."

The housemaid's normally cheerful voice falls flat; Mary peers into the mirror to check the tilt of her hat and notes the furrow in Anna's brow as she stands at her shoulder to secure it to her coif.

"I suppose decking the halls isn't entirely the jolly work the song would lead us to believe," Mary says, rather startled by the sensation of her own words being swallowed by a suddenly thickened atmosphere in the room, like the heaviness of the air just before a storm.

Her heart hangs, not beating, between breathless lungs. She has hovered in this state of dread, she realises, since she made her confession to Anna: that what she confided will be too great a strain upon the bounds of class which separate her from the young woman she confided it to, and that the one person she thought she could count on not to pass judgment—and how good Anna was that night, kindly turning aside Mary's question of whether she thought her a loose woman by saying, I think it's more complicated than that. But I know you're not the first lady to feel desire for a man, or to act on it—will no longer be able to look at her with respect. That a flash of lightning will rend the clouds and reveal her sinner's heart.
"Oh, it's not that," Anna says, distractedly, going to the bureau to retrieve Mary's gloves from the top drawer. When she turns back around, her face is flushed, and she blurts out, "Lady Mary, I couldn't help noticing...You're a bit late this month."

Her glove halfway on, Mary stops tugging the soft kid leather over her fingers and stares at her maid."Excuse me?"

"Normally your ladyship's cycle is like clockwork but...not last month. And...well you were with Sir Richard..."

Pregnant.

Anna thinks she is pregnant.

And the realisation that the possibility of becoming pregnant never once crossed Mary's mind when she chose to cross that most taboo of social boundaries is enough to nauseate her. How could she never have considered...? Why else should the act of love carry such a stigma for unmarried young ladies than for the very reason that they might bear children out of wedlock?

Bile burns its way up Mary's throat.

She swallows it.

"Once," she says, hoarsely. "I was with Sir Richard once."

And then he left.

Mary whirls away from Anna's gaze, but finds herself meeting honest blue eyes in the mirror.

"Begging your ladyship's pardon," she says, her voice very quiet, "but that's all it takes."

Tugging her gloves on is no easy task with her hands trembling and sweating, but Mary manages it. No longer feeling so exposed, she turns around, shoulders drawn back to look down upon the shorter woman from her full height.

"My health is perfectly normal," she says. "These irregularities do occur from time to time-" Though Anna is right that they so seldom do for her as to never occur. "-and I'll thank you not suggest otherwise again."

Because it cannot have happened.

It simply can't.

~*~

The jangle of bells persists after Mary pulls the post office door shut behind her, and she looks up to see a familiar bicyclist riding down the village high street. Adjusting the strap of her handbag over her wrist, she considers ducking back inside-the reason for this third outing in as many days being to clear her head, and God only knows how much Cousin Matthew muddies the waters even without her other troubles-but he has already seen her and waves as he pedals across the street to her.

"What a stroke of luck, bumping into you," he says, dragging one foot over the cobbles to slow the bicycle.

"Indeed," Mary agrees, not specifying what kind of luck.
"I was just on my way to the house."

"To see the new telephone? Papa really could use the moral support as we enter into a new era."

She continues up the walk in the direction of home, and out the corner of her eye sees Matthew swing his other leg over the seat, the chain of the cycle whirring through the spokes as he wheels it alongside her.

"He seemed to be coping quite well the other day, I thought. He rang me work to give it a test drive."

"Did he?" Mary blinks at the image hovering close, the moment of playful solidarity shared with her sisters and Mama teasing Papa about being so outnumbered. *The son he always wanted.*

"What brings you to the village?" Matthew asks, and, seeing the dimple of concern where his eyebrows knit beneath his cap, Mary gives him a smile and a shrug. *Escaping Mama's nagging about inviting my wayward lover for Christmas, and Anna's scrutiny for signs of pregnancy. "I just posted Mama's Christmas cards."*

"The season is upon us." The reply is almost perfunctory, and he goes on, "As a matter of fact that's what I was on my way to speak to you about."

Mary can't stop her brows arching in surprise that it's her he wanted to see, but she recovers quickly. "Yes, you are on the Christmas card list." When Matthew scarcely acknowledges her attempt at humour, she sighs. "You can walk back with me and speak, if that suits you."

"You're certain it's a good time?"

"As good as any," she answers—quite truthfully.

"Because something's weighed on me for some weeks now, but I could never be sure it was right to tell you."

"And now you are?"

Matthew doesn't answer as they stop at the corner of the pavement for a passing motor, but waits until they cross the intersection to say, "I understand Sir Richard Carlisle is to spend Christmas at Downton?"

"We're talking of inviting him," she says.

"You may recall the other weekend he visited—"

"I'm not sure Sir Richard was the most distinguishing feature of that house party."

Matthew's eyes widen as he regards her, askance. "Quite," he says. "There was a point after the Saturday luncheon, if you remember, when I stuck up for Carlisle. Solidarity for the middle class."

He chuckles, awkwardly—and alone—and then glances away, his eyes almost a translucent blue as they gaze at the road ahead in the lengthening afternoon light. "I rather felt I owed you one, so I tried to help boost his credibility to your Papa..."

"By telling him about how Richard paid Mr Swire's medical expenses."
"Precisely." A twig snaps beneath the front tyre of Matthew's bicycle as he brings it to a halt in the road, and as Mary turns back to face him he says, in deepening tones, "But that wasn't the full story. It can't have escaped your notice that Lavinia wasn't comfortable in Carlisle's company."

Supposing Matthew is not at all likely to appreciate her musings before their engagement dinner that perhaps Lavinia's resentment of Richard was rooted in some romantic entanglement—even more laughable now, after their romantic entanglement—Mary merely nods.

Matthew runs his long fingers over the handlebars of his bike, then lowers his arm to dangle at his side.

"It seems Sir Richard did, in fact, expect Reggie Swire to repay the debt he owed him. And Lavinia is the person who paid it." The fingers at his side curl into a fist. "Cousin Mary." His voice commands her gaze back up to meet his. "I'm afraid I'm not entirely sure how to say it, so I'll just come right out with it."

"By all means, do," Mary says impatiently, both with Matthew for taking so long to tell this story, and for herself for missing Richard's bluntness at the same moment as she is undoubtedly to receive some unflattering insight into his character.

"Lavinia took some papers of state from her uncle, Jonathan Swire's office, and delivered them to Carlisle. In exchange, he forgave her father's debts. He blackmailed her."

Mary turns from him, slowly resuming her walk up the road. As Downton looms over the tops of the trees, casting its long shadow in the low late autumn light, a conversation drifts to the front of her mind from the smoky interior of The Cave:

"How did you find out I was going to be in town?"

"Through means not dissimilar to the ones by which I acquired evidence about the Marconi scandal. Which you will no doubt find unsavoury."

Well, Mary thinks, her lips twisting in a smirk, Richard didn't lie to her; bribery and blackmail are not dissimilar. And both are unsavoury.

"And Sir Richard published these papers," she says, "which broke the Marconi scandal?"

"I'm sorry," says Matthew, falling into step with her again, wheeling his bicycle at his other side. "I know you must be...rather shocked...to learn your beau is...not the man you thought."

Mary's jaw clenches so tight at Matthew's presumption—or at his hesitation as he selects just the right euphemisms to express his presumption—that she must consciously tell herself to relax it before she can speak.

"On the contrary. I'm not the least surprised about Sir Richard. Though I never would have thought Miss Swire could be involved in such lurid goings on."

That stops Matthew in his tracks, and Mary glances back, satisfied to see his mouth partly open in surprise. She arches an eyebrow and fires her parting shot.

"Or that a member of the middle-class could be just as presumptuous and patronizing as an earl. You are Papa's true heir."

Before he can utter a word in response, she hurries the rest of the way up to the house, going straight to the library without stopping for Thomas to help her out of her coat. Mama sits at the desk, going
over Christmas plans with Carson, who stands over her shoulder, but looks up at Mary's entrance with wide eyes and a smile.

"Thank you for taking the cards to the post office, darling. Though I'm afraid I've thought of a few people I forgot. Isn't that always the way?" She laughs up at Carson.

"Without fail, my lady," the butler replies.

"You may as well invite Sir Richard while you're at it," Mary says, promptly turning to leave again, but not before she glimpses Mama gawking from her chair."Why don't you ring him up on and invite him yourself?"

"That would hardly be proper, would it, Mama? Sir Richard does mean to do things properly."
Chapter Summary

During a trip to London for Christmas shopping, acquaintances with a flair for the dramatic, and a dressmaker's error, force Mary to consider what role she must now play.

Liberty.

The bold black lettering stands stark against the white façade of the neoclassical building upon which it is painted. Like a newspaper headline, Mary thinks, proclaiming some military or political revolution victorious.

As she stands outside the entrance of London's most fashionable department store, peering up at the Liberty & Co. sign and the two storeys of soot-stained stone that rise above, she wishes for freedom. Not, for the first time in months, from the patriarchy that denies her a birthright, against which Richard Carlisle seduced her with promises to fight. Instead, Mary battles against her own body, a heightened sense of the dizziness and nausea that began on the drive over from Aunt Rosamund's holding her captive on the pavement.

"Mary?"

Drawing a steadying breath of the London air which is, if not wholesome as the air back home, at least refreshingly chill, crisp with the possibility of a frost, she draws her gaze downward to Rosamund, who has fallen back to wait as Edith and Sybil follow Mama into the store.

"Why are you gawking, dear? Someone might mistake you for a country bumpkin who's never seen a store larger than the village shop."

"Me, a country bumpkin?" Mary draws back her shoulders and takes careful steps across the pavement toward her aunt. "In this hat and coat?"

She momentarily forgets her nausea as she glimpses her reflection in the glass door: her new scarlet winter walking costume, trimmed with sable fur at the collar and cuffs, so bright against the grey backdrop of the wintry street scene.

"And here I was just thinking how festive she looks," says Edith waspishly. "The red really offsets the green of her complexion. One can't help but think of holly and ivy."

In other circumstances Mary would come back with a retort to make Edith's weak chin wobble. With all eyes on her now--especially Mama's--she is too mindful of the suggestion Anna made about her health, and of the credence her queasy stomach lends it.

"It's Aunt Rosamund's new chauffeur," she says, rolling her eyes. "If you had to get rid of your old one, couldn't you at least have found someone who knows which side of the road to drive on?"

"Why did you fire him?" Sybil asks.
Rosamund arches her brows at Mary and answers, "He was a spy."

"A spy?" Sybil echoes, incredulous.

Edith snorts. "What, for the Germans?"

"Really, Rosamund," Mama says, thankfully shifting her gaze to her sister-in-law, "why did you let Jenkins go? He always seemed an excellent driver."

"If only his ethics were not so dubious."

Rosamund throws a glance over her shoulder that makes Mary swallow a lump as she watches her push into the throng of Christmas shoppers gathered around displays and moving en masse toward the staircases. Her aunt may have sacked a chauffeur, but it's Richard's ethics to which she refers.

And she doesn't even know by what means he procured his Marconi scoop.

"Shall we get started?" Mama asks Mary and her sisters. She checks the ornate brooch-style watch pinned to her coat and frowns. "We haven't as much time as I'd like for all our shopping before your dress fittings with Lady Duff Gordon. And of course it'll be too late after tea with Sir Richard at Fortnum's."

Mary isn't sure whether it's the notion of eating that turns her stomach at the mention of tea, or the prospect of seeing Richard for the first time since their awkward goodbye at the train station six weeks ago, when he was already too absorbed in writing up his story about Mr Pamuk's death to even say the words. Although, if she considers the scenario fairly, she hardly gave him a chance to say them, before she whisked off to be Evelyn's moral support as he telephoned the Turkish ambassador.

And now Mama's informed him of their shopping trip to down, less than a fortnight before she is to see him anyway at Downton, and accepted his invitation to afternoon tea at Fortnum and Mason.

I thought your plan was to show me how he doesn't fit in with our kind of people? Mary asked when Mama informed her of the plan

You're confusing me with your father again, Mama replied, but added, sincerely, Whatever it is you like about Sir Richard, you saw it in when you were in the company of his kind of people. I want to give him a chance to show me, too.

By taking tea with him, your three daughters, and your sister-in-law? Mary flung back with her usual sarcasm. Mama's support comes as too little, too late; even if she does decide Richard is all dimples and charm, she'll deny ever having such an opinion if she learns about his ultimate breach of etiquette. Never mind that he did so at Mary's suggestion.

"In that case shouldn't we start with Granny?" Edith's suggestion draws Mary back to the current dilemma of Christmas shopping. "She's always the most difficult to find presents for."

"What a practical idea, Edith," says Mama--though the middle daughter wilts slightly when Sybil elicits a similar reaction from their mother.

"Don't you think we ought to save her for last? So we don't run out of time trying to make up our
minds and come away empty-handed?"

Some debate ensues, during which their voices recede, of no more consequence to Mary than the din of their fellow shoppers' conversations blending together all around them. They must reach some consensus, because she soon finds herself following them in a weaving path through the maze of people and display tables and cases, then shuffling down a flight of stairs to the basement level of the store. Too much *Nuit de Chine* wafts from the fox stole of a jiggling woman in front of her down the stairs, and to escape the nauseating odor, Mary looks up--but this proves a mistake as the view of the oak staircase spiraling overhead forces her to close her eyes and cling to the banister as she completes the descent by feel.

At the bottom, her state only worsens when she is confronted by Liberty & Co.’s most dizzying feature of all. Which is *not* the Eastern Bazaar with its eclectic display of Indian and Oriental-inspired decorative goods and furniture, but by a blur of frowsy hair and trailing silk that nearly knocks the off-balance Mary to the floor as a pair of arms embrace her and lips peck each of her cheeks.

"Mary darling!"

"Hello, Diana." Mary delivers an unsmiling greeting, though in true Diana Manners fashion, the other girl seems hardly to notice the lack of warmth as she draws back, her hands sliding down Mary's forearms to grasp her hands.

"Fancy running into you here, when I was *just* thinking of you!"

"Were you?" Mary thinks it unlikely.

"What a fetching coat. You *are* the daring one, going out in red after..."

The sentence trails off, and Diana's clear blue eyes turn into a suddenly glassy gaze; Mary, heart pounding and palms perspiring inside her kid gloves, cannot decide whether Diana said more than she intended, or if she is simply distracted by something shiny.

"I was going to say the same about your...kimono." Mary recovers a little as Diana takes the bait, tugging up the silken lapel that has slipped off her shoulder. Or perhaps it was really nothing more than Mary's own guilty conscience.

"Isn't it just a dream?" Diana releases Mary's hands and twirls, striking a *croise derriere* which somehow, for all her eccentricity, shows the garment's busy floral and bird print--and her full figure--to great advantage. "I found it upstairs and thought I'd ask Mama to buy it for me for Christmas...Only I can't find her anywhere..."

The vacant eyes scan the crowd around them as if to emphasize her point, but they do not alight on Lady Rutland.

"Ducky," Diana addresses a flushed and flustered Edith observing them from nearby, her face drawn uncharacteristically into disapproving lines that remind Mary of the Duchess of Rutland. "The Christmas season brings so many unexpected tidings from old acquaintances. I think yours might be the most surprising of all."

Mary draws in a sharp breath through her teeth. *Edith* wrote to Diana? Apparently so, given the way Edith steadfastly ignores Mary's attempts to catch her gaze. But why? In all the times they’ve been in each other's company, the younger girls have never been what anyone would call friends, and Diana
was quite mean to Edith when they were débutantes together.

"Sybil!" Diana cries as the younger girl turns to show Mary a brooch she's found. "Haven't you grown into a beauty? It's lucky for Mary she's already caught a husband, because all the eligible bachelors will be breaking their hearts over you! Do you come out next season?"

"Not for another year." Sybil shakes her head with a slightly dejected manner, as her eyes glitter with amusement at Diana who, seeming not to have heard her, chortles as she adjusts her kimono.

"Though perhaps Mary needs to look out--I've never heard Richard speak so highly of anyone as you, Sybil. Mama had him for dinner not long after he stayed at Downton, and he quite raved about your mission to liberate girls from the drudgery of service.

"Did he say anything about Gwen?" Sybil asks, all eager earnestness.

Diana blinks. "Gwen?"

"Dawson. The housemaid he's hired on to train as a secretary."

"Lord, I don't remember!" Diana's giggle stops abruptly as she threads her arm through Mary's and leads her apart from her sisters. "And I was only joking, Mary, about Richard. What are you getting him for Christmas?"

"I hadn't thought--"

"Well you'd better think. He's your fiancé!"

"We're not engaged. It's hardly appropriate--"

"Isn't it just a formality at this point?"

Would it be possible, Mary wonders, to scandalise Diana by stating that in fact the wedding would be just a formality.

"And I know just what you should get him!" Diana giggles again. "Don't worry, Mary darling! It will be completely within the bounds of propriety."

Mary doubts that, but does not express such verbally, just as she says nothing on the subject of what Diana means by at this point. Whatever she knows--or thinks she knows--it can't be so sinister as her remark about wearing red if it operates on the assumption of forthcoming nuptials. Can it? And anyway, how could Diana know anything?

"Look, Mary, there's your Mama!" Diana bolts forward, dragging Mary toward a fabric counter. "Lady Grantham, you've exactly the same idea as me--nothing but a Liberty print for the fashionable Englishman."

"How lovely to see you, Diana." Mama's expression doesn't indicate she thinks it lovely at all as she watches Diana flit about in the kimono she hasn't actually purchased. After a moment she turns to Mary to solicit her opinion the length of printed silk she was admiring before Diana interrupted.

"I was considering this for the lining of a smoking jacket..." Eyeing the silk draped over Diana's frame, Mama notices it's the same as the one in her hands, and moves further down the silk display.
"Perhaps a paisley would suit your papa better...If there's even time to have one made..."

"A smoking jacket, yes! Oh, Mary, that'd be simply ripping! You know how Richard is about his cigars!"

She does. In fact Mary has a more intimate knowledge of Richard and his cigars than Diana can likely imagine, for all her penchant for being featured in newspaper gossip columns. She tasted Richard's cigar when he kissed her that night in the library, the musty smoke on his lips, the bittersweet oaky tobacco as her tongue glided along his in his warm mouth.

"Don't you think that might be a little personal for a man to whom I am not formally engaged?" Mary asks, avoiding eye contact with Mama.

Diana throws back her head, a few strands of rebellious hair falling loose from the pins, and laughs--loudly, turning a few heads, which is just what she intended. "I suppose a dressing gown is out of the question, too! All right then, what about a nice respectable boring...scarf?"

Mary balks--but only because of the particular printed silk scarf Diana points to in a glass display case. Her eye is caught by a different pattern.

"Excuse me, Miss?" Diana waves to attract the attention of a salesgirl--and a number of passersby. "My friend would like to purchase a gentleman's scarf. That one, the peacock feather print."

Chortling, she grasps Mary's hand and bounces on the tips of her toes as if she's wearing a pair of pointe ballet slippers--which, a downward glance reveals to actually be the case. "Oh, Mary, it's the most perfect present for Richard. He's such a vain darling!"

"You don't think Sir Richard will find it insulting?" Mama asks as the clerk holds out the scarf for Mary's closer inspection.

"More insulting than the Papa and Edith about the shooting tweeds?"

Mama opens her mouth in retort, but before she can emit any sound, a fourth female voice joins the conversation.

"Diana! Diana my love. I told you not to run off." The Duchess of Rutland scolds her daughter as if she is two years old and not twenty--though she leaves off suddenly, with much the same distracted expression as Diana wore earlier. "Oh! What a lovely kimono." She herself is swathed in a chartreuse wool mantle over a trailing black dress, indicating that mother and daughter share an appreciation for Oriental fashions.

"Cora," she adds, by way of greeting, chin jutting at an awkward angle from her long neck to peer up at Mama from beneath the rolled mink band of the black and gold silk hat squashed low on her head. It strikes Mary as a cross between a turban and a Russian ushanka--apart from the large jaunty bow in the back, which recalls neither style of headdress.

"Lady Rutland."

Mama's smile doesn't reach her wide eyes as they dart downward to the hand encased in a long black evening glove peeping out from the wide yellow sleeve, which the Duchess pointedly does not extend to her. The tension between the two women perplexes Mary; even more so when she notices Diana bobbing on her toes again whilst her gaze darts back and forth between them as if she is a spectator at a tennis match. How alarming it is that Diana Manners is better appraised of the situation
"Mama, just look what I helped Mary find for Richard Carlisle! A peacock print Liberty scarf! Isn't it cunning? Just like the old fox!"

"Yes..." Lady Rutland turns slightly toward Mary and expresses the same genuine admiration that she did for Diana's kimono, but she is only momentarily distracted from the company. "Richard told the Duke and me he'd accepted an invitation to your estate. I must say, Cora, I voiced my fear to him that he might find a country Christmas rather dull in comparison to what he's accustomed to in town..."

Or at Belvoir, Mary suspects Diana's mother wants to say. The antics at the Saturday to Monday parties the Duchess throws at her husband's ancestral castle are notorious for being even more theatrical than the productions at His Majesties Theatre, and grace the pages of less reputable publications than The Sketch.

"Then again," Lady Rutland goes on, her shaded gaze locking on Mary. "I suppose Downton played host to scandal during Richard's previous visit with appeal enough for even a newspaper magnate's lurid tastes. Though I take it you'll avoid the traditional Boxing Day hunt?"

Mama splutters a response about Mr Pamuk's ghastly accident and Sir Richard's tasteful coverage of the tragedy, of which Mary can register no more than every other word for the roar in her ears of a hot sick wave rolling over her. Pressing her fingers in the cool kid leather glove to her lips, she again tries to convince herself it's only her own guilt. Not the possibility that Diana or Lady Rutland really knows anything. Certainly not that she is...afflicted with the condition Anna suspects.

But then the Duchess tells her daughter to come along and, as they pass by, leans in to Mama and squeezes her hand.

"I'm so sorry for you, Cora," she says as if she is offering condolences at a funeral. "But at least she'll be married off to a husband who can minimise the scandal for your family. Small comforts."

"Merry Christmas, darling!" Diana calls out, pirouetting to blow kisses.

Mary removes her hand from her mouth in a rather weak wave, though the pressing urge to be sick recedes along with their acquaintances into the mass of shoppers.

"My," she says, her voice slightly too tremulous to qualify as the blasé tone she has polished with as much care and precision as Professor Higgins buffed the London grime from Eliza Doolittle's until the syllables shimmered from her lips like cut glass. "The Mannerses never miss an opportunity to be dramatic, do they? All the world's a stage, indeed."

And the role that Mary must play, for the moment, is that she is not about to be sick on the stage because of a choice even Diana has not been foolish enough to make.

~*~

"What do you mean, Mary's gown doesn't fit?"
The Duchess of Rutland and her daughter are not, it seems, the only ones prone to theatrics. Fingers pausing on the buttons of her blouse, Mary tilts her head toward the exterior of the dressing room, straining to make out Mama's dismayed stage whisper through the heavy velvet drapery that separates the public space of the seamstress' shop from the fitting area.

"We were just here a few weeks ago in October for her measurements," she goes on. "You took them yourself."

"They seem to have changed in that span of time, Lady Grantham," replies Miss Brown, the dressmaker's assistant whose taut syllables make Mary imagine furrows in the skin all around the thin lips, which part in the very smallest of *o* required for speech. "Your daughter is rather more slender in the waist than she was when I measured her in October."

At once Mary resumes doing up her buttons, conscious of her sisters seated on the small upholstered sofa behind her in their new Christmas frocks, and of her own lately prominent ribs and hipbones, though they are hidden from view by her corset and chemise.

"Oh," Mama says, in a more normal voice, accompanied by a sigh. "In that case isn't it just a simple matter of taking it in?"

"Not without ruining the line of the gown, I'm afraid. And..."

Mary closes her eyes as the anticipated words are delivered as if they are something unsavoury Miss Brown must swallow.

"...she has increased in...the bust."

"Or you measured her incorrectly." Aunt Rosamund's tones, biting as the winter wind that chased them into Maison Lucile an hour ago, do not require Mary to strain to hear as she joins in the conversation, turning it from a duet to a trio. "Have you considered that possibility?"

Miss Brown's reticence is a plainer answer than she could make in words that it is not, and in the mirror, Mary feels sick at the sight of the her blouse stretching tightly across her breasts as the button strains at the edge of its hole. And of Edith's brown eyes watching her hawkishly above her narrow hooked nose. Sybil, however, grins.

"You have to admire Miss Brown's resolve against the combined forces of Mama and Aunt Rosamund."

"Hush, darling," Mary chides her little sister, leaning nearer to the curtain.

"Is Lady Duff Gordon in the shop?" Mama asks, her voice low again, and harsh. "I would very much like to speak with her."

Sighing audibly, the dressmaker's assistant replies, "Yes, your ladyship."

The rings of the curtain scrape against the rod as Mama flings it back to enter the dressing area with Rosamund, who draws it closed again behind them.

"Lady Duff Gordon is going to help us sort out this problem," says Mama, giving Mary a tight smile that is not mirrored in her eyes as they scrutinise her figure.
"So I heard," Mary says with as much nonchalance as she can muster. She obscures her mother's view by slipping the jacket of her winter walking suit over her blouse.

"It must be a mistake." Mama seats herself in a reproduction Louis XIV armchair tucked in the corner of the dressing room, she sweeps her hand over her eyes. "Your measurements can't have changed that drastically in so short a time."

"Haven't you noticed her picking at her food at every meal?" Edith stands and crosses in front of Mary to view her own gown in the mirror, adjusting the fall of the sheer black tulle over the jade satin slip in an obvious attempt to be noticed. No one does, of course.

"I wish I had Mary's resolve to diet," Sybil says, fidgeting in her dusky red gown with a wide sash and embroidered roses and pale gold lacework that suit her girlish sweetness. "Then my corset wouldn't have to be so tight. Though if only women weren't made to wear corsets--"

"That wouldn't explain the increased bust," Rosamund says.

Ignoring her aunt's appraising gaze, Mary says, "And if it did you should try it, Edith. So your corset won't have to work so hard."

"Oh, can't you two at least agree to a truce at Christmas?" Sybil implores, on her feet now and reaching awkwardly behind her back for the ends of her satin sash. "In the spirit of peace on earth?"

"You are an angel," Mary goes to her and loosens the sash for her. "Unfortunately the one who appeared to the shepherds didn't say anything about goodwill toward sisters."

"Or dressmakers," says Mama. "I'm not feeling a great deal of goodwill toward Lady Duff Gordon at the moment."

"I tried to warn you," Rosamund tells her. "This Titanic scandal will ruin the woman."

"She wouldn't be the only one," Mary mutters, and Sybil tilts her head upward to give her a sympathetic look as her fingers squeeze Mary's hand.

"Robert said the same," Mama says. "That Lucy's work will suffer with the public condemning her and Sir Cosmo for their means of escape."

"Bribery is generally frowned upon," Edith says, and Rosamund snorts.

"That was just newspaper slander," Mama argues, referring to the early reports that Lady Duff Gordon's husband bribed the lifeboat crew five pounds apiece to row twelve people in a boat meant to hold forty safely away from the sinking ocean liner; Sir Cosmo himself claimed the payment was for the purchase of necessities once the survivors reached landfall.

"I wonder who we know who might have been involved in that," says Edith, raising her brows at Mary, who rolls her eyes—though even she is not naive enough to think Richard's papers are above revelling in such a salacious story in the wake of tragedy.

"That is not charitable," Mama rebukes Edith. Pushing up from her chair, she goes on as she approaches her other two daughters, "Sybil's right, it is a season of peace and goodwill. I've had gowns made at Maison Lucile for almost as long as I've been a mother," she goes on, wistfully, and lifts a hand to stroke Mary's cheek. "I want my daughters to have dresses as beautiful as they are."
Mary wishes she could mock her mother's soppiness, but instead holds her breath as the blue eyes scrutinise her at such close range, the lines them deepening by a fraction as if puzzling something out.

"Lady Grantham? Lady Mary?"

At the voice outside the dressing room, Mama turns from Mary to sweep the curtain aside, revealing Lucy Duff Gordon herself. The dressmaker is the picture of modernity even past Mama's age, with bobbed red hair and dressed in one of her own creations, a blousing black wool hobble skirt whose simplicity is belied by elegant braiding down the side-seam and over the wide black sash which falls to mid-calf, paired with a blouse that is a true confection of cream-colored chiffon. Above the ruffled collar, her cheeks are tinged with pink. Rouge? Or humiliation at overhearing the old allegations trotted out against her yet again?

"I'm dreadfully sorry for this mistake about Lady Mary's gown," she says in the flat vowels indicative of her Canadian upbringing. "I'm afraid altering it simply won't be possible, but for your inconvenience Lady Mary may select any other gown she likes off the peg. I'll tailor it myself today and have it delivered to your address here tonight, or expressed to Yorkshire if you must leave before then. It's the very least I can do," she adds, "for another family who has suffered from the Titanic tragedy."

They haven't much time before they're to meet Richard for tea, and though Mama thanks Lady Duff Gordon for her generous accommodations, as they browse the selection of gowns on hangers and mannequins, she bemoans the loss of the original dress.

"It was just so perfect," she says with a sigh. "Ivory is so becoming with your hair and complexion."

Mary's stomach clenches as the memory of Richard's voice, husky from dozing with her after sex, rasps almost the exact words whilst inspecting the contents of her wardrobe.

"I was beginning to second-guess it, anyway," she says. "It's so bridal. And I already have an ivory evening gown."

"You already have a black one, too," observes Sybil as Mary is drawn to a dress not spied before now on a mannequin.

"Not quite like this one," she argues, her eyes raking over the layers of sheer black embroidered tulle draped asymmetrically over a black silk skirt, forming a shawl over a nude slip and black silk skirt, beaded with crystals.

"It's exquisite," Mama says, touching the beadwork about the neckline. "But...darling, are you certain you want to look as if you're in mourning? You were so impatient to be out of it for Patrick."

*I'm not as sad as I should be. That's what makes me sad.* Mary bristles at Mama's unintended dig, though not so much as at Edith's muttered remark when Lady Duff Gordon approaches Mama with the possibility of adding a bit of beaded burgundy satin at the cuffs of the elbow sleeves and bodice for a festive accent.

"*Isn't* Mary in mourning, though? For her reputation?"

She slinks off to speak to an acquaintance waving her from across the shop, and Mary stares after her
for a moment before drawing her gaping lips back together and returning her attention to the mannequin.

"This will be quite perfect," she tells her mother and Lady Duff Gordon. "The first time I met Sir Richard, I was a girl in black."

She will see whether he still wants to kiss her.
The Tea Party

Chapter Summary

Christmas tea is hardly a sampling of the delights of the season as Mary battles illness and Richard adds an unexpected member of their party.

"Wouldn't you say there's rather an air of familiarity to all of this?" asks Aunt Rosamund with a smirk, the glimmer in her eyes enhanced by the reflection of fairy lights from one of the restaurant's Christmas trees in her pupils. She turns slightly on the edge of the pale peach sofa shared with Mary and goes on, the corner of her lips quirking higher as though drawn by a string attached to the gingery eyebrows that arch almost to the brim of her hat. "Waiting in a fashionable tearoom for your unfashionably late beau?"

Mary rolls her eyes, but undermines her own attempt at disinterest by not restraining her gaze from wandering over the back of the identical sofa opposite, a low tea table in between, to the entrance of Fortnum and Mason's St James Restaurant. Although she does scan the faces of the few men clad in dark suits sprinkled among the ladies in their plumed winter hats waiting for admittance into the busier-than-usual venue, she can't say whether it is to keep watch for Richard, or to plot an escape route should tea break the control she has maintained only tenuously over her stomach.

"Sir Richard does seem to suffer from a lack of punctuality." Mama's voice draws Mary's eyes downward to the centre position of the other sofa. "Does it strike you as a peculiar trait for a man whose livelihood is built on deadlines?"

"Perhaps he's meeting one now," Sybil offers, helpfully, at Mama's left. "A new scoop for his evening paper."

"It wouldn't be the first time," says Edith, sandwiching their mother from the other side, an undertone of meaning in her voice and an expression on her shrewish features which make Mary twitch her thumbs against her curled forefingers in her lap. Edith looked just like that when she witnessed the last tense moment between Richard and her prior to his abrupt departure from Downton.

"The Evening Telegram will be in the newsboys' satchels before we finish our tea," Rosamund says with an air of expertise at which Mary cannot help but smile slightly, knowing her aunt is thinking of the tour they had of the printing presses. She pours herself a cup of tea from the turquoise teapot etched with a golden butterfly motif, drops in a lump of sugar, and continues as she stirs, her voice underscored by the high metallic whir of silver against china. "No, tardiness seems only to be a problem for Sir Richard when it comes to his personal life. Which leaves Mary to answer a question of vital importance: is she content to be her husband's second love?"

Mary's smile falters at once at the looming memory of capital letters typed on cardstock: THIS IS HOW IT WILL BE--Richard's only acknowledgment of her feelings about the manner in which he left her. Either he is oblivious to how stricken she was to come downstairs from their afternoon tryst to find him dressed in travelling clothes and carrying his briefcase, ready to board a train, or he is callous. Which is worse, she cannot say, and her stomach twists with the uncertainty of whether she even has the luxury of being his second love. Or love at all. It was never mentioned.
Richard made love to her—but was it because he loved her? Perhaps more importantly, did she love him? Was that what made her crave that degree of attention from him? Or was it merely lust that compelled her to invite him to her bed?

A sudden whiff of pine deflects her attention to the fireplace to which the sofas stand perpendicular, an arrangement which she supposes is intended to create an illusion of intimacy in the midst of the bustling restaurant. Evergreen boughs drape the teal marble mantel, and above hangs a Christmas wreath in place of the usual Impressionist landscape. Fortnum's could do with rather less greenery in such a stuffy corner of the room, and the fire crackling in the grate only makes it more so. Trying not to inhale too deeply, lest the odour exacerbate the queasiness that has plagued her all day, she returns to her distracting but no less nauseating thoughts.

Marriage for love was never in her plans. When Richard pointed out that truth to her and said that there was more to her than that, she took it as a profession of his love, and fancied herself returning the feeling. Was he offering her something else? Something they could build a marriage on?

"On the other hand..." Rosamund's lips twitch as if in a joke as they touch the edge of her teacup to take a drink. "There is a deal to be said about the merits of having a working husband. He hardly has time to meddle in his wife’s affairs. One might argue that such a marriage is even better than independence."

The last is accompanied by a little wink at Sybil, but Mary notices how their aunt raises her teacup again, masking the unmistakable twinge of grief evinced by this allusion to her own single status.

"Assuming Sir Richard does arrive sometime before our sandwiches and cake go stale," Edith breaks in, "where will he sit?"

"Next to Mary, where do you think?" Sybil answers, her tones huskier than usual with sarcasm as she leans around Mama to look at Edith as if she is quite stupid.

Mama is too busy frowning at the open space between Mary and Aunt Rosamund on the sofa to rebuke her youngest daughter for squabbling. "It'll be a tight squeeze."

Sybil sits back against the cushions with her more characteristic sweet demeanour. "I expect he and Mary shan't mind."

"Am I expected to sit between them and play chaperone?" Rosamund asks.

"Playing at being a chaperone really is the word for it, in your case," Mary says. "One might argue that we wouldn’t be here now if you’d taken that role rather more seriously."

No one does argue. No one says much at all, in fact, Rosamund included, and Mary pours herself a cup of tea with as much satisfaction as she has felt all day—perhaps in all the last six weeks—to have left her aunt quite speechless. Rosamund, who truly is Granny's daughter when it comes to having a response to everything, the last word at all times.

Sipping her tea, Mary sweeps her gaze over the restaurant entrance again, pausing on a familiar woman who raises a mannish hand to wave off a helpful footman from removing her ermine wrap, one end of the stole pinned to her hip by the other hand which settles there. Frida Uhl's dark, heavy-lidded eyes scan the tearoom from beneath the brim of her hat, a tower of brown felt and autumn-hued feathers, assessing Fortnum's clientele as if they are her patrons in the Cave of the Golden Calf.
The nightclub owner's red lips part in speech, the same colour flooding Mary's cheeks at the memory of the Viennese accent referring to her as Richard's girlfriend; the flush deepens as her gaze follows the backward tilt of the plumes to the companion Frida addresses over her shoulder.

"I'm afraid you're wrong about one thing, Aunt Rosamund." Mary lowers her cup and saucer to her lap. "Sir Richard may be frequently late, but he is never unfashionable."

"What, is he wearing his tweeds again?" Edith twists round on the sofa to look, though Sybil has already beaten her to it.

"A very smart business suit," she announces, beaming over her shoulder at Mary, who can't help but return the smile. "He looks a proper London gentleman."

"A grumpy London gentleman, you mean," says Edith. "That scowl seems to be his favourite accessory."

Mary hates to agree with her, but Richard hardly appears to be in good humour as he shifts two armloads of wrapped gifts to a footman without dropping any, and shrugs out of his greatcoat and trilby with the assistance of another, all the while voicing evident displeasure with something to the headwaiter.

"A pocket watch and a cross expression," Aunt Rosamund says. "Marmaduke never left the house without either. A businessman's most important tools."

The businessman in question, however, seems content to leave the cross scowling to the headwaiter, red-faced and gesticulating to an underling, while Richard stands at the edge of the restaurant with his hands in his trouser pockets, eyes coolly scanning the faces of the women beneath their hats as if perusing newspaper headlines for a note of interest. Mary sits up straighter, coëcking her head slightly to accommodate the jaunty angle of her hat so as not to shade her face from him. She raises her teacup to her lips and drinks, as much to settle her stomach as to affect disinterest--by no means must Richard think her desperate for a glimpse of him after six weeks.

She cannot take more than a sip of tea, however, for the lump that forms in her throat as their gazes meet across the room. If she were inclined toward romantic clichés, butterflies would have taken up flight in her stomach as the moment mirrors the first time they locked eyes in a crowded ballroom last May; instead, Mary thinks of the last time his gaze held hers, as they stood toe to toe at the foot of the staircase at home and Richard snarled at her for being childish.

Yes, she has been childish, indeed. For expecting him to rank her higher than The Telegram.

For expecting him to write.

For expecting him not to turn up for tea with another woman.

Mary gulps her tea as Frida links arms with Richard, drawing his gaze down to her as they follow the headwaiter to the tea table. The drink courses down through Mary's chest, heat radiating outward, and the warmth from the fireplace prickles over the exposed skin of her face and hands so that she begins to perspire within her wool suit. Yet somehow her toes feel like ice in the pointed tips of her shoes, and her fingers tingle as if frostbitten when Frida's hand closes around them, her grip chafing.

"My dear Lady Mary," Frida purrs, drawing her onto wobbly legs to peck her cheek. "How lovely to see you again--but it has been too long since the last time. You should have called on me at the Cave
when you were in town in October."

"We were attending a wedding." Mary casts a sideways glance at Richard, who has resumed his debate with the headwaiter, apparently about confusion as to the number of their party and the footman who's been sent to fetch an additional chair. "The ball ran late."

"The Cave is open rather later." Smirking, Frida draws back from Mary to stand beside Richard at the end of the table as the headwaiter scurries off. "Do I have the pleasure of meeting the Earl of Grantham's family?"

"With the exception of the Earl himself and the Dowager Countess," Richard says, the hard lines of his face giving way to dimpled charm. "It's a pity she didn't come, as I know you'd find her quite the character." He makes the introductions all around, then says, "Please accept my apologies for the awkwardness of the seating arrangements. Adding a number to our party seems to be tantamount to changing a law in this country."

"Then it's just as well Granny isn't a long to make it a party of eight," says Sybil, the only one besides Frida whose laugh isn't forced and polite.

"Indeed." Richard pulls Frida aside as a footman comes with the extra chair and a waiter lays another place setting on the already overcrowded table. "Never mind that the Dowager is even less forgiving of the newness of my money and title."

Frida leans over the table and helps herself to a thick slice of apple crème cake, which she bites into as she assumes the added seat, leaving the vacant seat on the sofa for Richard. He hesitates under the ladies' watchful gazes, clearly unsure of the etiquette for such close quarters, as Rosamund slides to the very end, her sleeve crumpled by the arm. Mary considers making it easier for him by sliding to the middle next to her aunt, but decides instead on the opposite end. Richard hasn't made this easy on any of them, least of all her, and it will be rather fun to watch him squirm--most literally--in the midst of so many Crawley women. Less pettily, she cannot bear to sit even one place nearer to the fire--though with Richard's body pressed close at her side she questions whether fire would affect her body temperature any more adversely-- nor does she relish the idea of having to squeeze past his knees in the event that she should lose her precarious hold over her stomach.

"How lovely all of your daughters are, Lady Grantham," says Frida. Mary steadfastly avoids Richard's gaze on her as the Austrian woman continues, "You are the youngest, Lady Sybil, ja? The one who charmed Richard into stealing away one of the housemaids to be his secretary?"

Though obviously delighted to be noticed by an adult, Sybil replies earnestly, "I think Gwen earned the position entirely on her own merit. She's very determined and ambitious."

"And you, I think, have very bold and modern ideas for a well bred young lady," Frida says."You would fit in well with the young people who frequent my nightclub."

"Praise, indeed," Edith mutters.

"Sybil isn't out yet, I'm afraid, Mrs Uhl," Mama says. Her brows knit. "Or do you prefer Frau?"

"I am divorced, Lady Grantham, and in any case I prefer Frida." The feathers on her hat quiver with her chuckle. "And at the Cave we are not so strict about these little rules imposed by society. If a girl is old enough to form her own opinions about feminism and class mobility, then she is old enough to associate with people to whom she may express them, would you not all agree?"
"I wish more people shared that view," Sybil says, but checks herself in light of the look Mama and Aunt Rosamund exchange across the table. She stirs her tea, and ventures, "How is Gwen getting on, Sir Richard?"

"Better than the new housemaid who replaced her at Downton, I hope," says Edith in tones that belie any such hope.

"Not as efficient as her predecessor?" Richard lifts his eyes to Mama as he selects a sandwich from the tiered tray.

"The other servants have been frightfully beastly to her," Sybil answers.

"It's just a few good-natured pranks." Mama's smile fails to mask her evident thought that this tea party conversation could not get any madder than if it were led by the Hatter and March Hare. "A little initiation rite. In the spirit of fun."

"Or of taking her down a peg or two," Edith interjects. "O'Brien says Ethel's bit high and mighty about having been head housemaid...at a much smaller house than Downton."

"Since when are you bosom pals with O'Brien?" Sybil asks.

"I can't say I'm much surprised," Mary says. "Like unto like."

She raises her teacup to her lips, enjoying Edith's glower over the rim, but as she drinks, Richard's knee brushes against hers in a way she knows to be conspiratorial. Glancing up at him, she finds his gaze fixed on Sybil, though Mary recognises the telltale flicker of the dint beneath his cheekbone.

"You may rest assured, Lady Sybil, that Miss Dawson hasn't been the victim of hazing..."

He talks on, but between the warmth of the tea and the fire, Mary ceases to hear the specific words; and she feels rather than hears the low rumble of his voice from his body pressed close to her side. Her eyelids droop, both with drowsiness and the memory of the husky tones putting her at ease before they made love, and continuing their flirtatious banter after.

But she mustn't think about that now, not here.

Blinking, Mary gulps her tea and sits up straighter, her ears once more alert to the syllables he utters, and to their meaning.

"...her parents were none too pleased about her giving up her safe place in a country house and moving to town."

Out the corner of her eye Mary sees his head incline slightly toward her, and she turns to meet his eye. "Perhaps they've read your papers," she says.

Richard returns her gaze levelly for a moment, and a muscle in his cheek ripples just beneath the smooth-shaven skin. "Miss Dawson knows her own heart and mind. And is determined to follow them."

"I wish we had time to stop by your office and see her." Sybil's wistful tones remind Mary that though she and Richard are having their own private conversation, they are not the alone. "Do you
Grinning, Richard extends his hand to take the small gift-wrapped box she passes across the tea table. "I'm sure Miss Dawson will be very pleased when I tell her you asked after her." He scrutinises the paper printed with holly berries before tucking it into his jacket pocket. "I've been out of the office doing a bit of shopping for employees myself."

"And for non-employees," Frida adds, dabbing a bit of icing from the corner of her mouth. "And not by himself--with my help. You are a lucky woman, Mary," she says, catching her eye. "I have impeccable taste."

As if to emphasise her point, Frida sits back in her chair, adjusting her stole about her shoulders to show off her fashionable wrap blouse and paisley skirt, which Mama is obliged to compliment as Mary sits mute, clenching her jaw. She ought to be relieved by this explanation for Richard being out with Frida, but her mood leaves little room for forgiveness.

"So not a Fortnum and Mason gift basket?" Aunt Rosamund quips.

"Diana Manners helped me choose something for Sir Richard." As she moves to pour herself another cup of tea, Mary adds, "She was wearing a kimono."

This time it is Frida's laugh that sounds forced as she watches Richard, whose face is a study as he chews his sandwich. When he has washed it down with a long drink of tea, he places his cup on the table, clasps his hands between his knees, and smiles as he addresses the three women on the opposite sofa.

"And have you all had a successful shopping trip? I believe there was a dressmaker's on your agenda?"

"Lucile Duff Gordon's." Mama practically sighs the name, her relief evident that the teatime discussion has moved on from the subject of servants and secretaries. "For the girls' final Christmas frock fittings."

"Only Mary's didn't," Edith says, speaking up for the first time since Mary tweaked her about O'Brien, the retaliatory blow landing square in the pit of Mary's stomach.

"Your new dress didn't fit?" Richard asks, turning to Mary before she has time to school her flush into submission.

"The assistant seems to have measured incorrectly," Mama says with a much more flippant wag of her head than she mustered in the dress shop. "The error was rectified and Lady Duff Gordon is tailoring a new gown as we speak."

"I do adore Lucile's work," Frida says, drawing her stole more securely around her shoulders as she pushes up from her chair. She waves off Richard's move to stand and excuses herself to go out for a cigarette.

"It seems Lucile's work is suffering," Aunt Rosamund says, her eyes following Frida's retreating broad form from the tearoom before returning to Richard over the rim of her cup. "How could it not, in the wake of such scandal?"

"On the contrary, Lady Rosamund. I'd say she's keeping rather well afloat."
"Do you, indeed?"

"Did you know she's the author of the Dear Dorothy column in *The Sketch*?" Richard pronounces the newspaper's title harshly. "She's also been hired on to write regularly for *Harper's Bazaar* and *Good Housekeeping*.

"American magazines," Mama says.

"Which share the common characteristic of being owned by William Randolph Hearst," Richard adds. "Who also publishes the *New York American*, where that scurrilous interview Lady Duff Gordon gave immediately following the wreck originated and launched the scandal here at home."

He relaxes against the cushions at the back of the sofa, wholly at ease in his own element, which Mama insisted she wanted to see; somehow, Mary doubts all this talk of newspaper scandal raises him an inch in her estimation.

"Obviously Hearst's capitalising on the notion that any publicity is good publicity," Richard says.

"In other words," Aunt Rosamund cuts in, "Mr Hurst made Lady Duff Gordon notorious and then exploited that."

"You must wish you'd thought of it," Mary says. "One of your idols, is he?"

Richard smirks at her before sitting up and shifting slightly toward Rosamund, gesturing with open palms as he explains, "It's mutually beneficial. Hearst's periodical circulation continues to soar, while business booms at Lucile, New York. Whether Sir Cosmo will ever recover from the scandal is another matter entirely."

"And why should he?" Edith pipes in. "Whether he bribed his way into a lifeboat or not, the fact remains that he survived the shipwreck when hundreds of other men died for the sake of women and children first." Her voice pitches high at the end of her speech, and quavers, as does her chin; the tears that well in her brown eyes are not a dramatic affectation as she adds, "Including our own dear Patrick."

Richard draws a handkerchief from the inner pocket of his jacket, but the instant Edith's fingertips brush his to accept it, he asks, "Do you believe the lives of women and children are more valuable than the lives of men?"

"Of course not," she sniffs, "but the code of chivalry demands that--"

"Sir Richard," Rosamund interrupts in tones of disbelief, "do you mean to suggest that if you'd been aboard the *Titanic*, you'd have bribed your way onto a lifeboat?"

"Oh Aunt Rosamund," Mary says, catching her eye, "you know as well as I do he's not above bribery."

Without acknowledging the snide comment, Richard answers Rosamund. "If I'd been aboard the *Titanic* with a wife and children, of course I would have seen to their rescue before securing mine. But would I trade my life for other men's wives and children? Shocking as it sounds, I think not. How would my going down for the sake of so a nebulous concept as chivalry ultimately be in my family's best interests? They'd depend on me for more than seeing them through a shipwreck."
"Such as a reputation," Rosamund says.

Edith snorts. "You'd hardly leave them penniless."

Mama cringes visibly, a small sound of horror escaping her parted lips.

"Really, Mama," says Mary. "We're discussing the sinking of an ocean liner, and it's the mention of money that offends your delicate sensibilities?"

"Since we're speaking hypothetically anyway," Richard says, widening his eyes, "consider this: what if I wasn't aboard the Titanic as a millionaire newspaper publisher? What if instead I was one of those poor wretches in third class who spent every penny I had to buy passage to America for my wife and children, only to go willingly to my death and leave them to fend for themselves on the streets of New York?"

"If they were lucky enough to make it out of steerage and onto a lifeboat at all," adds Sybil, quietly. Richard nods, steepling his fingers as if he were seated behind the great oak desk in his office rather than on a peach upholstered sofa in a tea room. "As Lady Sybil reminds us, these same people who cry chivalry also believe that the lives of those women and children in first class were worth more than those in third."

The arrival of a waiter to replenish their teapot brings the conversation to a halt, but as no one speaks after he has gone again, Mary suspects Richard must have shocked everyone into silence.

"For heaven's sake," she says, rolling her eyes. "The four of you are proof of why yellow journalism thrives so men like Sir Richard can amass so much wealth and power. He's played straight to your emotions, and you've bought every word. And all the while he distracts you from the truth of the matter."

"Which is?" Richard stops pouring his tea to regard her with interests.

"That under no circumstances would Richard Carlisle go down with the ship."

"Mary!" Mama stage whispers, even as Richard lifts his teacup, tilting it slightly toward her as if it is a glass of champagne raised in toast.

"What a horrid thing to say to the man you--" Sybil breaks off, colouring, and turns imploring. "Please don't be offended, Sir Richard. She doesn't really mean it.

"Doesn't she, though?" Richard's eyes never waver from Mary's face as he tilts his head to drink, though hers follow the roll of his throat down into his collar as he swallows, and back up again when he speaks. "I was under the impression that Lady Mary admired the fighting instinct."

Her temples throb with the echo of her own voice in her head: I don't need a protector. I need someone to fight for me. The same sick feeling that made her clap her hand over her mouth when she originally spoke the words in the Claridge's ballroom comes over her now, though she stops short of mirroring the past action. Instead she draws a deep breath to quell the nausea, but the ashy smell of the fire and the evergreens on the mantel combine with a pungent cheese odour wafting from the sandwich tray to make her wish she could bolt outside as she did that other night. How foolishly she believed Richard was that someone who would fight for her.
'Indeed,' she says, shakily, her legs even more unsteady as she stands. Does she feel Richard's fingertips at her elbow, steadying her, or is it only her treacherous imagination? 'Our family might be better off if Cousin Patrick had thought about the state in which women and children first would leave Downton.'

'I thought you were only going to marry Patrick if no better offer came along?' Edith makes no effort at veiling her bitterness. Or perhaps it's not Edith's tone of voice, but the taste in Mary's own mouth.

'Has one?'

She blinks at Richard's face, trying to work out whether it's drawn with anger or bewilderment--or both--then down at his hand on her elbow. She shrugs free of his touch as she can no longer stop her fingers covering the tight press of her lips, muffling the _excuse me_ she throws back over her shoulder as she bolts for the lavatory.

Despite having so little in her stomach--tea, mostly, and a bit of salad she managed to choke down at luncheon--Mary fears heaving all of it out on Fortnum and Mason's white marble spiral staircase--or some unfortunate Christmas shopper's shoes passing on her way down--before she can complete the ascent to the first floor ladies' powder room. Mercifully she does not, though the bile is burning in her throat by the time she reaches her destination, and she only just makes it into a stall with no time to latch the door behind her when the force of her nausea sends her careening over the toilet bowl, her hand flying from her mouth as she vomits.

For a moment it comes almost as a relief to expel what has plagued her all day, but when she continues to heave long after her stomach has emptied itself of the rather startling amount of its contents, a strangled sob emits from her throat amid the gagging sounds. What if this is not the end of it? On trembling legs she sinks to her knees on the polished tile floor, one hand pressed to her abdomen, feeling the spasms of her muscles beneath the light boning of her corset. What if it's only the beginning of the symptoms of a pregnancy she will soon not be able to hide, much less deny?

The thought is enough to inspire another round of vomiting, a milky substance painfully dredged up from the very depths of her belly, her fingers curled into claws around the porcelain rim. Once it is purged, however, it is as if a valve has been turned; no further physical reaction ensues even as Mary eyes the viscous blob floating at the top of the murky toilet water with a detached sort of disgust, though her hand continues to shake when she reaches up to pull the flush lever and she must remain kneeling on the floor, watching the sick swirl down the drain, for another moment until she musters the strength to stand.

When she pauses, hand on the stall door, to draw a breath before emerging, the faintly acrid odour of a recently smoked cigarette fills her nostrils and sets her stomach to churning again. Not with renewed nausea, for which Mary would be almost grateful, but with dread. Rolling her eyes at her own paranoia--lots of women in London smoke, after all--she pushes the swinging door open, becoming as a statue again, the fingers of one hand clutching the handkerchief with which she thought at the last second to dab at the corners of her mouth, as her fear proves to be a reality.

"Frida," Mary croaks, her eyes not meeting the heavy-lidded pair gazing back at her, but instead fixed on the glass ones of the ermine head dangling over the Austrian woman's broad shoulder. The animal's mouth yawns in a permanent silent scream, and Mary empathises with its terror at being caught in a trap for the sole purpose of its fur carrying the stale musk of a rich woman's cigarettes.
"I thought you looked unwell at tea," says Frida, offering a damp towel.

It would feel heavenly to dab her neck and cheeks with the cool cloth, but Mary declines. She'll have a long bath tonight at Aunt Rosamund's; for now washing her hands will have to do for the sake of appearances.

If only she could be sure Frida Uhl is as easily fooled as some of their mutual acquaintance.

"Mary." The guttural tones echo in the tiled lavatory. "I hope you know that Richard and I are only friends. His heart belongs wholly to you. You should have heard him as we shopped. Lady Mary would like this...Lady Mary would say that--"  

"Whatever Sir Richard said, I'm sure it was for your ears only."

Mary shuts off the tap and scrubs her hands dry on a fresh bleached hand towel. What does it matter what Richard says to other people if he can't say it to her when it counts?

"I also hope you know that if you are in trouble..." In the mirror, Frida seems to be studying Mary's waistline. "I know where you can get help. And you can trust me not to gossip. Or to pass judgment."

"I beg your pardon?"

The towel flutters from Mary's hands to the black and white octagonal checked floor. As Frida stoops to retrieve it, Mary throws back her shoulders and effects her most imperious stance; she is the lady, after all, and Frida only a woman of means.

"I'm afraid I do not understand you at all."

But Mary's error is in speaking the truth. Frida discards the towel in the hamper and straightens to full height, and Mary catches their reflection in the mirror and thinks she looks so young while Frida looks experienced and wise and... like the gun-wielding woman who not only threatened lovers with their lives, but tried to take her own. While Mary can scarcely say two words to the man she slept with, or fathom what is occurring within her own body. Or not.

Without another word she strides from the powder room in a resonant click of heels before Frida can attempt to enlighten her-- though that might be a more desirable thing than the alternative that awaits her in the alcove.

At the sight of Richard leaning against the wall opposite the bathroom, hands stuffed into his pockets, her eyes fill with tears and she blushes. All she can think about is how much she had trusted him when she invited him to her bed. When he asked if she was certain.

"The men's room is upstairs," she says as she attempts to brush past him as he pushes off the wall, but his fingers circle her upper arm, gently drawing her to stand in front of him.

"And you are here."

She meets his gaze, knowing that an attempt to hide will be the surest way to alert him to the fact that she is keeping a secret from him. He scrutinises her nevertheless, and for a moment his lips part as if he is going to remark on her appearance, which even she cannot deny is sickly, having just looked at herself in the mirror, but he does not. Instead he glances away, reaching up with his free hand to
smooth the thinning hair at the back of his head.

"This isn't at all how I imagined today would go."

Against her will, the knot bound up in Mary's chest loosens at the idea that he might have daydreamed about having tea with her. And her family. "Edith does tend to spoil things."

Richard grins sideways at her, appearing for a moment almost boyish. "We shall have to endeavour not to allow her to spoil Christmas."

He utters the word in a hushed tone that makes Mary think of the wonder the season held for her as a child. When angelic choirs filled a sky that shone full of stars that earls' daughters could wish on and never doubt that any dream would come true. When the future was wrapped up in a pretty box and tucked beneath the sheltering branches of a tree much like the one she can see now rising up through the department store's central stairwell.

"I've missed you, Mary."

The squeeze of warm callused fingertips on her palm makes her suddenly aware that at some point as she was lost in thought, Richard released her elbow to hold her hand.

She pulls it away.

"Yes, I gathered that from all the letters you wrote the past six weeks."

Richard flinches as if she slapped him, his cheekbone standing out white against the flush of his face, and here they are: back in the tearoom moments ago...at Downton weeks earlier...their quarrel left open between them. Little space is, Richard taking a step toward her, the downward tilt of his head in combination with his proximity making Mary feel as if the little hallway to the lavatory is closing in around them. His whites of his eyes widen around the bright blue irises, fixed beneath the hard line of his brow.

"If you believe my lack of communication reflects my feelings for you, then perhaps I ought to make more of the fact that you never responded to my last telegram."

Just as Mary opens her mouth in retort—*How was I supposed to respond to THIS IS HOW IT WILL BE STOP? LOOKING FORWARD TO A LIFETIME OF YOU LOVING ME AND LEAVING ME STOP?*—the powder room door swings wide and Frida breezes out, tucking her jade cigarette holder into her handbag. Her gaze touches Mary's, and her hand Richard's arm as she glides past them in the direction of the stairs.

"We should go back," Mary says, following, "before Mama decides you and Frida have spirited me away to the Cave of the Golden Calf."

She fully expects to feel Richard's hand to clamp around her arm again, but this time she his voice arrests her.

"I'll make it up to you," he says, softer, not precisely apologetic or repentant; the lion simply velvets his paws. Mary doesn't have to turn to envision the manner with which he saunters up behind her, or the almost feline curve of his mouth. "I'll write every day between now and Christmas. Romantic verse delivered by special courier, if I thought that was what you wanted. But it isn't. That's not who you are."
The sole of his shoe creeks on the tile as he stops just behind her, close enough that the warmth of his breath caresses her neck.

"And it's certainly not who you are," Mary replies, her voice more pinched than she would wish, due to holding her breath; if Richard notices, he will undoubtedly assume she is overwhelmed by his charms, when really it's just that the trail of fresh cigarette smoke that lingers in Frida's wake is making her rather queasy again, so she tries not to inhale.

"We're more than that," Richard murmurs, his lips brushing her ear as he leans in, hands curving lightly around her shoulders. "Anything else seems small in comparison. I'm near to distraction at the thought of being with you again."

"Speaking of being with people again," she says, deliberately misconstruing the meaning of his euphemism to annoy him, "isn't that Evelyn Napier across the way?"

Mary strides forward out of his grasp, waving to her friend, who sees her and stops, even as her shoulders square and back arches in anticipation of Richard's claws coming out once more.

Close on her heels, he snarls, "Is that your better offer?" She knew he wouldn't let her off the hook for that. As they step out into the atrium, where Evelyn waits by the staircase, Richard's voice raises in concession to the crowd noise reverberating off the marble and ceiling four storeys up. "The honourable Mr Napier?"

"I do endeavour to be," Evelyn drawls, doffing his hat to Mary, his eyes narrowed on Richard. "Carlisle. I fear the same cannot be said for you."
Chapter Summary

In the days before Christmas, Mary finds herself hanging by a thread as her confidence in Richard—and her secrets—begin to unravel.

Through a blur of dark lashes, Mary glimpses the dark mahogany of her dressing table rising up toward her as her head nods. Her eyes snap wide open as she jerks her chin from where it has dropped to her chest, meeting Anna's in the mirror as she drags the brush through the glossy lengths of Mary's hair. Noting the slight furrow between the fair eyebrows, Mary twitches her lips, colourless with exhaustion, into a smile.

"Heavens. How lucky I didn't go down to dinner, or I might have nodded off in the consommé."

Anna doesn't seem to appreciate the attempt at humour, but glances away, placing the brush back in the dressing table drawer and stepping back to deftly divide Mary's hair into three strands for her plait.

"Only a moment longer, Lady Mary. I imagine you'll be asleep before your head touches the pillow."

"You know, Mama said she didn't intend to stay up for after dinner coffee," Mary says, her tone heavier as irritation creeps in at Anna's evident scepticism. "Six hours of railway travel is a bit much for anybody. *Even those passengers not confined for a great deal of that time being sick in the lavatory.* "And we were delayed twice for ice on the tracks."

"Yes, m'lady. I find myself getting sleepy earlier this time of year. As the days grow short."

"Unfortunately for you the parties for the season only grow longer."

At that, Anna's mouth does quirk into a slight grin as she ties off the end of a plait with a ribbon.

"Well you've got to make the most of your new Christmas frock, haven't you? Lady Duff Gordon's outdone herself this year."

"Hasn't she?" Mary gets up from the dressing table and pads across her bedroom to her wardrobe rather than her bed, opening it to admire the new black dress that hangs alongside her other evening gowns, the silver embroidery and crystal beadwork winking like stars from the layers of lace and silk. "Mama and Edith say it looks like mourning, but I always think black is so becoming on me."

"I'm not sure there's a colour that isn't becoming on you, Lady Mary. Though I thought you said you'd chosen an ivory gown when you were up in October?"

"A girl's permitted to change her mind, isn't she?"

Mary's breezy reply does not at all match the tone her body speaks as she turns and crosses the room to her bed: shoulders slope forward, fingers laced together in front of her, wringing her hands. Permitted to change her mind, yes...but not her measurements.
As if reading her mind, Anna says as she straightens the items in the wardrobe, "I let out some of your jackets and dresses, while you were in London, and moved a few buttons on your blouses. But I'm not that skilled a seamstress, m'lady, and it won't do for long..."

"It won't have to." Mary jerks the coverlet over her knees as she draws them up into the bed. "It's the stress of the season. Once Christmas has come and gone..." And Richard. "You'll see what a dreadful coincidence this has all been."

"I hope so." Anna remains clearly unconvinced. "We'll know by Christmas. As you say."

"It's all your fault for making me watch the calendar." The reference to Mary's cycle makes her cross. "An anticipated visitor never arrives on time, isn't that what they say?"

"I know one about boiling pots, m'lady."

"I suppose that's more relevant below stairs." Mary blows out her bedside candle and lies back. "My head is touching the pillow. That must mean I'm asleep."

~*~

"I'd prepared a droll remark about disturbing your beauty sleep by summoning you at this ungodly hour of the morning..." Granny turns her head, as if to glance at the drawing room mantel clock which reads half past ten, though her frosty gaze never wavers from Mary's face above the thin pursed lips. "...but looking at you I almost feel I should send you back to bed at once."

"Please, do," Mary says, too groggy yet to think of a cleverer retort--there was scarcely time for a sip of tea when Mama sent Anna to wake her for an urgent summons from Granny, and then she vomited into the chamber pot the maid only just grabbed in time to spare the counterpane. Belatedly, she realises owning to her illness may not be the best way to keep suspicions from being aroused. Or is it? "I seem to have contracted the lurgy."

"It's true," says Mama from the sofa. "She's lain in the past three mornings since we got back from town. At first I thought it was just fatigue from the journey, but--"

"I told you going to London at this time of year was foolish," Granny cuts her off. "Heaven only knows what she came into contact with. The plague, most probably."

"Oh, Granny. There hasn't been a case of the plague in London for centuries. A fire took care of it, I think?"

"Yes but you were in the company of that horrible German woman. The divorcée, who owns the cabaret."

"Frida Uhl. She's from Vienna, and the Cave of the Golden Calf..." Mary smirks slightly as the name induces the desired effect of sending a shudder down Granny's rigid spine as she perches at the edge of the pink armchair, the claw of her hand curling tighter around the end of her cane. "...is a nightclub. She is divorced, though. You were right on one out of three."
"How did you know about that?" Mama asks, scarcely seeming to move her smiling lips. "Did Sybil or Edith tell you?"

"Rosamund wrote to me." Granny shifts slightly on the cushion and withdraws a folded sheet of stationery from her pocket. "In fact that's just what I've come to talk to you about, Mary. Not the part about your beau turning up to tea with another woman on his arm--"

"They're only friends. Frida helped him shop for my Christmas present, for heaven's sake."

Why is she defending him now? She certainly didn't hesitate to make the same accusation to Frida.

"That was hardly the most shocking thing your aunt had to say about you," Granny says. "Please be seated." She gestures to the armchair angled diagonally to hers, a side table between them. "I'm afraid in your delicate state of health, this is news best received recumbent."

If only Granny realised just how apt that euphemism may be, Mary thinks, reaching back to rest trembling fingers on the arm of the chair as she obeys, woozy again.

"Surely it can be nothing so ominous as you make it sound?" Mama's lips spread wide over closed teeth, a nervous laugh wobbling out.

"Perhaps not to your American sensibilities," Granny replies. "But to my thoroughly English ones, I take rumours of my granddaughter's fall from grace as a harbinger of doom."

"Why not with a grain of salt?" Mary says under her breath.

Mama speaks as if she did not catch the remark. "What do you mean, fall from grace? Are you saying some London gossips have called Mary's virtue into question?"

"I think the only question being asked is whether anyone heard that the Turkish ambassador's son's death was a cover for the real scandal," Granny replies. "Which is that the Earl of Grantham's daughter took a lover beneath his own roof."

"How despicable!" Mama turns her pale face to Mary with an expression she can't be sure applies to the slander against her or Mr Pamuk. "What an insult to all of us. Especially to the poor dead man. And Mr Napier."

Mary's stomach flops over at the memory of Evelyn, challenging Richard's honour. She didn't stick around for their confrontation, assuming Evelyn would take Richard to task for drawing attention to his ownership of the horse that threw Pamuk, and Richard, of course, said nothing on the subject—or any other—when he returned briefly to say goodbye and settle the bill for tea. Now it seems that Evelyn may have addressed another issue entirely. Though if that is the case, it seems impossible that her family has not heard anything from Richard in regard to their scullery maid's loose lips.

"Where does Rosamund say these rumours originate?" Mary asks.

"Cousin Rose heard it from her maid, who heard it from Diana Mannerses'."

"Rose MacClare?" Mama asks. "Cousin Susan and Shrimpy's daughter?"

"Do you see why I'm not so quick to discard this as malicious idle chatter? You can always rely on family."
"To hold grudges?" Mary says, her voice not quite steady as she suddenly remembers Diana's passing remark about a letter from Edith. Could her own sister really bear such deep resentment as to start such a damaging rumour? And on what grounds? "Yes, Cousin Rose has always been jealous of me. And Diana had designs on Richard. Or still does have. Even if the Duke and Duchess of Rutland would never agree to a match with a newspaper tycoon from Morningside. That's exactly why she'd want him. The forbidden fruit."

Who knows better than she? Richard accused her of exactly that.

"Nobody said anything about Sir Richard," Granny says, her thin eyebrow arching over her shrewd gaze.

"It's assumed though, surely?" Mary replies, realizing her error and fumbling to recover. "Isn't this what we all expected after we were photographed outside that den of iniquity, as you put it?"

"Be that as it may, it's never the man whose reputation suffers. It only takes one to tango, as far as society is concerned."

"It's unfortunate there were no photographers inside the Cave, to prove that I danced the Argentine tango with a partner." Mary twitches her thumbs against the sides of her index fingers. "You know I'm beginning to think the suffragettes aren't that far afield. Perhaps I'll bob my hair and march around Parliament with a sign--since I'm ruined already, regardless of whether there's an ounce of truth to the rumours. One man steals my inheritance, and another my virtue."

And in neither case will Papa help her. Her white hands in her lap, swim before her eyes.

"Mary dear," Granny says, not sounding as if she is very dear at all now, "You're not admitting truth to these rumours, are you?"

Mary rolls her eyes, clearing the tears. "Don't worry, Granny. Richard didn't take anything from me."

It's not a lie, and she doesn't think for a moment as she watches Granny's fingers flex, then curl again around the knob of her stick, that she believes it. Though, thankfully, she stands with a rustle of satin petticoats beneath her velvet winter walking suit, and makes to go.

"Of course a jealous Diana Manners is good defence. And as to such a deed occurring in this house...why, when could it have? It isn't as if Rosamund was entrusted to chaperone you again."

With a sharp laugh, Granny fixes her appraising gaze on Mama. "The parents who were so grieved over their daughter's photograph appearing in The Sketch would never be so careless as to leave her alone with a man on their watch."

"But I was," Mama whispers after Granny has left them alone. "I did. I went up to rest during the hunt and never gave a thought to how that would leave you alone with Sir Richard, and..." She closes her eyes, and winces. "That was when it happened, wasn't it?"

"Mama, he didn't--"

"Take anything?" Mama's eyes snap open, electrically bright with tears. "No, but you gave, didn't you? Freely--and so very foolishly. Oh, Mary...And as bad as these rumours are, they don't even tell the whole story. That you're..." A strangled sob wrenches from her throat, but she manages to squeak out the rest of the sentence. "...pregnant."
"Mama..." Mary says again, unable, it seems, to say anything else.

"The sleeping late every morning and retiring early, the sickness on the train, not eating, your changing measurements..." Mama presses one palm to her forehead, and leans back heavily into the sofa cushions. "Oh, that poor assistant at Lucile...I blamed her, then bullied Lady Duff Gordon into giving you that new frock...I saw all the signs, but I never...I never thought my daughter..."

The hand passes down over her brow, rubbing over her eyes, which blink puffy and red when she lowers it to take a handkerchief from her pocket.

"I held you in my arms the moment you were born and never thought there was a more perfect baby girl. I knew you wouldn't stay that way but...How can you be so disappointing? And your father--"

"Oh please don't tell him!" Mary at last finds her voice, unsteady though it is. "Nothing is certain, yet. It could be...what do they call it? All in my head?"

Mama blows her nose, and stares at Mary for a moment over the handkerchief.

"I won't tell him," she says, the tears falling again as she stands. "Not yet anyway. He'd have a stroke, and then where would that leave the rest of us, since you refuse to marry Cousin Matthew?"

Mary sighs and, inappropriate as it is in this moment, thinks this is how it is for Elizabeth Bennet living with her mother's poor nerves at Longbourn. Only she supposes she must be cast as Lydia in this sordid tale of woe.

"Cousin Matthew was never going to marry me, Mama."

"You'd best pray Sir Richard will, or you'll be ruined. We'll all be ruined."

She turns and flees the drawing room, muffling her sobs with her handkerchief crumpled into a sodden ball against her lips.

Letting the weight of her body press her deep into the cushion of the armchair, Mary lolls her head back and stares vacantly at the doorway, too exhausted even to close her eyes. If she could she would give herself over to the oblivion of sleep, but the moment's repose is just enough to give her mind a chance to start working again. The thoughts spin like the crank of an automobile, sparking a surge of energy within.

She leaps to her feet and runs as she has not since she was a girl through the hall, guided by a remark only half-heard through the blur of nausea and fatigue the previous night which now leaps to the front of her mind: Edith asked to use the library this morning to do her Christmas gift wrapping. Sure enough, when Mary throws open the door, she finds Edith hunched over the table before the front window overlooking a light flurry of snow, cutting a length of elegant Liberty print paper.

Edith swivels in her chair, scissors poised mid-cut, and lifts an eyebrow. "You never have had the patience to wait till Christmas morning to open your presents, have you?"

Mary's jaw tightens so as she strides to stand at the end of the table she feels it click in its socket. "I know what you did, you poisonous little snake. You found out what that ninny of a kitchen maid saw and wrote to Diana Manners that I slept with Sir Richard. I thought you said I'd get into enough trouble on my own without your interference?"
And so she had. Edith had just got her into even more.

"I wrote to Diana, yes," Edith says, turning back to her task as if Mary accused her of nothing more sinister than writing to Grandmamma in America about their recent London shopping excursion. "But I only told her about the hunting party. I believe I mentioned something about how you and Sir Richard join our merry chase and probably enjoyed your own alone together in the house."

The scissors slice neatly through the gift wrap, and Edith's thin lips twist in a smirk as she looks up at Mary, whose mouth hangs agape.

"Oh don't worry about giving yourself away just now," Edith says. "It was nothing I didn't already know." She takes a book from her little pile of gifts at the opposite end of the table and lays it on the paper, then folds the wrap around it. "That's the funny thing about all this. A few weeks after I wrote to Diana, O'Brien came to me, deeply concerned about poor little Daisy being distressed by some gossip the new housemaid brought with her from London about you."

Mary's fingernails carve half-moons into the palms of her hands as she restrains the old childhood urge to fist Edith's curls at the roots and twist her tender scalp.

"Well you must know how hard it is to get a coherent word out of that poor mousy girl," Edith continues, securing the folds of gift wrap with a forest green ribbon, "but somewhere in the midst of all the babbling I construed that Daisy was terrified the gossip would wend its way to Sir Richard, and he'd sack her. Because apparently she caught him in your bedroom, and he threatened her with ruin if she breathed a word of it to a single soul? What charming manners your beau has."

Snip. Edith cuts the end of the ribbon free from the spool, and turns her eyes up to Mary's again, dark cold beads in her pale face.

"So you see, Mary? Somehow I managed to start a rumour that you're a slut weeks before I knew you really are one."

~*~

The shadows lengthen across Mary's bedroom, falling across her lap where she shivers on the ivory sofa, clad only in her dressing gown, darkness blanketing her with a comforting weight as evening settles in early for the longest night of the year. She leans her head back against the arm, as Anna slips into the room as if she is no more substantial than a shade herself, a white towel draped over her arm.

"Your ladyship's bath is ready," she says.

Mary nods, but makes no move to rise, though she knows the hot water hauled up three flights of stairs by the bucketful will cool quickly in the unheated bathroom, heat escaping the porcelain tub in swirls of steam. She remembers, of all things, Richard talking about the en suite bathrooms at Claridge's Hotel; he can't have been impressed with the bath situation at Downton.

Not that he stayed long enough for it to really become a nuisance.
"Lady Mary," Anna's voice thankfully interrupts the depressing train of thought, "are you all right?"

Mary lifts her head, noting the maid hugging the towel to herself before meeting her eyes. "You should have told me the new housemaid's been gossiping about me."

Anna looks down at her shoes peeking out from beneath the hem of her blue calico day uniform. "Forgive me, m'lady, but it wasn't my place--"

"I dare say I've involved you in a lot of things that aren't your place."

The slight smile that curves on Anna's lips falls as she raises her eyes again, bright even in the uncertain light of the room with her earnestness. "There wasn't a great deal of talk. Though O'Brien did remark that she saw me mending your corset around the time of Sir Richard's visit. But Mr Carson put a stop to the gossip at once. And he defended your virtue gallantly."

Mary blinks against a sudden sting in her eyes. "Just one more person who will be disappointed in me."

"And who will forgive you, and support you."

"If you'd overheard what transpired in the drawing room this morning you'd know what short supply those are in."

"Lady Grantham knows, then?"

Nodding, Mary swinging her legs over the edge of the sofa, planting the soles of her feet firmly in the carpet to make certain she is steady before she stands. "And I think Granny suspects as well."

A shadow flickers across Anna's face, almost as if she cringed. Then, just as quickly, she gives that small encouraging smile again. "They'll come around. After the initial shock wears off."

Without another word between them, Mary pads across the rug and sweeps past Anna into the hall, the maid following her past Edith and Sybil's rooms to the bathroom. The door clicks softly shut as Mary stands at the edge of the claw-footed tub which Anna filled without her preferred lily of the valley scented bath salts whose smell has lately become unbearable. She unties the sash of her dressing gown and shrugs her arms out of the sleeves; Anna deftly catches the gown before it falls to the floor, the fingers of her other hand brushing Mary's elbow, murmuring to her to mind her step as she climbs into the bath. Mary bristles at the cautious touch, though as she stretches out in the water she notes the jut of her hipbones and the hollow of her indrawn stomach as she lies back, and it is impossible to believe that there is anything to Anna's insinuation.

Anna hangs the dressing gown on a hook on the back of the door and turns toward the bathtub again as Mary takes the cake of plain soap from the side and begins to lather her arm. "Will your ladyship require anything else?"

"An acquaintance in London told me that if I really am...in trouble...she knows someone who could help me. Do you know what she meant?"

Mary does not expect to see what she does when she looks up to find the unflappable maid pale and wide-eyed just before she averts her gaze.

"There are some things, Lady Mary," she says, very quietly, "that you should be glad you've been
sheltered from."

"I'd say my being sheltered hasn't exactly been to my benefit in this situation."

Anna's chest rises beneath her apron with a deep indrawn breath before she meets Mary's gaze and says, "I believe your friend may have been referring to abortion."

"Abortion?"

Once again Anna can't look at her, and her cheeks, which had been white, now flood with colour. "There are ways of...stopping pregnancy. Causing miscarriage."

Mary's lips part to speak, but no words seem adequate. "Oh," she says, hoarsely, looking down to see that the soap has slipped from her hand, which rests on her stomach.

"It's illegal, of course," says Anna.

"Yes, I should think so."

"And very dangerous. Women die. And the poor babies..."

A tickle across her skin; Mary notices she's been stroking her stomach with the tips of her fingers. She withdraws it, the water rippling as she skims her hand through in search of the dropped soap.

"I can't imagine bearing guilt and the shame of such a choice," Anna says, "but I do understand he desperation that must lead some women to make it...If they've had an affair...if they have too many mouths to feed already."

"If they're unmarried?"

"But...surely that won't be the case for you? Sir Richard met your family for tea...he'll be here in a few days to spend Christmas...He must still mean to marry you."

Water trickles as Mary brings the soap up out of the water and resumes scrubbing, vigorously. "Or he may just be in it for the sex."

"My apologies if I'm over the mark, Lady Mary, but if that's the case then he's gone to a lot of trouble. A man doesn't have to look far for that in London. Or at Lady Rutland's parties, if there's any truth to the gossip."

More than anything, Mary wants to believe Anna, but Richard's whisper in her mind is more persuasive: I've missed you...I'm near to distraction at the thought of being with you again.

"It seemed to be all that was on his mind at Fortnum's."

"You won't know for certain till you've told him."

Mary stops rubbing the soap over her skin, and looks up at Anna. "What if I do, and all I'm certain of is that he'll marry me because he has to?"

Anna gives her a sad smile. "I'm afraid I'm rather out of my depth, m'lady."
"That makes two of us." Mary slides down the end of the tub until her hair begins grows heavy as it absorbs water, and she is submerged beneath the soapy water.

~*~

"Mother?" Matthew says the instant he comes through to the drawing room from the dining room, where he and Papa have been holed up with their port and private conversation for far too long for it to be the usual gentlemen's topics. "Ought we to head home?"

"Yes we should," Cousin Isobel replies with undisguised eagerness, abandoning her game of whist with Mama, Granny, and Edith. Not that she's paid attention to it all night, having given up her usual fierce competition with Granny to watch the door; obviously she is apprised of the subject Matthew discussed with Papa. "Our train leaves so early for London in the morning, and I haven't quite finished packing."

"That's what ladies' maids are for," Granny mutters, laying down her cards, her annoyance evident that Cousin Isobel lost to distraction, and not to her.

"You should let Taylor drive you home, too, Mama." Papa stands beside her chair and touches her elbow to help her stand, but Granny does not reach for her walking stick propped against the edge of the card table.

"That means there's an intrigue afoot. I'd rather stay."

Papa frowns, but does not voice his displeasure. He simply reverts his attention to the Crawleys, offering to walk them out. Picking his battles, Mary thinks, looking up from the magazine Sybil has been attempting to engage her with as they sit together on the sofa. What fight is he arming himself for?

"Merry Christmas, Cousin Cora," Matthew says, shaking Mama's hand. "Cousin Mary."

He avoids her eye, and whatever else he goes on to say to the other members of her family is drowned out by the roar of blood in her ears as she realises exactly what he told Papa. Even before Carson comes back to the drawing room, having seen the dinner guests out to the awaiting car.

"Lady Grantham, Lady Mary, his lordship wishes you to join him in the library."

Both Lady Granthams answer the summons, though for a moment Mary cannot move from her seat on the pink sofa cushions.

"Oh, what has Papa got against you now?" Sybil says.

"Do you suppose Miss Swire's maid could have heard the gossip from Lady Diana's?" Edith says, catching Mary's eye.

"What gossip?" Sybil looks back and forth between them.

Either because of Mary's glower or simply because she has some sense Edith informs their little sister that it's not fit for the ears of young ladies who are not yet out. Their ensuing squabble accompanies
Mary as she follows her mother and grandmother from the drawing room.

In the library, Papa stands before his writing desk, hands clasped behind his back in his colonel's stance.

"Mary," he says through tight lips, "take a seat at the desk."

She glances around him and notes stationery and a pen on the leather writing surface, but does not obey, instead meeting his icy gaze from beneath an arched brow.

"I already wrote my letter to Father Christmas, though I'm afraid it won't do any good. I haven't been on my best behaviour this year."

"At last, something we can agree on." Papa continues, brusquely, "You will write to Carlisle, and you will tell him that you are very sorry to inconvenience him so close to his visit, but you must disinvite him."

"Disinvite him?" Mama echoes in tones that make it unnecessary for Mary to turn around to know that she is goggling.

"Such things are simply not done, Robert," Granny says, equally shocked.

"And hosting blackmailing hawkers of newspaper scandal for Christmas dinner is?" Papa booms, redirecting his vexation from Mary to his wife and mother. "I thought only our wayward young daughter had no such scruples."

"Blackmail?" Mama parrots.

"Enlighten your mother, Mary." Papa passes a hand over his brow as he turns away from the women to pace the Persian carpet. "I am too angry to speak of the reason why Miss Swire is not comfortable spending Christmas in the same house as Carlisle."

"So they were lovers?" Granny asks in hushed tones less indicative of her being scandalised than savouring the salaciousness of it all. "I sensed a peculiar...rapport." Her blue eyes flick to Mary, who rolls hers.

"For heavens' sake, do you think a man like Sir Richard would take any more of an interest in Lavinia Swire than he would in Daisy? She sold him the files that implicated the Marconi scandal."

"Sold?" Now Granny is the parrot. "In exchange for what?"

A heartbeat of hesitation, then Mary answers, eyes on the shine of Papa's patent shoes as they pass beneath the light of the lamp. "Her father's debt forgiven."

"But that's preposterous," Mama says. "Reggie Swire is Sir Richard's friend. He paid his medical expenses. It wasn't a debt."

"He's an businessman through and through," Papa argues. "Men like that have no scruples, no concept of giving anything with no strings attached, nor of having relationships that do not profit in all ways, be that monetarily or socially."

His gaze falls on Mary, and she hears the echo of the judgment handed down to her the last time she
stood trial here: *You are the next rung up the social ladder.*

Mary lashes out like a wounded—or rather, a re-wounded—animal. "Unlike men like you?"

"Mary, be silent," Mama hisses, stepping in front of her. But rather than taking a stand beside Papa, she stops before him, and says, "My dear, your qualms about Sir Richard are absolutely legitimate—"

"That's rather an understatement, Cora, wouldn't you say?"

"As an Englishman, you ought to be appreciative," she says, and in profile Mary notes the tug of a smile at Mama's lips for the briefest of moments. But she goes on, "And as I'm an American, you ought to know how indisposed we are to it—" Her eyes dart sideways at Granny's snort. "—and listen all the more closely to what I have to say."

Mary holds her breath.

"Which is that I must stand by my earlier position. We can't disinvite Sir Richard, precisely because of the sort of man he is. Do we want to invite his grudge against our family?"

"I quite agree with Cora," Granny adds, physically taking a stance beside Mama despite the earlier derision. "We must simply do our utmost to make it abundantly clear that Sir Richard is not one of us."

Papa gapes. "You can't be serious."

"Am I ever anything but?" Granny says. "Now please, Robert," she tucks the hand not gripping her walking stick through the crook of his elbow and guides him toward the library door, "will you see if Taylor is back with the car? This intrigue has proved rather more tiring than I anticipated."

Not until they have quitted the room, and the door shuts softly behind them, does Mary let out her breath. All her strength seems to seep out with it and, much against her will, she finds herself sinking down upon the chair at the desk where Papa ordered her to sit.

"Is there anything else you've kept from me?" Mama asks in tones as harsh as the lines of her face. The way she rounds on her reminds Mary of a lawyer during a court recess, displeased with her defendant's performance in the docket. "Only I'm going to need to fire from both barrels if I'm to convince your father that he should give Sir Richard his blessing to marry you when he asks for your hand."

"What makes you so certain he intends to make an honest woman of me?" Mary watches her fingers fiddle with the tip of Papa's fountain pen as she tries not to hear Richard's voice in her head. Of course I don't need your father's permission to marry you, but I mean to do things properly. Would he have, truly, if she hadn't pushed him to do things in the wrong order?

"Because you're going to tell him you're pregnant. And that he has no choice but to marry you."

"Perhaps you should tell him, since you're the one with the loaded shotgun." Mary draws her fidgeting hand into her lap, and looks up at Mama. "Please don't include my...possible condition...as a round of ammunition."

"That would be rather self-defeating, wouldn't it? Robert would kill Sir Richard and then have a stroke, and we'd be even worse off than we already are." Mama rubs her hands over her cheeks, as if
to smooth away the lines, and squeezes her eyes shut. "He'll have to believe you have a large, healthy premature baby."

"Or perhaps it won't be healthy."

"Mary!"

Pushing up from the desk, Mary flings her hands open at her sides. "Wouldn't that be better than your daughter marrying a man like Carlisle, as you all kept putting it? A man who bullies and blackmails and would bribe his way onto the lifeboat of a sinking ship? Is that who you want me to marry?"

"I always imagined your father would walk you down the aisle and give you away to a good, brave man. But we don't have the luxury of preferences anymore. At least Sir Richard seems to genuinely have affection for you. So you can be grateful you have that."

*Does* she have it, though?

Mary shrugs. "Convince Papa, if you like. But you know me, Mama. I'm not likely to marry a man I've been ordered to, am I?"

Having fired her parting shot, she makes to leave, but Mama's voice arrests her before she can reach the middle of the room.

"You're going to be a mother, my dear. You have made your last selfish decision."
Richard's return to Downton presents Mary with the perfect opportunity to come clean, but her family's attempts at saving her from herself--and from Richard--undermine the Christmas message of salvation.

The midnight blue 1911 Renault rounds the corner of the lane into the drive, a shock of colour against the unbroken grey layer of ice that covers gravel, grass, cedar and sky. At the sight of the automobile, the members of the Crawley family sigh and mutter in relief; their exhalations of breath form steam in the air as they cease bouncing on their toes or huddling in on themselves against the wind or chafing hands to rub the warmth back into them, to form a receiving line.

Mary inhales the crisp air to steady herself, one corner of her mouth quirking upward as a line read in some novel or other--Austen, she thinks--awakens in a corner of her mind where it's lain dormant for years: A man must have a very good opinion of himself when he asks people to leave their own fireside, and encounter such a day as this, for the sake of coming to see him. Richard, of course, did not ask for his arrival at Downton to be heralded so formally, but Mama insisted--against Papa's protests--that it is of vital importance that they welcome their Christmas guest properly, especially since his last tardy, not to mention unplanned, arrival relegated him to taking a solitary luncheon in the library. In any case, Mary has no doubt he will be pleased to be the recipient of such a fuss--that is, if the five idle, shivering creatures who await him are not more responsible for a frosty reception than the weather.

Mama, at least, flashes a smile warm enough to heat a room as Richard disembarks the vehicle. She steps out of line, hand extended to shake his gloved one as the other sweeps his hat off to reveal slightly dishevelled hair, fairer than usual for the pomade having been worn off. As Mary last saw when she raked her fingers through it in her candlelit bedroom.

"Welcome to Downton, Sir Richard," Mama says. "How festive your red scarf is."

"Thank you, Lady Grantham." He glances down at the scarf that peeks out from between the lapels of his black woollen greatcoat, one pale eyebrow arching as if he has forgotten what he is wearing. "It was a Christmas gift--rather appropriately."

It is a handsome scarf, Mary observes: deep red in a nouveau floral motif. Bold and modern, like him, and his eyes appear brighter in contrast to the rich hue. She regrets not taking longer in Liberty to peruse the selection of men's scarves before purchasing the peacock feather print in a state of pique. Though she is still piqued, isn't she?

"Is that a Liberty print?" Edith's question is seemingly innocuous, but she darts a sharp glance in Mary's direction.

"I believe Lady Rutland said so, yes," Richard answers.

Mary bites the insides of her cheeks as her gaze narrows on the scarf, no longer admiring. Was that
Diana's idea, too? Did she advise Lady Rutland to buy Richard a scarf before making the same suggestion to Mary? Or was it the other way around? Was she the victim of Diana's flighty absent-mindedness, or of one of her infamous pranks? In either case, the joke is on Mary.

And she is not amused.

"Well it's white tie for dinner and midnight mass, not red scarf," Papa says in a thin voice through an even thinner smile, giving Richard's hand the very briefest of pumps that may still be considered polite, "Carson's just rung the dressing gong."

"I'd have been here earlier," Richard says as they all go in through the door Carson holds, "but the ice…"

"Oh, we had such a dreadful time returning from London last week," Mama says. "And Rosamund got held up when she came the day before yesterday. I can't remember a December with so much ice."

"Did Gwen make it to her parents' all right?" Sybil asks. "She wrote she'd be travelling with you."

"Not with you, in your first class compartment, I hope?" Papa regards Richard as he would an errant kitchen boy and not a man his own age, and likely soon to be a peer.

Richard glances away as Thomas takes his hat and helps him off with his coat. He looks more annoyed than affronted, thankfully, but his reply to Papa is measured. "In third, naturally. Miss Dawson paid her own way. And her father was already at the station when we arrived," he adds with an indulgent smile for Sybil.

"You're pen friends with a servant now?" Edith scoffs.

"With a secretary," Sybil corrects, tilting her chin upward. "And at least I've got friends who write to me."

For a moment Edith splutters, then she says, "I had a letter the other day. From Diana Manners."

Sybil remains unimpressed, and Mary smiles at the observation that her little sister's expression is almost a mirror of one known to cross her face. But the expression slips from her mouth as she catches Richard watching her intently.

"Darling," Mama says, clutching at Papa's sleeve in her desperation to regain control of the conversation, "have you heard from Matthew and Cousin Isobel? I wonder if the ice gave them a great deal of trouble. They went up this morning, you know," she adds, for Richard's benefit.

"Matthew did phone," Papa says. "I asked him to let me know if they made it in all right." To Mary's ears, his voice softens as he speaks of the one member of his family he approves of at the moment--though it could also be the working of her rather biased imagination, she acknowledges, Papa's stiff demeanour returning as he address to Richard. "The Crawleys are to spend Christmas with Miss Swire and her father. Though I expect you knew, being such great a great friend of Mr Swire?"

"I haven't spoken to Reggie since we were all here in November," Richard replies, tugging his leather gloves off his long fingers. "Though I'd have thought the heir would want to see his future home in all the splendour of the season."
"He'll have plenty of time for that, won't he?" Mary says, "When it's his house?"

"I believe he'd have liked to," Papa says, ignoring her attempt at needling him in favour of keeping his pointed stare on Richard, "but he was being sensitive to his fiancée."

The jab does not, of course, touch Richard, who has no idea any of them knows Miss Swire was his source for the Marconi scandal. Indeed, he seems to have no thought of himself at all now, his eyes seeking Mary's, intense with sympathy and a familiar expression that recalls an earlier conversation with him about Matthew's bride-to-be: She won't be half the countess you would.

*She really will be, if I'm great with child.* Mary feels her lips twitch in response to her own bitter joke; the lines of Richard's forehead arch upward and his mouth tilts in a smile of question, asking to share in her private amusement. She wishes he could. She imagines his hand at the small of her back, the brush of his chin against her temple as he leans in to hear her, the rumble of his chuckle, as well as his response: *That's not exactly what I meant when I said there is more to you than that.*

What *did* he mean? He never said what he thought she *could* be, if not the Countess of Grantham. His newspaper baroness, if his intention to marry her was genuine. Though it seems she will be the mother to his heir first. Does the sequence of events matter to him? Does it affect his plans? Or is this the only end there is for her--to bear children for some important man, regardless of his class?

He's watching her closely again, that shrewd journalistic gaze scrutinising her from head to toe. Thinking about sex, as he told her at Fortnum's? Or noticing something different about her?

Would it be so bad if he did? Anna says she should tell him about the baby; Mama says she must. And just a moment ago she imagined laughing with him over it.

Before he has a chance to notice, and before she can consider it further, she turns from him. "It's high time I dressed for dinner."

It's only a temporary escape; when she descends the staircase again three-quarters of an hour later, the beaded train of her gown caught up in one hand to keep it out of the way of her heels, her step falters when she spies Richard already waiting for the family, framed in one of the stone archways of the saloon. At first she's a little surprised that he took no time to rest after his journey, but then it occurs to her that Richard is not accustomed to leisure, and his later than expected arrival may have made him doubly aware of being punctually dressed for dinner.

She takes a moment to observe him from her vantage point on the staircase. Even turned away from her, the patch where his hair thins in back in plain view, accentuated by its shine under the lights of the Christmas tree as he gazes up at it, he cuts a dashing figure. Though more intriguing, perhaps, is the study in contrasts he presents: dressed impeccably for the formal occasion in white tie and tails, but one shoulder leant casually against the pillar, arms akimbo with his hands tucked into his pockets in that characteristic self-conscious stance.

Mary remains rooted to her step for a moment, half-admiring him, half-contemplating whether she ought to take advantage of this private moment to tell him her secret--or to turn and bolt back upstairs so she won't *have* a private moment with him--when he turns partway around to look up at her, his face belying no trace of surprise at her being there.

"Is this the new gown?" he asks. "The Lady Duff Gordon creation that caused such a stir among the Ladies Crawley?"
"Not my first choice," Mary replies, "but it'll do, I think."

Richard slips his hands out of his pockets as he crosses the hall to her, extending one up toward her as he stops at the foot of the stairs. For a moment she hesitates to let him assist her, bunching her dress' lace overlay in both satin-gloved fists, before uncurling the fingers of one hand and placing it in his. It's been so long since she felt the familiar largeness of his grasp, and the strength of it...She draws in a sharp breath, conscious as her breasts heave of their new fullness--and of their tenderness beneath her corset, which Anna laced with caution. Is it because Richard notices, too, that his Adam's apple rolls down his throat as he swallows?

"It seems an error that worked out in your favour," he says, his voice a little huskier than in the previous moment. "Is it similar to the original dress?"

"It was white." She waits for the flash of recognition in Richard's eyes before drawing her hand from his grasp and brushing past him into the saloon. "You've spotted the Christmas tree, I see?"

"I should be phoning Miss Fields to schedule an appointment with an optician if I'd missed it." Richard's longer stride carries him easily to her side, the tension dissipating; they stand in the archway together, and for a moment Mary can almost believe they are back in the folly. Before they committed their folly. "This is Downton tradition?"

"I think the sheer scale of the thing is more a Cora tradition."

They both turn at Aunt Rosamund's tones, crisp as a winter wind and the tap of Granny's cane on the marble floor as the pair enter the hall; behind them, Mary glimpses Thomas and Carson carrying off their fur coats.

"But what else is to be expected from a person whose country grows those unnaturally large trees?" Granny says.

Instinctively, Mary looks up to meet Richard's amused gaze; the twitching in his cheek reveals his struggle not to go so far as to laugh at Granny.

"Now, Mama," says Rosamund, "let's be fair in our criticism. Even Cora has never attempted to bring in a California Redwood."

"And anything smaller than this would be dwarfed by the space, surely?" Richard says. "Out of proportion?"

"At last," Mama drawls, coming down the stairs, "someone who shares my sensibilities."

Richard's grin falters as he inclines his head toward Granny, who tells him, "I wouldn't take that as a compliment."

"It's a splendid tree, Lady Grantham," he says, straightening as Mama joins their growing group. "I've never seen baubles quite like these."

"Thank you. My mother sent a number of them with me from America for my first Christmas here as a bride."

"The gaudy ones," Granny mutters.
"They've been in your family a long time, then?" Richard asks.

Mama nods, but Granny's deadpan undercuts the effusion. "I suppose to an American, twenty or thirty years are something of a legacy."

"Mother gave me a legacy of Christmas being the most magical season of the year," Mama replies, not dissuaded, and it is Granny who deflates, foiled.

Mary can only look on like a spectator at a tennis match; in light of recent events she can scarcely believe they are really going on as if it's Christmas as usual at Downton. Though a part of her wants to remark that if the plan is to convince Richard to marry her at once, it's perhaps best not to show him a normal Christmas.

Even if she really intended to voice the thought, Mama leaves her no opportunity, inquiring of their guest with interest, "Was your mother that way, Sir Richard?"

"No..." Richard draws out the word, his thumbs hooking over his trouser pockets again as he continues. "Christmases in the Carlisle household were simple affairs. My brother and I did convince her to let us have a small tree once, but her complaints about all the extra sweeping she had to do because of the dropped pine needles took some of the shine off the experience."

"Perhaps a tradition best left to those who employ housemaids," Granny says.

Mary winces a little at the dig, but Richard's hands slide out from his pockets as he takes up the discussion of his working-class roots.

"Indeed. We did make snowflakes and paper chains from leftover newspapers Dad brought home from the press."

"We used to make paper chains!" cries Sybil, fluttering down the stairs like a red and gold butterfly in a rose garden in her new Christmas frock, Edith following sedately behind in her envying green.

"Nanny taught us to make them, and we hung them all around the nursery. Mary, do you remember when Edith accidentally spilled paste in your hair?"

"I was never under the impression that was an accident," Aunt Rosamund remarks.

"It clearly wasn't," Mary says. "Edith's response was, Oh dear, it will have to be cut out of your hair, and then you won't be able to play Rapunzel in the pantomime. Luckily I've learnt all your lines as well as my own."

"I'm the one blonde in the family," Edith retorts, in much the same manner as she pled her case before Mama. "Why should you get to play Rapunzel?"

"Because I don't have the hooked nose to play the witch."

Immediately Mary regrets picking at her sister, though not so much because she's managed to wound Edith again with a joke all these years later--it hardly compares to being called a slut--as because Richard no doubt finds their bickering petty and childish.

He only raises his brows at her above twinkling eyes and asks, "Am I to be entertained with a Crawley sisters' Christmas panto?"
"Aren't the everyday theatrics of this family entertainment enough for you, Sir Richard?" Granny asks.

"I do miss those days," says Mama with a wistful sigh. "That'll be one of the perks of having grandchildren."

Her gaze settles on Mary as she says this, her smile widening to reveal more of her teeth as Mary glares back.

"All the Christmas fun," Mama adds, with a sharp nod and a tone that makes fun sound as agreeable as a visit to the dentist.

"I am pleased to think that I have risen to such a position that I'll be able to provide this sort of Christmas magic for my children," Richard says, his eyes on Mary as well.

Mama's eyes widen subtly above that hollow smile, darting between her guest and her daughter as she clearly wonders whether Mary told Richard about the baby.

"Such sentiment," Mary says. "I expect it from Mama, but from you, Sir Richard? No need invoke the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come. We have Edith to bring that touch of childishness to our otherwise grown up Christmas Present."

~*~

If there is one lesson Mary ought to have taken from her youth--apart from the ones about what may befall a girl who spends time alone in the company of a man--it's that Edith, always so perversely keen to meet other people's expectations, only becomes more insufferable when shamed for certain behaviours. The behaviour in this case being, of course, childishness.

"If memory serves, Sir Richard," Edith says as he slides beside her onto the bench seat of the sedan, Papa having climbed in ahead of him to occupy the space next to Mary, "you're not a religious man."

Papa snaps his head around from peering out the rear windscreen, concern tugging more heavily at his features as he regards Richard than the previous moment when he tried to make out the icy drive. "I do so hope my daughter is mistaken, Sir."

"This could hardly be a more uncomfortable drive if we'd taken the bus," Mary mutters.

Earlier, whilst waiting in the vestibule at Downton for Lynch and another chauffeur hired to transport them all in two cars for midnight mass at York Minster, Richard made a quip about going altogether in a bus, which Granny did not realise was a joke. Their current seating arrangement is Mama's doing, presumably made in the hope that the half-hour journey there and back would be enough time for Richard to change Papa's opinion him and obtain his blessing on the forthcoming nuptials. Intentionally or not, Papa foiled her plan; he told Sybil it was more appropriate that she ride in the other car with Mama, Granny, and Aunt Rosamund--no doubt to spare himself from more chit-chat about Gwen and working women and suffrage as much as to keep the impressionable sixteen-year-old from Sir Richard's poisonous influence--and bade Edith to ride with him, Mary, and Richard, instead. Because clearly Edith is full to overflowing with her own venom.
"Lady Edith's memory is reliable," Richard replies in a tone which, despite the darkness inside the car, tells Mary that if she could see his face, he would be meeting Papa's gaze in his usual unflinching way.

"But doesn't it feel hypocritical?" Edith persists. "Attending a service to celebrate the birth of our Lord whom you don't even believe exists?"

"On the contrary. Nothing makes me feel more as one with our countrymen than keeping a hollow ceremony for the sake of tradition."

Beside Mary, Papa snorts. "I daresay the pews will be filled tonight with people who sin on Saturday and repent on Sunday."

"Liars and slanderers, for example," Mary says, catching Edith's eye as it gleams in the headlamp of an approaching motor. "Purveyors of gossip."

"Which of us in this car could be guilty of those heinous sins?" Edith says.

Only as her sister's smirk slips away into shadow as the other car passes on the narrow road does it occur to Mary that Richard may think she referred to him. She looks across the car but can make out no more of him than a silhouetted profile, his head turned to peer out the window, though it is too fogged up to see anything out of, and even if it were not, the night beyond too black.

Of course, though Richard may not be guilty of the aforementioned transgressions, he is no more a saint than Edith. His fortune, in fact, is built on dubious ethics. On the one hand Mary does not care, not really, what secret unsavoury means enabled to climb up from where he began: in a little Morningside house that could spare neither the luxury of money nor time to have a Christmas tree--How can she, when he employed those very tactics to punish the insinuations the *Sketch* made about her?

But while she admires how shamelessly he stands against Papa's disapproval, she must also grudgingly acknowledge the truth of Edith's words. Richard claims to want to do things properly, yet he cannot suspend his own campaign for the right to coexist with men like Papa to focus on the uphill fight for her. Mary detests the game as much as he, but mustn't they first appear to have mastered it before they blatantly disregard the rules to please themselves?

Granted, she can hardly expect Richard to compete when he isn't playing with a full deck. If he holds the King of Hearts close to his chest, she hides the Ace in her sleeve. Or beneath her increasingly uncomfortable corset.

However, sandwiched between him and Papa in the predictably overcrowded cathedral, you would think Richard the most pious of them all. It does not elude her that any connection Papa feels with a supreme being is more likely to occur within the walls of Downton, the ancient House of Grantham established by the monarch ordained by God himself, than in any church. But it is Richard, not Papa, who sings every word of the Nativity hymns to the Lord of Lords and King of Kings in the voice of a devoted, if not remotely humble, subject.

Mary leans toward him, drawn by the bright timbre of his voice, as well as a sudden urge to comment on this previously hidden talent.

"Careful," she murmurs, and he leans in to hear, "you're rather destroying your reputation as a staunch atheist."
His reply is a purring breath against her cheek above the fur collar of her evening coat. "I think I only have that reputation with your sister. I wasn't baptised an atheist as an infant, after all. And how do you think poor Scots Presbyterians spend Christmas when they haven't festooned Sequoia trees to gawk at?"

Mary presses her lips together to stifle a laugh. "Am I meant to envision the Cratchit family?"

"With fewer crippled children and thicker brogues."

Abruptly Richard's twinkling gaze flicks to the front if the church, and he sits back against the pew; Mary notices Papa turned slightly to her, no doubt wearing the same disgruntled look as when he used to scold her and Sybil for whispering during the sermon, though she doesn't look; instead she continues to watch Richard out the corner of her eye as he falls into the current carol easily, even before he finishes turning to the correct page in the hymn book.

"Gladly, dear one, lady mine,
Help I cradle this child of thine;
God's own light on us both shall shine
In paradise,
As prays the mother Mary."

Mary has attended enough Christmas Eve masses in her life to know that the reading that preceded this carol was the account of Joseph who, having learnt his fiancée conceived a child by some means other than him, meant to put her aside quietly so as not to disgrace her. Because he loved her. Never has the gospel story struck her as having any bearing on her own circumstances, before these present ones. How did Mary feel to learn Joseph would marry her after all...because an angel of the Lord told him to? Presumably the Blessed Virgin didn't argue the point, as she did with Mama, which was why God chose the other Mary in the first place, above all other women, the Handmaid of the Lord.

But did she never doubt? Mary lifts her eyes to York Minster's west window. The winter sun long since set, but the candelabras illuminate the stained glass with an ethereal glow. Her gaze sweeps the collage of images wrought in hues of glass so deep they might well be cut from rubies, sapphires, and topaz, until they find the two panels devoted to the Nativity. Did the Mother of God never doubt Joseph's love? Did she wonder if he regretted his choice to do what he was ordered to do? Did Joseph resent not having a choice, truly?

No. Of course not. Mary gives her head a slight shake at the ludicrousness of her own musings. Because they were good people. Their stained glass images wear halos and even the ass and ox grin inanely at the saintliness.

Richard, on the other hand, as Mama so bluntly stated, is not a brave, good man. Not that Mary wants that. *Brave and good* was never recovered from the icy Atlantic, never mourned by her any deeper than the black dress she wore because other good, brave people expected it of her. Oh, Richard is good to her. He squared off against the *Sketch's* editor, though arguably that was as much to preserve his own reputation as hers. Even so Mary cannot imagine that he won't stand by her now, if she asks him to.

The problem being, she doesn't know if she can.
She's not a beggar. If she was, she would have begged him to stay that day, instead of hopping on
the first train to London with his scoop. He would have stayed if he wanted to, and Lady Mary
Crawley should not have to beg a man to want her.

To love her.

If Richard doesn't love her, she would rather he not marry her.

*God rest you merry, gentlemen,
   Let nothing you dismay…*

Too late for that, she thinks, her throat constricting around the words, choking her as she attempts to
sing the hymn along with the congregation.

*For Jesus Christ our Saviour
   Was born upon this day,
   To save us all from Satan's power
   When we were gone astray:
   O tidings of comfort and joy.*

Even if it were not for the plodding tempo of the hymn, accompanied by the organ's doleful strains,
Mary feels certain that this Christmas can hold nothing of comfort or joy for her. No blissful Nativity,
certainly not a virgin mother and child. She has gone astray, but she doesn't see how there can
possibly be any real salvation. Only desperation and ruin and being .

She doesn't realise a few tears have slipped down her cheeks until Richard shifts beside her, then
reaches across to give her the handkerchief drawn from his coat pocket--along with a note Edith
presses into his hand.

Mary unfolds it as she dabs her eyes.

*I told you the black dress would be appropriate.*

~*~

The knock comes well after midnight.

Mary's eyes widen in the dark, and her fingers curl into a claw, clutching the blankets to her chest,
even though she's lain wakeful since they returned from mass, fully expecting this. At the second rap,
a little louder, she throws back the covers and sits up, ignoring nausea that comes from rising too
quickly, and swings her legs over the side of the bed. By the time she staggers through her bedroom
in the dark--catching her hip on the arm of one of the chairs in the sitting area and cursing Papa for
not having electricity run upstairs--her heart beats so quickly that she is sure even under ordinary
circumstances her stomach would be fluttering. The doorknob rattles in her trembling hand as she turns it.

A beam of shifting yellow light makes her squint as she leans her head around the door to peer into the darkened hall where Richard stands, fingers flexing around the candlestick gripped in his hand. Even as her own hip throbs from her run-in with the chair, the uneven breath she releases, making the flames judder at the ends of their wicks, is actually silent chuckle; what gothic concession creeping through the halls of Downton by candlelight must be for a man as modern as Richard claims to be.

"May I come in?" His voice, scarcely louder than a rasp, nevertheless seems too loud in the empty hall.

Mary opens the door wider, relieved to notice in the encroaching pool of light that Richard at least had the sense not to prowl about in nightclothes; he's still wearing his trousers and evening shirt, though his bowtie dangles from the unbuttoned collar, and he stands in his stocking feet in the red carpeted hall, making no move to enter.

"I suppose I have to let you," Mary replies, "so you won't be caught like a thief in the night."

"I've never had need to steal anything. And if you don't want me here, you won't have to ask me twice to go. And not just from your room."

His voice drops to a lower register with the last, and it rumbles through her like the ominous warning of a brewing storm.

There it is: his presence is no sure thing.

One word, and he will be out of her room, out of Downton...

Out of her life.

Mary steps backward, retreating further within, then sidles around the door to give herself room to catch her breath and him to enter. Or not.

"I invited you, didn't I?"

"In fact your mother did." The door clicking shut behind him underscores Richard's clipped words; the carved white mouldings frame his height and broad build, and not for the first time tonight Mary's neck prickles with awareness of having no escape. "You can understand how I'd be unsure whether she really offered it at your behest."

Her lips part, tongue pressed to the backs of her teeth to retort--And you can understand how I wouldn't be keen to invite you back, when you couldn't wait to leave--but the words stick in her throat as Richard's face shifts, the shadows cast by the candle receding as the hard angles soften. When he speaks again, she watches his mouth form the words gently, and remembers the sweetness of it upon her own.

"You haven't been yourself. Though I can guess why."

"Can you?"
He makes no immediate reply, instead turning to place the candlestick on the side table that stands between the settee and the chair she bruised herself on. She holds her breath, torn between hope and dread that he knows her secret already, and she will be spared having to tell him.

"I left you a lamb among wolves," he says, returning to her. His hand settles on her hip, the thumb somehow finding exactly the spot where she struck it, and she flinches away.

"Me? A lamb?"

Richard's his hand falls to his side. "Would a black sheep be more apt?"

Even under the circumstances, Mary cannot stop herself giving a little snort of laughter at that. It cuts the tension between them--somewhat--and emboldens Richard to touch her again, one hand on her shoulder as the other traces a curling tendril of hair back from her face.

"In any case, I said I'd fight for you, but you've been on your own with Edith at your throat."

Edith. Mary lets out her breath, her shoulder sagging beneath the weight of his hand. He hasn't guessed, then. Well. She wasn't sure she wanted him to know, anyway.

She shrugs. "I'm not sure I need you to. I've been fighting with Edith my whole life, after all." Being called a slut by Edith is new, though.

"She envies you." Richard's other hand settles on her shoulder now, the calloused pads of both thumbs scuffing over her collarbones above the neckline of her nightdress. "You possess every social advantage she lacks."

"Edith's a much more accomplished pianist, I'm afraid."

"That's only an advantage in a world populated by Jane Austen heroes." Richard's thumb fits into the hollow of her throat, and Mary's pulse beats against it. "The only thing Edith has in her favour is being the daughter of an earl, so she's trying to cut you down to my level. Such as she imagines it."

His touch grows hard as he pronounces the words harshly, but then he draws in a long breath, and his fingers relax about her neck, sliding upward to cup her face in his palms as he goes on.

"She doesn't see that there is more to me than that. And much more to you. I do. I have. From the moment I first laid eyes on you. A girl in black."

She is still a girl in black--or was before she changed out of her evening gown--and Richard is still the man who wants to kiss her. He tilts his head and presses his mouth to hers without a trace of hesitance, nor does Mary resist the slightest bit, but kisses him back.

As his tongue sweeps past her lips, and she allows her own to glide alongside it, she can easily forget that he is only partly correct about what has made these weeks apart from him do much more difficult to bear than their separation before his abbreviated visit to Downton. She places her hands over his, pressing his palms against her face as if she can mould their bodies into one. And they twain shall be one flesh. But isn't that what she thought occurred when they made love before?

Her hands fly from Richard's and his leave her face. Before she can break the kiss, however, the heel of his palm fits into the small of her back, pressing her hips against his hard arousal; the other hand curls softly over her breast.
"Richard--"

Mary turns her head, but still he does not take the hint that she means to put a stop to this, content, apparently, to trail kisses along her jawline. His fine hair tickles her cheek as he nips at her neck, tasting the perfumed patches behind her ears and the valley between her collarbones.

"God, Mary...This is all I've thought about since I left here. How much I want you."

"Sometimes even Sir Richard Carlisle can't have what he wants."

His lips pause in the dip of her breastbone just above the ruffled neck of her gown, and his eyes appear green as the blue catches the golden candlelight when he lifts them to her.

"Excuse me?"

"If you wanted me, you shouldn't have left."

Richard's exhale is hot against her skin. Slowly, He straightens up, and Mary stands rigid in his grasp at her back and on her breast until he stands at full height and finally releases her.

"Frida was right, damn her."

A shiver, and Mary no longer feels so in control of herself. "Frida?"

He turns away, the veins standing out on the back of his pale hand as he raises it to smooth his hair.

"I told her she was a bloody fool when she suggested my departure may have left you in some doubt as to the honourableness of my intentions." He frowns deeper, but the side of his brow twitches upward as if a new idea flickered through his mind. "I told her she didn't know you as I do. That I gave you no reason to doubt me."

"Surely you can appreciate why I might--"

"No, Mary, I can't," he says, over her, though his volume does not increase. "I am a man of my word. When I say I will do something--for example, marry a woman--I will do it."

He advances on her as he speaks and Mary braces herself, digging her heels into the floor and squaring her shoulders, but he does not grip her shoulders as she expected him to do in his anger. In fact he does not seem angry at all. More...offended. Or hurt. A wounded animal. It seems so strange that a man who has no qualms about blackmail and bribery should place so much value on keeping his word.

Tough problem, Mary reflects yet again, is not so much with the words Richard said as the ones he didn't say.

She, of course, doesn't say this to him. Not least of all because before she has a chance, Richard distracts her with a question of his own.

"Does this mean Frida is right about the other thing, too? Are you..." He swallows. "...pregnant?"

"Is that what the London gossips are saying about me?" Mary hears herself say. "Because you of all
people should know that not *everything* that goes around is true."

"I haven't heard any gossip about you."

"I find that difficult to believe. Don't you have spies for that sort of thing? Bloodhounds to sniff out scandal?"

"Where is it coming from?" Now he becomes physically imposing. "Not that little kitchen maid?"

"The new maid. Ethel. She came bearing tales from London." Mary doesn't know why she doesn't just tell him it was Edith--she certainly deserves to be punished for what she's done--or that Diana Manners spread it around.

"Well the only source Frida mentioned was female intuition."

"Oh, well is *that* all?" Mary rolls her eyes. "I find it hard to believe you would trust intuition over facts."

"The kind of intuition that follows the *fact* of hearing someone be sick in the lavatory at Fortnum and Mason. Now look me in the eye, Mary.

She does. And tells him, "Frida was mistaken."

With a nod, Richard strides to the door, opens it, and steps out into the hall. Just as it shuts behind him, Mary catches his low parting words. "She would not be the only one."
The Game

Chapter Summary

Christmas traditions help Mary and Richard begin to get the feel for teamwork, only to be faced with the reality that they're not the only players involved in the game.

Christmas is the season for surprises, Mama always likes to say in the most saccharine manner that makes Mary pull faces across the table at whatever family member catches her eye. In her entire life, this may be the first year she has been truly surprised, Edith's observation about her tendency to suss the contents of her presents before the day being accurate, if not meant literally; when Mary enters the dining room for breakfast, she stops short in the doorway, one hand going out to grasp at the carved moulding, to discover that Richard is still here.

She was so sure, after their quarrel last night--or rather, in the small hours of this morning--that if she saw him again, it would be to say an awkward goodbye...for good...on his way to catch the train back to London. Instead, he's being shepherded by Mama to the sideboard where breakfast foods steam in gleaming silver chafing dishes, and nothing about his appearance indicates an intention to depart earlier than planned. Instead of the expected travelling clothes, Richard's attire is appropriate for Christmas morning service--black morning coat, dark pinstriped trousers, and dove grey waistcoat--if a little dour: the forest green stripes in his tie provide his outfit's only concession to colour or holiday cheer, whilst Papa donned a champagne waistcoat and ascot flecked with crimson, which Mary actually thinks would be complimentary to Richard's colouring and physique; even Carson, in acknowledgment of his half-day off, sports a burgundy plaid waistcoat that would have been the height of Victorian holiday fashion.

The thought occurs to Mary that perhaps Richard is being careful to avoid anymore wardrobe missteps after the tweed fiasco, though she is more concerned with the fit of her own crimson dress, which seems to hug her body differently than it did just a few days ago when Anna made a few clever tucks to disguise her changing figure, in light of the lie she told last night about her pregnancy. Her hand leaves the door frame now to tug self-consciously at the waistline, and she wonders whether anyone will notice the sleepless circles around her eyes.

No sooner has she thought it than Richard's gaze meets hers from across the dining room--not an accidental glance, but a purposeful look back over his shoulder, as if in search of her. His cheek muscle ripples beneath smooth-shaven skin. The tension between them plainly did not dissipate in the few hours since they quarrelled in her bedroom. But the blue eyes beneath the heavy brow are no longer hardened with angry accusation as when he left her; the downward angle of the lids is instead reticent, even...sad.

He is tired, too, Mary thinks, observing the deepened lines about the corners and the faintly darkened hollows beneath.

"There's coffee, Sir Richard." Mama's overly-attentive hostess' tones border on urgent. "You're a coffee drinker, aren't you? I thought I recalled you prefer coffee to tea, so I made sure we had a pot this morning."
"I do, Lady Grantham." Richard swings his gaze--reluctantly, Mary thinks, or hopes--back to her mother. "It's kind of you to remember."

Would he think it so kind if he Mama was plying him with coffee to marry her eldest, pregnant daughter? Mary joins them at the sideboard, holding her breath as the aroma of the coffee turns her stomach--of all things; she should have thought the kedgeree Richard spoons onto his plate would be the culprit, or the devilled kidney he eyes in the next chafing dish.

"I remember you also prefer to take your coffee with toast and the morning paper in the library," Edith says, a slice crunching as she bite into it.

Mama's eyes round in horror at Edith's unbridled nastiness, though no sound of rebuke comes from her open mouth.

"Someone could do with a visit from the Spirits of Christmas," Sybil says, and Mary could kiss her. Richard catches her eye again, a dimple forming beneath his cheekbone where the previous moment's flush of anger now fades. "Thank you, Carson, I take it black."

At Richard's nod of acquiescence, the butler places a cup and saucer at the space between Mama's presently vacant chair and the one occupied by Sybil, who remarks that the coffee smells wonderful and asks Carson if she might have a cup, too. She grins up at Richard as he draws out the chair designated for him and seats himself with his plate.

Spreading his napkin in his lap, Richard speaks in a tone that seems to address the breakfast room at large, though his gaze is for Mary alone. "I should hope I'm not so far gone as to require supernatural visitors to make me realise it would be to my benefit to take more leisure time from work than I am accustomed to doing. I can afford to, now."

"Indeed," mutters Papa, who is, in fact, reading his Times at the breakfast table.

Mary takes a slice of toast she has little intention of eating and slips into the seat across the table from Richard. Without her having to ask, Carson pours her customary cup of tea, strong and sweet. His bushy eyebrows droop in the way a lifetime has shown Mary they only do for her; Anna said how heroically he disbelieved the rumours of her unchaste behaviour. How disappointed would he be to know the tea he prepared exactly to her liking quells her morning sickness? Or did, until she is sickened by the thought that he is one more loved one taken in by her lies.

Taking a small sip of her coffee, Sybil continues conversing with Richard. "But there is a morning edition of the Telegram on Christmas Day, isn't there?"

Richard nods as he swallows a bite of kedgeree. "And an evening, as usual."

"Since you allowed Gwen a holiday I wondered who does work on Christmas."

"If Miss Dawson were a little more reliable--in the sense that she's capable of performing to Miss Fields' level," he clarifies, smiling reassuringly at Sybil's expression of alarm, "I wouldn't have given her a holiday. Christmas Day is for the junior editors and staff."

"The little people always get the short end of the stick," Edith remarks.

"That's a bit rich coming from someone who woke to a fire made up by a chambermaid who rose at
some ungodly hour, and had a servant to assist with dressing, isn't it?"

"I trust your valet enjoyed his Christmas lie-in while you built your own fire and dressed yourself?"
Papa asks without looking up from his newspaper to see Richard's unveiled irritation. Edith sees, however, and smirks just as openly as she cuts into her kidney.

"Only I would have thought with you being a self-made man," she says, "you'd be more sympathetic to the plight of your underlings."

"I paid my dues editing Christmas Day editions to get where I am. It's drudgery, to be sure, but I tell them to think of it as a chance to shine."

"It is rather the message of Christmas, isn't it?" says Mama, sitting down beside him.

Richard picks up his coffee cup. "Perhaps some of them will be publishers one day."

"Perhaps even Gwen," says Sybil.

That makes Papa look up. "Shouldn't Christmas be a time of reprieve from class and suffrage debates?"

"No one was debating, Papa," Sybil argues. "And anyway, you're reading the newspaper. Isn't it all politics?"

"It's the Times, darling," Mary finds her voice at last. "Certainly no political views that challenge the aristocracy or patriarchy in there."

She can't help but glance at Richard, a smile twitching across her lips as if switched on by the current of electricity in his bright eyes.

"It's such a brilliantly beautiful morning," Mama's voice, too loud, breaks the moment of connection. "What would everyone say to walking to church?"

What Sybil and Richard say is that they are both in favour, she because it will be jolly fun and he because it will give him something to put in a letter to his mother that will make her think his rise in society hasn't put him entirely out of touch with his old humble walk. "Even if the service is C of E."

Mary adds her own agreement, despite the weariness that resides deep in her bones and the boiled eggs, to Mama's credit, having quelled her nausea to the point that she thinks she could ride in the car without feeling nauseous for the first time in some time, because a vote for a drive would be a vote on the side of Papa and Edith.

Church bells chime from the village as they set out down the lane, squinting against the sun that glistens on the dripping tips of icicles just starting to melt in mid-morning warmth so that the trees seem all to be hung with tinsel and baubles and fairy lights. Mary walks briskly, thinking to keep up with Richard's longer stride and custom of moving at a clip to keep with the pace of London, only to feel his long fingers curl around her elbow, drawing her alongside him at an amble that puts them in danger of being overtaken by the servants, who follow the family. Mama, happening to glance backward over her shoulder, links arms with Sybil and Edith, distracting Papa by taking up the song some of the servants are singing, led by Carson's sonorous bass.

Love and joy come to you
"Dear God, it's like Little Women," Mary says--only Mrs March would never be so blatant in her attempts to secure a marriage proposal for her daughters. Then again, none of the March girls was in such dire need of one.

She becomes suddenly aware that Richard's hand is still on her elbow, the long fingers in velvety grey leather stroking lightly. "I meant what I said in there."

"Don't you always?"

"Yes," comes his heavy response to her flippant remark, his grip tightening on her arm. "It would be nice if you would occasionally say what you mean."

Call up the butler of this house,  
Put on his golden ring.  
Let him bring us up a glass of beer,  
And better we shall sing.

Carson's voice, close behind, sounds almost as a reminder. Richard loosens his grip, and looks ahead at the road beneath the brim of his top hat.

"I don't want to quarrel again," he says after a moment, her pheasant plumes brushing against his hat as he leans in to be heard over the carolling and the bells, more resounding as they near the village. "That's not who we are. Or who we used to be. Something's changed..."

Stopping in the middle of the lane, his hand at her elbow turning her gently to face him, Richard looks down at her, his eyes bright with intensity as they peer from the shade of his hat. "I want to change."

She lifts her eyebrows at him, and his cheek ever so slightly dints with the start of a smirk, though his eyes cut away, self-conscious; his hand leaves her arm as he raises it in the accompanying unsure gesture of tugging at his hair in back, and the cold cuts through the wool of Mary's coat and dress.

"I've told you before that until recently my life has been my work," Richard goes on. "Wouldn't you agree with me when I say it's high time I work on my life?"

She hesitates to answer as the servants, start to pass by in groups of two or three, their singing and laughter going quiet or cutting out altogether in respect, though they pretend not to notice Lady Mary and her suitor. Except for Thomas and O'Brien, of course, who raise their eyebrows and then look at each other, no doubt in silent agreement that they will gossip about this later over Christmas cigarettes behind the kitchen. Mary's fingers curl tightly in on themselves at the thought of the nasty pair with their heads together discussing her torn corset and quarrel with Richard, as Anna said they had.

"Because I'm willing to, Mary." Richard's voice, louder now, more sure, draws her attention back to him. "I'm not afraid of work. Hard work, even. I believe in it. But if I'm to have a partner, I must
have one who's willing to work as hard as I am. Are you?"

It's so different to their previous conversation in her bedroom that Mary can hardly be sure what to make of it. She nods up at him, and his expression softens. Briefly his gaze wanders, glancing up ahead, then his hand closes around Mary's and he lifts it to his lips, brushing a kiss across her fingers through her glove.

"Later," he murmurs against it, his breath warm, "we will talk. And more importantly, we will listen."

*Love and joy come to you
And to you your Wassail too.
And God bless you and send you a happy new year…*

Over his shoulder, Anna passes by with Bates, the carol faltering on her lips as her eyes meet Mary's, the soft blue plainly repeating her appeal that Mary must tell Richard about the baby. She looks away, stomach twisting as Richard draws her hand through his arm and they walk on.

Lives will certainly change if Richard listens to what she has to say. That she lied to him.

And nothing will convince her that it could possibly be a change for the better.

~*~

"For heaven's sake," Mary says, rubbing her forehead as Edith resumes her place on the sofa with a scowl that her teammates—Mama, Papa, and Sybil—did not guess her Charade, "if you're trying to act out the vapours, you shouldn't flop around like a fish."

Granny turns to Mary on her settee near the fire, lips pursed but not quite restraining her chuckle. "That's exactly what I thought. A salmon swimming upstream to spawn."

"Everyone thought that," Mary says.

"How would you act out the vapours, then, since you're the resident expert?" Edith sneers.

"Actually she looks a bit as if she does have them." Sybil's tone contains no mockery, and Mary blinks at her youngest sister across the makeshift seating area in the saloon, bits of furniture pulled in from the drawing room for their customary Christmas night games by the tree. "Are you all right?"

"Fine, darling," Mary replies. Her voice seems distant to her own ears, and she is sure unconvincing, the sensation that she may faint heightened by everyone's eyes on her. *Only I have to tell a man I lied to him about being pregnant with his child.*

"Only it's so hot this close to the fire," she says aloud. "Does it have to be so big, Papa?" She eyes the massive carved stone hearth with contempt as she pats beads of perspiration from her neck and forehead with the tips of her gloves.
"If the rest of the room isn't to feel like an ice house," Papa replies.

"You ought to consider installing central heating," says Richard, setting his whiskey tumbler on the side table as he leans forward in his chair address Papa across the space, despite Papa's look of open displeasure at the suggestion. "It's a sizeable expense," he goes on, gesturing with his hands, "but the long-term investment..."

"Here," Aunt Rosamund's tones slice through the rumble of Richard's voice at it recedes from Mary's awareness, she gets up from the nearest end of the sofa to stand before the fireplace. "Change places with me, Mary. It's my turn anyway, and you'll be cooler back from the fire."

Somehow, without being fully aware of moving there, Mary finds herself leaning against the pink arm of the sofa, one hand curled around a glass of water, which Thomas brought her at Mama's behest. The cool etched glass against her palm instantly steadies her, even before she takes a drink. They all watch her as she does so, finally resuming the game when they are satisfied she's out of danger of swooning.

Though as her family turn their attention to Aunt Rosamund, Mary feels Richard's gaze on her from his armchair beside the sofa. Not on her face, scrutinising her with suspicion as she noticed Granny do, but on her fingers, which she only now notices fiddle with the end of the black beaded necklace that dangles over bodice.

"You're not wearing it," he says, so low that Mary might have missed it over the increasingly wild guesses Granny is making about Rosamund's incomprehensible pantomime, if she wasn't expecting it, or a similar remark, ever since she came down dressed for Christmas dinner.

Richard refers, of course, to the gift she unwrapped from him that afternoon: a gold pendant with iridescent aqua teardrop opals and green peridot set in a vine motif surrounding a sunburst. An exquisite piece, and obviously far too extravagant a gift for a suitor to make a woman to whom he is not formally engaged—which Papa remarked on. But that is not what made Mary clap the velvet jewellery case shut, unable to look at it as she blinked back tears.

"The Parable of the Lost Coin?" she guesses as Rosamund hobbles hunched to and fro in front of the fireplace, one hand extended in a sweeping movement. Her aunt breaks character, emitting a sound of frustration.

"No talking," Papa warns, checking the time on his pocket watch.

"That wasn't talking!" Rosamund rejoins.

"It's only a two-word title," Edith says.

"And I'm not sure titles of parables in the Bible count as books?" Sybil says, more in question than a pronouncement of Mary's error, but Mary nevertheless rolls her eyes and turns back to Richard. He regards her from beneath an arched eyebrow as his forefinger trails a circle around the rim of his whiskey glass.

"It clashed with my gown," she says, her heart clinching painfully in her chest at the thought of wounding him even as she aims to do exactly that. She studies him for any sign that she has, but his face remains impassive, as if his features are chiselled in stone. His fingers, however, clutch hard around the tumbler.
"I didn't mean it as an insult," he hisses.

"I don't see how I could have taken it any other way, considering how the last time you saw me in sunbursts you accused me of believing I'm the centre of the universe."

His nostrils flare with his sharp indrawn breath. "You are. In a microcosmic sense."

Mary glances away. Darling Sybil suggested as much when she came into the bedroom while Anna dressed her hair and, in the habit that belies her as little sister, no matter how old she is, explored the contents of the vanity table, including opening the case containing Richard's gift. *He must mean you're the centre of his universe.*

Edith scoffed at that. *Better than a confession of love to you, Mary.*

Once, perhaps. But now she doesn't even have the luxury of revelling in the change being with Richard has wrought in her. She can only hear Mama's voice resounding in her head. *You're going to be a mother. You have made your last selfish decision.*

"If by that you mean you are the universe I'm the centre of," she says to him, raising an eyebrow in challenge, "then perhaps the peacock print scarf is appropriate after all."

"I wouldn't be insulted if you thought me vain," Richard says. "I'm insulted because you didn't think of me at all when you let Diana Manners choose my gift. *Sherlock Holmes,* he says, abruptly changing the subject and tones. "The two-word book title Lady Rosamund is attempting to act out."

"That's correct," Papa says. "Unfortunately time was already up when you answered."

"I'm afraid I must protest being on the same team as Mary and Sir Richard," Aunt Rosamund says, taking the settee Mary quitted by the fire with a huff not unlike Edith's. "They're paying far more attention to each other than to the game."

"You always were such a sore loser, Ros." Papa uncrosses his legs and pushes up from his chair, handing off his glass to Thomas to refill and then sauntering to the fireplace.

"And you the most insufferable winner, Robbie. Not that it happened very often."

"Well we can't change the teams now," says Granny, "after it took us so long to divide up in the first place. Edith and Mary simply cannot be on the same team."

"I still don't agree with that," says Papa, leaning against the stone mantel with his fresh whiskey. "We ought to be promoting teamwork."

"You tried that when we were eleven and nine," says Mary. "The best we can hope for is healthy sibling rivalries, such as you and Aunt Rosamund have developed over the years."

"And it's better for the marriages not to be strained by opposition," says Mama in placating tones as her eyes dart from Mary to Papa.

"You and I are the only married couple," he says, "and I hardly think after nearly twenty-five years one game of Charades will put us asunder."

"If Cora's plan is to show what a good team Mary and Sir Richard make," says Aunt Rosamund,
turning toward Granny on the settee, her tone hushed but not enough that everyone can't still hear her, "I'd say it's rather an abysmal failure."

"Sir Richard!" Mama cries. "Why don't you take a turn? To make up for coming in just under the wire with that last guess."

Richard's lips twitch into a thin smile; he gets up, drains his whiskey, and as he sets the empty glass on the table, mutters to Mary. "And now I shall be made to look even more a fool."

Selecting a card from the stack Edith proffers, his brow furrows as he reads what is written on it, his expression deepening into a glare as he regards her. Mary's heart hangs suspended in her chest as she whips her head to look at Edith beside her on the sofa. What trouble is her sister making for her now?

Mustering every ounce of dignity he possesses, Richard takes a step back toward the fireplace and raises his hand, the long fingers curling inward as his index finger points to indicate one word. Then he puts it to his upper lip and makes a twirling motion.

"Mustachio?" Rosamund guesses.

Richard gives a curt nod, indicating she's on the right track. He continues the finger movement as he tilts his head backward and pantomimes laughter.

"A Frenchman?" Granny guesses, which makes Papa snort and sets Sybil and Mama to giggling.

"Oh Granny," says Mary, "isn't it obvious? Sir Richard's a moustache--"

"--twirling villain," Rosamund finishes the phrase, obviously pleased with herself. But her celebratory moment at her team's rally after the last inattentive round is cut short by Papa.

"That's hardly a charade, us it?" Face reddening and chest puffing imperiously beneath the starched front of his shirt, he pushes off the mantel as Richard turns to face him. "In fact the only game being played here is the one I've been forced to into, welcoming you into my home."

Richard raises his chin above the pointed tips of his collar. "It was my understanding, Lord Grantham, that you are the head of this household, and that by law there is very little you can be forced into by a woman. If my presence so offends, you had every right to forbid Lady Grantham to invite me. As it is, I should like to know what it is about me that you find so repellent."

"Repellent, Sir? No that hardly goes far enough. Despicable would be more accurate."

"Robert, please," Mama says, going to him, clutching at his sleeve. "Not on Christmas night."

"Don't worry, my dear," he replies, not sparing her a glance as his eyes narrow on Richard. "I won't throw this blackmailing scoundrel out until tomorrow morning. At which point I will expect him to catch the first train back to London."

"This can't be about the rumours," Aunt Rosamund says to Granny, "or he'd have taken Sir Richard out and challenged him to a duel by now."

"Robert," Granny cuts in, "don't you think Sybil and Edith ought to be sent up to bed?"
Papa's mouth hangs open for a moment as he seems to remember his younger daughters are present. "Yes, girls," he says, over his shoulder, "your grandmother is right. Run along upstairs.

Neither makes any move to get up from the sofa. Sybil protests, "Honestly, Papa, we're not children!"

He seems poised to argue, when Richard intervenes.

"I'd prefer they stay to hear your accusation against me, and my defence." He tugs at the white cuffs of his shirt; if he were not wearing an evening jacket, Mary can almost imagine him undoing the cufflinks and rolling up the sleeves as he would for a fight. He boxes, she remembers, and observes the tendons flexing across the backs of his hands as he tenses his fingers, the knuckles cracking. "Since you've already made this a family matter."

Papa wheels on him. "Oh, you consider blackmailing vulnerable young women into betraying family members so you can peddle scandal defensible, do you?"

"He can't mean you, Mary?" Sybil says.

"He means Miss Swire," Richard replies, quietly. The breath goes out of him, then. Mary can see as he slides his hands into the pockets of his trousers, that the Marconi scandal was the last accusation he expected to be levelled against him. She ought to have warned him...

"In which case I won't defend myself," he goes on. "Because there is nothing to defend. I gave her something she needed, and in return she gave me something I wanted. It was an exchange." Over Papa's scoff, he says, "I should think your lot would be glad to see corruption rooted out of the Liberal government."

"And out of my home, as well."

"On that note," says Richard, "I bid you all goodnight. And goodbye, as I doubt any of you will give me a send-off."

His gaze lingers on Mary for a moment, then he turns and strides from the saloon. Not, surprisingly, up the oaken staircase to his guest room, but in the other direction, down the front hall. William can be heard stammering something about getting his coat, but Richard brushes the footman off, and the thundering of the front door indicates he has gone out.

Once again Mary finds herself in motion without expressly thinking of getting up, turning sideways to slip between the sofa and Richard's vacant chair. Her name in Papa's clipped tones echoes behind her through the vaulted ceiling of the saloon along with the percussive click of her heals as she strides to the hall, but she ignores him; Mama pleads with him to let Mary go to Sir Richard, and Papa does not argue with her. In the vestibule she, too, is accosted by the helpful William about a coat or a wrap, but she tells him she won't be long out of doors and he gets the door for her instead.

It's not the frosty air that comes as a shock to her senses as she blunders off the step onto the drive, but the depths of the darkness of the country December night. She stands there for a moment, heels pressed against the paved step as if clinging to a lifeline, squinting into the black. As her eyes adjust she notes the steaming puffs of her quick breaths in the air and realises that light falls in crisscrossed rectangular beams from the ground floor windows. She sweeps the area again with her gaze, at last
spotting the broad silhouette of Richard's shoulders just off the driveway and beyond the reach of the
glow from the library. She goes to him, gravel crunching beneath her feet; as she approaches, the
haggard lines of his face illuminate briefly in the flicker of a struck match as he touches it to the cigar
held between his lips.

"You knew about Lavinia and Marconi, didn't you?" he says, without looking at her. "You and your
mother and your grandmother. None of you was surprised at your father's little announcement. You
knew before I ever came here."

"Yes," Mary answers; there is no sense in denying it. "Matthew thought we should know what sort
of man was courting me."

She watches the smoke exhaled through Richard's nostrils entwine with the cloud of her breath, two
wraiths locked in a dance. Close, but never quite touching, and then finally dissipating into the ether.

Beside her, Richard shifts his weight, extending one leg to punch through a frozen patch in the grass
with the toe of his shined patent leather shoe, then flicks his match in. It hisses faintly as the damp
snuffs out the flame.

"Yet I was invited here anyway," he says around the cigar. "Despite my being a moustache-twirling
villain." He turns to her, his eyes seeming to brighten along with the glowing embers at the end as he
draws from it. "Why? To see me humiliated? Because I was, Mary. I haven't bowed and scraped like
that to anyone since--"

"No. To convince you to marry me anyway, no matter what sort of man you are, and save us all
from ruin. "I never wanted that."

It's not entirely the truth; she wanted to punish him for leaving her. Papa did that instead, and the
ache of it bruises so much deeper than she ever wished to hurt Richard. And yet...she cannot bear the
thought of hurting Papa that way, either. As it will, when he learns of her pregnancy. How can you
be so disappointing? Mama said.

"I..." Her voice cracks. "I wanted you here."

Richard studies her for a moment in the ruddy light of the cigar, then pulls it from his lips and takes a
step nearer to her. "You don't think me despicable for taking advantage of Miss Swire?"

"That little mouse?" Matthew's fiancée is, for once, a welcome distraction from her own misery and
woe. "Frankly I wish you'd done worse."

"I have, to other little mice. It's seldom personal--it's business in a tough world. But if it'll make you
feel better to think I'll be a permanent thorn in Lavinia's side..."

His lips curl slightly around his cigar in the semblance of a smirk, but the expression in his eyes as
they look down on her can only be described as admiring. Who else in the world would admire her
for wanting to destroy another person? She's a fool to let him go...Blood pounds in Mary's head, her
face flushed again as she works out his implication.

The only way Richard could continue to punish Matthew's fiancée is if he expects to be thrown into
her company. That would be here.

As Mary's husband.
No...He can't still mean to marry her...Not after what occurred with Papa...He can't think Papa would ever allow...

"Come with me." Richard's voice is as rough as his hands as they close around the bare bits of her arms exposed between her sleeves and her evening gloves, his cigar discarded somewhere. "You can have your maid pack your things tonight, and I'll arrange for a car to come from the village. We can slip away at dawn and be halfway to London before your family sit down to breakfast."

She begins to shiver, and he pulls her against him, pressing warm lips to her forehead, her temples, her cheekbone. Mary wants nothing more than to give in to him, to this crack in his calculated facade, the balance between pragmatism and passion that has always characterised their relationship now decidedly tilted toward the latter. Enough of her control remains intact, however, that she stands rigid in his arms, her own hands gripping his sleeves in the attempt to push him away.

"Oh, Richard, I couldn't…the scandal. There's already gossip..."

"I wouldn't ask you to live in sin."

His grip tightens on her arms, so that she can feel her skin reddening beneath the callused palms; his kisses along her jaw, however, are so soft, his breath as he lingers beneath her ear a pleasant tickle. She closes her eyes, remembering how it was just like this as he moved inside her, the warm weight of his naked body pressing hers into the mattress.

With memories like this, she is always living in sin.

"You could stay with Frida." She feels the bulge of his Adam's apple roll over her collarbone as he swallows. "Till the wedding arrangements can be made. She'd be more than willing to help, I know she would."

Frida is willing to help in more ways than Richard can imagine.

"That would hardly be less scandalous than living in sin with you."

Mary gives him another push, and this time, he lifts his head.

"Nobody will dare say a thing about us. And if they do, I will destroy them."

"Even you can't ruin the reputation of every gossip in London," Mary says. In spite of herself, she reaches up to push an errant lock of hair back from his forehead, tracing the lines etched deeply in his skin as she does so. She lowers her hand to her side with a sigh. "And it's not just us we'd have to think about, if we eloped amid scandal. No one would receive us. Our children…"

Richard's forehead creases as he tilts his head in question. "We'll have time before there are children to consider for people to forget."

His eyes narrow, and Mary thinks--hopes---for a moment that he will work out her lie. It quickly becomes apparent tht he simply awaits her answer.

She shakes her head. "My family never would forget. Not Papa. They'd be ruined, too."

Abruptly, Richard releases her, stepping back, and the cold seeps into Mary's bones.
"So that's your choice, then?" he says. "Your father, who won't lift a fight for your right to inherit this house, or your mother's fortune? When I'd have given you everything."

He looks so stricken, with his shoulders slumping and his eyebrows, too, eyes peering out from beneath them with disbelief. She wants to tell him--*It's not that simple*--but the words seem to have frozen in her chest, along with her heart.

Abruptly he turns his back to her, and in the slanting light from the library, she thinks she sees a tremor in his hand as he raises it to tug at the hair at the back of his head.

"I'll call for a car to take me to the village tonight. I'll get a room at the pub. Because I can't sleep one more night in this house, and tomorrow I have work to do."
The Jump

Chapter Summary

Mary attempts to get over the hurdle between her and Richard--both literally and figuratively, as she gives in to the allure of Boxing Day traditions. Will the leap--and the ensuing consequences--prove insurmountable?

"Taylor, pull the car over."

The chauffeur's eyes meet Mary's anxiously in the rear-view mirror. "Now, m'lady? Here in the ditch? We're nearly at the station."

"And I'm nearly going to be sick. The ditch would be preferable to the Renault, don't you think?"

"Oh! Yes, m'lady, at once!"

As it is, even though Taylor brings the car to a stop off the side of the road, Mary still only narrowly avoids emptying her stomach on the upholstery in the time it takes him to climb down from the driver's seat and come around to get her door. In the end she must do it herself before he reaches her, though his hand encased in its heavy driving glove finds her elbow as she steps down onto the embankment.

"Watch your step, Lady Mary, it's that slippery, and too dark to see the icy patches in the grass."

She risks it, pulling her arm from his grasp and dashing off to lean over the edge of the ditch, which she can barely see in the predawn dark, except as an outline in the Renault's headlamps. Thankfully the old driver backs away, boots crunching in the ice and on the gravel as he goes back around to his side of the car, allowing her at least an illusion of privacy in this horrifically revelatory position.

Scarcely has she straightened up again, however, perspiring despite the chill and trembling both from the exertion of heaving and the wind's bite across her sweat-dampened skin, when Taylor returns. He maintains a careful distance; the gleam of metal diverts Mary's attention to his hand, curled around a thermos flask.

"Go on, m'lady. Have a drink. It'll settle your stomach."

As she dabs the corners of her mouth with her handkerchief, she eyes the container. "What is it?"

"Why, tea, Lady Mary." Taylor's voice lilts upward, as if in question rather than a statement; indeed, Mary isn't certain what else a chauffeur would be drinking but tea before six in the morning.

"It might have been coffee," she blurs out, hoarsely.

Richard's chauffeur probably drinks coffee at very odd hours. Much like Richard himself. I seldom have time for more than coffee and toast before my morning commute to the office, his voice rasps through her mind, lack of sleep and sickness apparently reducing her mental faculties to anything but
inanities. Does he sip coffee now? Glower at the morning's headlines as he waits on the station platform, impenetrable against the cold?

A knife of wind cuts through Mary's coat and her stupor.

"Thank you, Taylor." She accepts the thermos flask from him and staggers half-blind on the uneven uphill ground toward the waiting motor. "You won't mind if I drink this while we continue on our way?"

"Begging your pardon, Lady Mary, but ought you to give yourself a bit more time to recover?" The chauffeur lurches in front of her, one hand catching her arm again to balance her as the other grasps the car door handle. "I do apologise, m'lady, if it's my driving that's made you ill. The puddles will have frozen over again in the night, and I'm being cautious."

"It's not your driving," Mary replies, though she remembers that just the other day Papa returned from some jaunt or other into the village and complained of Taylor's unsteady hands on the wheel making him a little queasy and mused that it might be time to suggest the chauffeur retire. She sips the tea and notes how his faded eyes regard the thermos warily from his sagging face.

"It's nothing catching, either," she says.

Her flippant tone probably not reassuring him that he won't catch stomach flu from her and be finished off. The heart attack he would suffer if she told him the truth certainly would: It's that I'm pregnant, Taylor, and must go tell my lover, with whom I've had the most frightful quarrel.

"I have no time to give myself," she says, climbing into the car. "I must be at the station before the six o'clock train departs."

Whether because Taylor drives a little more daringly, or because they stopped closer to the village than she realised, the clock illuminated by a gas lamp beneath the overhang of the platform reads a quarter to six when Mary steps tentatively onto it. The idling motor recedes into the din of intermittent puffs of steam from the awaiting train, the jarring voices of engineers readying the locomotive for its cross-country journey, freight workers loading baggage, and of course the conversations of the passengers themselves. Without glancing at their faces peering out from between the brims of hats and collars turned up against the cold for Richard's furrowed brow and piercing blue eyes, Mary ducks into the lavatory, not to be sick but to check in the mirror that she doesn't look it.

Unfortunately, the visage reflected back at her looks discomfited at best. Not having rung for Anna to assist her with the usual morning toilet, Mary simply stuffed the plait she wore to bed up into her hat; she notices a bit of pale pink grosgrain peeking out beneath the navy felt and reaches up to conceal it and the youth it represents. There's nothing she can do about her eyes, however, too dark and too big in her thin pale face, the purplish shadows beneath them which she tried to hide with a dusting of powder showing through anyway. The combined effect makes her look every bit a girl who lay awake all night hugging her knees to her chest with the bedclothes drawn all the way up over her head, as she used to do after Uncle Harold told her and her sisters ghost stories.

There was one they used to beg him to tell over and over, which she forgot years ago only to remember last night, about the invisible hand of a mother who died in childbirth rocking her surviving infant's cradle. For the first time since entertaining the possibility of pregnancy she considered the danger giving birth could be to her, but death was not the fear that robbed her of sleep.
After Richard told her he would spend the night in the village Mary went straight up to her room and, by some stroke of luck, Mama allowed her the privacy she craved. Sybil, on the other hand, did not, but marched in with all the righteous fury of a Suffragette.

_How could you just sit there and let Papa say those horrid things to Sir Richard?_ she demanded to know. _Why didn't you fight for him? No wonder he's leaving. He must think you don't love him._

_Good, Mary thought. He should know how it feels._

But of course she didn't say it aloud to Sybil, in part because it was no longer true that she was uncertain of his love. The accusations pricked her already wounded conscience, and she retaliated, blow for blow.

_Forgive me for not playing to your little feminist romantic fantasies by standing up against our tyrannical patriarch for my poor wronged lover. But this is a grown-up situation, and you're a child._

Sybil left, then--not before she shouted that the only person who was acting like a child was Mary--and she slammed the door shut behind her with such a resonant finality that Mary twitched her thumbs against her forefingers as Anna, who played witness to the row, plaited her hair.

**What do you think, Anna?** she asked as she climbed into bed. **Who's the child in this scenario?**

After a moment of tight-lipped hesitation, the reply came: _The only one I know for certain is the one inside your ladyship right now. The child who deserves to have a father who at least knows he exists._

Mary snuffed out the candle, unable to face the maid again after that. Nor could she even after a night's wrestling with her indecision left her with no choice but to do what the maid told her from the beginning she must do. Not because she feared Anna would be smug about it, as her sisters would be in such a scenario. Because she knew how kind Anna would be. Kindness would be her undoing.

She _must_ be pulled together when she faces Richard. Her body is coming apart as it is.

The shriek of the train whistle jolts her back into the present and into motion. Her heels click across the tiles at the same tempo as her heart, though she scarcely hears them underneath the thunder of her own pulse in her ears.

She stops short on the platform at the sight of a familiar female face; Gwen's copper hair and crimson suit and hat that once belonged to Sybil blaze colour in the midst of the other passengers in their dark travelling clothes in the uncertain flicker of gas lamps in the predawn station. The former housemaid clutches a sheaf of papers to her chest and nods earnestly up at Richard, so that even with his back to her Mary is certain he's instructing her as to some task she's to perform during her ride in third class. No Boxing Day holiday for secretaries, she muses, and at that moment Gwen catches her eye. The young woman's mouth opens in speech, and she bustles off to her carriage as Richard turns.

Perhaps Mary is ever so slightly inclined toward Sybil's romanticism, after all: it seems for a moment that the sharp lines of his face ease, and that the flash in his eyes is hope.

But no--they only caught the light as he turned. He does not move a centimetre in her direction, and she knows he will not. She recognises the tension beneath his sharp cheekbone, along his strong jaw line, as he struggles to maintain control over the stolid mask. Her eyes widen slightly as their downward path brings them to settle on his scarf; her throat constricts as if her own knots tighter
around her neck.

The peacock print.

If she came here with any notion of that he would meet her half-way, the scarf disabuses her of it entirely.

Richard Carlisle is not a man who offers second chances. If she wants one, she will have to swallow her own pride and ask him for one.

Why didn't you fight for him?

Mary draws a breath, the crystals of ice in the air seeming to frost over the fibres of her lungs, and takes a step toward him. Sybil is not the only one of them who will fight. She will see.

"Richard," Mary says, the words shuddering out and hanging between them amidst the steam of her breath. "There is something I must tell you. Before you go."

"Before I go." His gaze wavers from hers, glancing off to her side and behind her, searching for someone, something. Taylor. Or a porter. With her baggage.

Dear lord, he did hope...The blues and greens and browns of his scarf refract as a kaleidoscope as her eyes mist.

"I can't go with you." She reaches out for him. "But--"

"ALL ABOARD!" calls the conductor, and the whistle emits another blast.

Richard turns away, and strides toward the first class train carriage, his knuckles white as he clutches the handle of his briefcase.

"You have nothing to say that I wish to hear."

~*~

The sky is only faintly lightening as Taylor pulls the car round to the back entrance so that Mary may sneak upstairs and into bed before her family wake to see her or to question where she has been. The servants, of course, have long since risen--and so shall their curiosity at the sight of the last daughter of the Earl of Grantham they would expect to greet before the sun, much less on their turf. Which, she forgot till now, would be a hive of preparation not only for the day as usual, but to send the family off to Haxby Park for the traditional Boxing Day hunt and dinner party.

Her approach slows in the kitchen yard as the whickers of horses drift through the crisp air and walls of stone from the stables and she makes out Bates and Thomas spit-shining two pairs of riding boots--Papa's and Sybil's. Normally riding to hounds is the best part of Christmas, for Mary, but of course she begged off the hunt this year, expecting to entertain Richard; Edith bowed out, too, though usually so eager to show Billy Russell that looking smart in hunting clothes is Mary's only advantage over her in a foxhunt, despite his assertions since their childhood years that Mary could jump for England in the Olympic Games if she wished to.
But Edith swears she will never hunt again after witnessing the Turkish attaché break his neck. Morbidly, Mary rather wishes she were so traumatised; if only she went after a fox in November instead of Richard, leaving him to write up his damn interview with Mr Pamuk, she wouldn't have been so offended by his departure to publicize his death. Or become pregnant.

She would be free to stand up to Papa.

She would be free to run off with Richard.

*She would be free.*

A gust of wind kicks up and sweeps her improperly pinned hat off her head. She claps it back on, but not before her plait escapes, streaming out behind her.

"Bates?" she says as her approach draws the valet's attention along with Thomas' appraising gaze. "Will you please find Anna and tell her to fetch my boots to be polished and readied? I've decided to join the hunt after all."

Thomas' insolent suspicion is to be expected, but she is unprepared for Bates to search her with a faint upward curve to his mouth that makes the crinkle of his eyes seem less warm than quietly passing judgment. Anna likes him; but does she like him well enough to betray Mary's confidence?

And would he, in turn, betray her to Papa?

"Very good, m'lady," he says, compliant, and not, she decides with a measure of relief, complicit.

She hurries upstairs, remembering that a hunt at Haxby--nearly an hour's ride to warm up the horses without exerting them, and almost as long a drive for the non-riders who will take an early luncheon and then follow the hunt on foot should weather permit-- means her family will be up earlier than usual despite their late Christmas night. Despite her efforts, she is caught anyway. Mama, dressed and wrapped in the fringed shawl Papa gave her but Aunt Rosamund picked out, stands in Sybil's doorway, speaking in harsh but hushed tones with the nightgown-clad girl poised with an indignant hand on the doorknob.

"This is out of character," Mary says coolly, "Mama out of her bed before seven, and Sybil having got up on the wrong side of hers."

Mama looks over her shoulder, features tugging downward in lines etched deep and harsh as the tone now addressing Mary.

"Do you honestly think I could sleep after what occurred last night?" She looks her over, as if noticing for the first time Mary's equally uncharacteristic state of dress. The lines ease with hope. "Where have you been?"

"Seeing Sir Richard off."

Mary glances away from Mama, unable to face her inevitable disappointment. The hurt and anger with which Sybil regards her are hardly better, nor faded since last night. In fact she appears not to have slept, either. Did anyone in this house? Edith, probably; Mary glares across the hall at her middle sister's closed bedroom door. Though she supposes she ought to be grateful Edith isn't peeking out into the hall, smirking like something of a moustache-twirling villainess herself.
"I've just been telling Mama that I'm boycotting the hunt today," Sybil says, with a defiant lift of her chin. "As a form of protest."

"You are being unreasonable and melodramatic." Mama turns back to her. "It's your first time riding to hounds as an adult. You'll be bloodied, if a fox is killed. And Papa has so looked forward to this day. I thought you were excited, too."

"I was--until Papa showed his true colours as a prejudiced tyrant."

"Sybil Patricia Crawley! How dare you speak about your father that way!"

"You can't defend the way he treated Sir Richard last night," Sybil lashes back. "It was positively beastly of him. Even if Sir Richard was in the wrong--which I don't think he was--Papa is supposed to be a gentleman. And the newspaper world is hard."

"Believe me, my darling," says Mama, darting her gaze sideways as if to check that no one is coming down the hall, then lowering her voice, "your father deeply regrets the public nature of the confrontation--"

"So secret sins are preferable?"

"Sybil..." Mama's shawl slips off her shoulders with her heavy sigh. Adjusting it, she braces one hand against the ornately carved doorjamb as she goes on. "You must try to see it from his perspective. A father's greatest duty is to safeguard his daughters from dishonourable men. From where he stands, Sir Richard placed Mary in a compromising situation when he took her to that...nightclub..." She half-swallows the word, as though it is an obscenity she has been made to utter.

"The Cave of the Golden Calf," Mary says, the corner of her mouth twitching.

Not amused, Mama half-turns toward her as she continues the speech which is no longer directed solely at Sybil. Or at all.

"Sir Richard hasn't courted your sister properly, and now we've learnt of these underhanded dealings involving another young woman whose father was too ill to protect her."

"Lavinia Swire's a person with her own free will," Sybil argues. "Why does no one call her honour into question? And anyway, Sir Richard was right. Breaking the Marconi scandal uncovered corruption in the government."

Mary arches an eyebrow at her little sister. "Do you think by trotting out politicians' misconduct he means to reform the government, or to profit from it?"

"Does it matter, when justice is served in the end?"

"I am not going to argue whether the end justifies the means," Mama cuts in, glowering at Mary before stepping sideways to stand between them, her hands coming to rest on Sybil's shoulders. "You are sixteen years old. You will go to your room and dress, come down for a hearty breakfast, and then you will ride to Haxby Park with your father for the hunt. Is that understood?"

"Yes," Sybil replies with a curt nod. "But I won't be happy about it."
"Your happiness or your misery are entirely your own choice."

"Don't worry, darling," says Mary as Sybil starts to shut the door, "I'll be along, too."

"What?" Mama spins around as the door slams. "You mean to ride with the hunt?"

"No, to polish the bridles."

Mama's mouth opens in retort, but before she can speak a lilting I beg your ladyship's pardon drifts to them from down the hall.

"Anna?" says Mama as they both turn to see the maid hurrying toward them, her round eyes fixed on Mary.

"Mr Bates just told me you asked for your riding clothes to be readied," she pants. "Lady Mary...do you really think that's such a good idea?"

"And why shouldn't it be?" Papa booms, and they turn to see him emerge from his dressing room, a copy of the Times tucked under his arm. "It's the best one I've heard from Mary in months." As he goes past, he gestures with the rolled broadsheet and gives her what seems like the first smile she's seen from him in about that long. "Remember who you are, my darling daughter, and forget this Carlisle nonsense."

His retreating form blurs through another veil of tears, but when he has rounded the corner into the gallery, Mary blinks them back, and turns to go, at last, to her own bedroom. The lump lingers in her throat, however, choking the words she flings back over her shoulder at Mama.

"Yes, I certainly detect an air of regret about last night."

"Mary, please don't allow your bitterness about the entail to poison you to your father in every way," says Mama, following close behind. "He loves you more than you can imagine, and you must believe what I told Sybil about him feeling that he's failed to protect you."

Mary stops to open her door, and glances back to see Mama clutching her shawl tight to her chest, which shudders with a sob.

"And so have I. If I hadn't left you alone with Sir Richard that afternoon..."

"If only you hadn't given me the idea to sleep with him in the first place."

The tears seem to dry in Mama's eyes at once as they widen. "Excuse me?"

Rolling her eyes, Mary opens the door and goes in, flopping down upon the sofa, heedless of the dirt on her shoes as Mama turns back in the hall to whisper to Anna to please see to Sybil and await further instruction regarding Mary's things. When she comes in, leaning back against the door to shut it, Mary examines her fingernails as she resumes the conversation.

"You're the one who told me Granny was wrong about sex."

Mama flinches, and makes a strangled sound in her throat, and Mary can hardly believe she's spoken so bluntly. Then again, wouldn't it be rather ridiculous to revert to euphemisms now that she's had
"You could have left me in fear and ignorance," she goes on. "Instead you told me how exciting it was, to be with a man you know and trust and..." Love. She catches herself, and meets Mama's eye. "Clearly you didn't tell Papa that Aunt Rosamund has fallen out of first place for Worst Chaperone, as he looks like Christmas finally came."

He was whistling "Good King Wenceslas" as he strolled down the hall, she realises belatedly.

"Of course I didn't tell him! And believe me, Mary, I feel almost the same way about Richard as your father does, but I do think he should at least have the chance to do right by you before your papa finds out just what he's done."

"You say it as though Richard's done something I haven't. I've been right there with him all the time. In this instance," she says, her hand falling to her side on the sofa cushion, "leading the way."

For a moment Mama regards her in silence, and Mary watches her own fingers picking at a loose thread in the upholstery.

"That's the first glimmer of responsibility you've shown me," says Mama, and Mary looks up to see her lowering herself onto the edge of the armchair angled in toward the foot of the sofa. "But you still didn't tell Richard you're pregnant. Did you?"

Mary shakes her head.

"Well I'm relieved, actually." Mama sits back in her chair, huddled in her shawl as she rubs her hand across her forehead. "I can't think of anything worse for any of us than if you told him and he left." She lowers her hand into her lap and catches Mary's eye. "Though if you don't tell him soon, I will."

"Mama--"

"You'll have to ride now," Mama cuts her off, getting up again, "if we want to avoid more awkward questions from your father. I suppose I should probably warn you." She stops behind the chair, running her hand over the curved gilt back. "Matthew's going along."

"Matthew?" Mary lifts her head from the arm of the sofa. "But he's in London!"

"He and Cousin Isobel returned late last night. Reggie Swire took suddenly ill. His lung condition...Anyway, Matthew sent up a message asking if there was still room in the hunting party for him."

"No wonder Papa's so happy."

"Mary, darling..."

Mary looks up, hoping that in this matter, at least, Mama will acknowledge a justifiable hurt, that Papa has found the son she failed to be.

"Anna is right," she says. "Riding to hounds is no activity for an expectant woman. Please go easy."

"Oh, Mama." Mary swings her feet onto the floor and stands. "When have I ever made anything easy?"
Diamond's hooves clatter onto the wooden planks of the bridge, and she snorts in protest, shaking her head against the bridle as Mary reins her in.

"I know, darling," she says, patting the mare's neck. "This is too mild for my taste, too."

She grips the saddle horn a little harder under her knee and twists around to see Matthew riding up behind, looking quite as ill at ease in his hunting costume--which was a Christmas gift from her parents, an essential outfit for a future earl--as Richard did in his shooting tweeds. And not half so smart. Richard would sit a horse nicely, she thinks--if he cared to tear himself off his swivel chair to learn; she's seen how suited he is to a top hat.

But she came here to not think of Richard.

"Do you need to stop for a rest?" Matthew calls, when he is within earshot, slowing his mount to a trot, the peals of horns and the bays of the hounds and the thunder of hooves and view hallos receding into the distance with the hunting party. He reaches for the flask dangling by a strap from his saddle and unscrews the cap, offering it to her.

"Hardly," Mary sneers, certain he's probably brought water instead of brandy; she should have stuck with Billy, who always has very good brandy in his flask. Apparently Mama told Papa she was a little under the weather and shouldn't overdo it today, which prompted him to suggest with all the subtlety of Lady Rutland playing matchmaker at a dinner party that Matthew would do well to stick with Mary for his first time riding to hounds.

Matthew's gaze follows the jerk of her chin to indicate the gully below the bridge that cuts through the corner of the wood to meet the path the party will take. "Wouldn't more experienced riders know that's a lark and frowned upon by the master of the hunt?"

"My. Someone brushed up on his hunting etiquette for the occasion," Mary mocks him. "You may want to press on and see if you can catch Sybil and Papa. He'll be so pleased to see you, I'm sure."

"No, I don't imagine he would be, after I already let you send Lynch away when Cousin Cora was so adamant--"

"Let me?" Diamond whickers as Mary turns her about, and Matthew tugs hard at the reins as his own horse darts sideways, startled. "Just like you let me decide whether Papa should know about Miss Swire being Sir Richard's source for the Marconi scandal? I must say, I was wrong about you. You've got exactly the stuff to make a fine earl one day. Who'd have thought a solicitor from Manchester could be so paternalistic?"
Though red-faced, Matthew retains a cool composure that would serve him well in court—should he ever rise in his profession, that is. "You seem to think I act from a misguided sense of honour. That I regard it as my duty to look after you because I have inherited what should, in a just world, be yours."

"That's about the long and short of it."

"Be that as it may, Mary, everything is not about you. I felt I owed the present Earl of Grantham an honest answer about why the future Countess felt uncomfortable celebrating Christmas at Downton."

She slaps the crop against Diamond's flank and the horse breaks into a gallop across the bridge and down the hill on the other side. Muddy water splashes over into her face as she charges through the stream the bridge bypasses, and she smiles. Good.

Let her be as stained on the outside as she is within. Let the picture in the attic be unveiled.

A gate looms before them, and she leans over Diamond's neck, the coarse mane lashing her face through the netted veil.

And takes the jump.

~*~

"You should go straight up to bed," Mama says, inspecting Mary with anxious eyes as she steps down gingerly from the car when they arrive back home after dinner, Sybil and Edith having stayed behind at Haxby for the night, as they all planned to do.

"Don't be such a worrywart, Cora," says Papa, grasping her hand. "It's only that she hasn't ridden in far too long. And she rode much too hard."

He frowns down at Mary, and she rolls her eyes; not so much as his reproof as at Matthew being such a telltale after she scolded him for that very fault.

"I'm sure he's right, Mama," she says, though of course in light of her mother's earlier admonishment about going easy, this hardly eases the troubled lines off her face, though she says it more for her own peace of mind.

After her bath at the Russells', she felt a twinge deep in her pelvis not unlike menstrual cramps, and though the hunt worked up more appetite than she had in weeks, by the time they were all sat down to dinner she was unable to eat a bite for the sensation of her stomach being clamped tight in a fist. Papa's suggestion of simply being out of shape seems a much more reassuring. And likely. Of course there's always the possibility that it is, indeed, menstrual pain. In which case they all ought to be very relieved.

She's not sure that she is.

But she brushes the thought aside, affecting an air of unconcern as Carson sweeps the front door wide for them to enter the hall, footmen at the ready to assist with the family's coats and hats.
"Anyway, blame it on Billy, inspiring me with all that talk of equestrian events being added back into the Olympics again."

"Are you scheming to ride for Britain in the Berlin Games in '16?" Papa asks with a chuckle; Carson, helping him out of his greatcoat, can scarcely contain the disapproval evident in his substantial eyebrows. "The team could use you, after our rather abysmal performance in Stockholm last summer."

Mary's shoulders stiffen, her arms only part-way out of the sleeves of her coat as Thomas holds it. She should be glad that Papa is joking with her again, his demeanour warm. Instead, she can only think how the night before he was anything but joking as he coldly ordered Richard from the house.

"I have to make a name for myself somehow," she says, catching his eye as she draws her arms out of her coat, her voice taut as her stomach constricts against a shooting pain. "Since I won't be marrying a famous newspaperman."

She strides through the vestibule to the front hall; Papa follows with Mama, neither saying a word until she is part-way up the stairs.

"I suppose it won't make any difference to you," he calls up to her from the foot of the staircase, "but I am sorry about last night."

"How generous of you to say so, Papa. When you've got everything you want. The chance to put a social climber back in his place. A son."

She pauses on the landing, fingers curled over the smooth carved railing as she peers down at Papa, and sees him flinch.

"I've only ever wanted two things, Papa. Downton, and Richard. And because of you, I'll have neither."

He replies, very quietly, his lips scarcely seeming to move. "Carlisle was never a suitable match for you, and I don't believe you can truly be so attached to him, except to get to me."

Now Mary winces; hadn't Richard made the same accusation?

"As for Downton..." Papa's broad chest swells as he clasps his hands behind his back. "Do you think I want to give Downton to anyone who isn't my own child? But Downton is my child. And my parent. It's part of an ordered universe--of which, my daughter, dear as you are to me, you are not the centre. No matter what is implied by inappropriate gifts of ostentatious jewellery."

"Mary," pants Mama, hurrying up the stairs, "please go to bed before you say something you don't mean." She looks back at Papa. "Both of you."

"Too late, Mama." Mary at last breaks eye contact with Papa and resumes climbing the stairs. "And I meant every word."

~*~
In her bedroom, she finds Anna laying out a fresh nightgown on the downturned coverlet, ready to assist her with undressing for bed. Gritting her teeth at the sight of the maid, she avoids meeting the blue eyes which were so apprehensive this morning about her riding to hounds, and no doubt will examine her now for any ill effects of the hunt.

But Mary's jaw goes slack with a gasp and her gaze automatically seeks Anna's when she steps out of her bloomers.

The white, lace-trimmed cotton is stained with bright red blood.
The Awakening

Chapter Summary

While Mary's on bed rest, new instincts stir as she finds herself no longer carrying the burden of her secret alone. Meanwhile, in London, Richard makes headlines...

"Your uterus has moved higher up in your abdominal cavity," says Dr Clarkson the next morning. "I can feel how it's already expanded to accommodate a growing foetus even though you've not yet begun to show."

He palpates her stomach with gentle, practiced fingers, but Mary nevertheless tenses muscles already sore from her sleepless night curled like a child in utero herself against the cramps that gripped her until she had to surrender to Anna's insistence that Mama be awakened. She trains her eyes on the ceiling, too mortified to look at the physician who has attended her since she was born, too afraid that if she does she will find the even tones belied by a flush of mortification that he is conducting this examination on his lordship's unmarried daughter. In any case, her ladyship's bright, unblinking stare from the chair drawn up to the other side of the bed must be strain enough for Dr Clarkson's professional demeanour.

"You're definitely pregnant," he states, his hands leaving Mary's abdomen. "As to whether you'll stay in that condition..." He turns to rummage through the black bag on the bedside table. "...that's less certain."

Her gaze wavers for a glimpse of whatever instrument he has taken from his kit, but he's turned from her and moved down to the foot of the bed, where he instructed her to lay with a sheet draped over her knees at the start of the examination. She looks away again, turning her head the opposite direction on the pillow to Mama, though she feels her own fingers clutch tightly around the hand she remembers being so soft and cool on a fevered brow as a girl, whilst Clarkson lifts the sheet and murmurs an apology for any discomfort cause by the internal check.

"Your cervix is closed," he says after a moment, the upward lilt of his soft brogue leading Mary to believe this is favourable despite the unfamiliar terms that must pertain to the female anatomy. Perhaps inappropriately, she remembers Granny's words about how uncomfortable and untidy intercourse could be, and appreciates anew how that was not the case with Richard. She has that, at least.

"Bleeding is not uncommon in early pregnancy," Dr Clarkson says, straightening up and draping the sheet modestly over her calves again.

"Then..." Mama hesitates and Mary glances at her, surprised to see her visibly choked. "She's not having a miscarriage?"

She sounds almost...relieved. But how could that be? Isn't a miscarriage the most straightforward solution to their troubles? Any relief must be due to some potential danger to Mary's health, which makes her grasp tighter to Mama's hand as sudden fear seizes her at the realisation of her own ignorance on the subject of childbearing.
"I urge cautious optimism," says Clarkson from the washstand, where he rinses his hands and instrument in the porcelain basin. He returns to the bedside as he rolls down his shirtsleeves and buttons the cuffs. "We won't know for certain for several days. If in that time the cramping continues, or worsens...if the bleeding persists, or grows heavier, or..." His voice recedes to a rumble as he waxes medical and Mary closes her eyes against tears that blur red as her blood pulses in her ears. ".then she may indeed miscarry."

"Is it because I rode?" she hears herself ask, eyes snapping open to see her hand, free of Mama's, shoot across her body to grasp Clarkson's sleeve. "I jumped Diamond over a fence..."

The doctor takes her hand, gently prising her fingers loose from the cotton.

"Although I will prescribe total bed rest for the next few days as a precautionary measure, physical exertion does not, as is commonly believed, cause spontaneous foetal abortion."

Mary draws in a sharp breath at the word, and Clarkson's brow furrows as he goes on.

"If you should miscarry, Lady Mary, you won't be to blame." His forehead relaxes as he gives her a reassuring smile. "But you are a healthy young woman. There is no reason why you should not have a healthy pregnancy and a safe delivery..."

Except that she never wanted to be pregnant or deliver a baby. Never even thought about wanting either.

"...in early August, I should say, going by the dates of your cycle. But sometimes these things do happen, with no explanation."

Apart from wishing for it?

"I'll give you something for the pain," Clarkson releases her hand and rifles through the bag again. "It'll help you rest, too. Have you experienced a great deal of nausea? Ginger can alleviate the symptom. Ginger ale."

Mary is hardly cognizant of having heard or submitted to his instruction to open her mouth until she tastes the bitter dose of laudanum on her tongue. Mama thanks him as he packs up his medical bag, and she steps into the hall with him, snatches of their murmured conversation drifting back into the room: "Call me if there is any change..." "Of course we can count on your discretion... The father doesn't know... Mary's, either..."

At the last, Mary can no longer hold back her tears.

"Richard doesn't know," she sobs into her hands as Mama steps inside the room, sagging against the door to push it shut behind her. "He won't know because it's too late now and it's all my fault."

Mama raises her hand, as if to smooth her hair back into place, but her fingers curl around the side of her head as she presses the heel into her temple. With a sigh, she pushes off the door and trudges to the bed.

"It's not too late. I'll phone Sir Richard if you want me to, and ask him to come." She sinks down on the edge of the bed and takes Mary's hand. "But in any case it's not your fault. You heard Dr Clarkson. You didn't cause this. Whatever happens,"
Pressing her fingers to her lips, Mary shakes her head. "He was only being kind. I've said things… such terrible things. You heard me. I said maybe the baby wouldn't be--"

"Hush now." Mama's hands find her shoulders, and the room swims around Mary, black creeping in around the edge of her tear-blurred vision, as she feels herself being pushed back against the pillows. "They needn't be repeated."

"It's not just what I said. It's what I thought..."

Mary struggles against the coverlet being drawn up over her. How many are there? And what are they made of? Lead? Her limbs and the lids of her eyes seem to be, her lips and tongue, too; a sour taste lingers on them, mingled with the salt of the tears that streak down her face as she forms the syllables and words with effort.

"I know that a pregnancy can be made to end. And now I may have done it."

"You need to sleep, Mary."

Mama speaks very quietly--a hiss, not a whisper. And though the black is closing in as Mary's body sinks, heavy, so heavy, into the pillows and mattress, she sees the blue above her. The bright wide horror--*How could you? Whose daughter are you?*--before cutting away in disappointment.

Fallen...she is a fallen woman...

She falls asleep.

~*~

"May I have the pleasure of this dance?" Richard calls across the Claridge's ballroom, his white-gloved hand extended.

Mary means to glance around to see who he might be addressing--it cannot be *her*, surely--but his gaze holds her. Seems to pin her, in fact, against the column she backs up against. His long strides carry him quickly to her, one hand grasping hers as the other snakes around her waist, pressing against the backs of her hips to draw her into the dance.

"I'm afraid you'll have to find another partner," she protests as he sweeps her across the dance floor in a dizzying circle. Not a waltzing manoeuvre, but a frantic one-step to a ragtime tune. "As you can see, I'm in mourning."

Richard's chuckle rumbles against her chest as he holds her tight against him. "That won't be possible, as we seem to be the only people dancing."

He nods toward the ballroom, and Mary follows his gaze to see that she was quite mistaken; they aren't surrounded by the pillars and painted plastered ceiling of Claridge's, this is the dark, low-ceilinged Cave of the Golden Calf, and apart from the man banging on the off-key piano up front, they are the only people in it.
"Where is everyone?" she asks.

"Riding to hounds, of course. Leaving me quite alone to kiss my girl in white."

As Richard tilts his head, leaning in to brush his lips against hers, Mary murmurs, "White?"

"Yes, white. Just as I asked."

He draws back slightly from her, eyes darkening as they rake over her bodice. Mary looks down, too, and draws in a sharp surprised breath to find herself not, as she expected, wearing the black beaded gown she meant to wear to Agnes Belcher's engagement party, though not her familiar ivory watered silk, either. It's the Lucile creation she ordered for Christmas, before pregnancy altered her proportions...

"Oh dear," Richard remarks, his eyes alighting on her stomach where a red stain blooms and creeps upward like a rosebush climbing up a garden wall. "You seem to have acquired a scarlet letter."

His fingers disentangle from hers, and his hand leaves her waist and Mary begins to tremble at the loss of his warmth. She claps her hand over her mouth as bile burns in her throat at the sight of blood fashioning itself into a pattern across her bosom like ink from an invisible pen, but her vision is obscured and she cannot make it out.

"What does it say?" she asks Richard, but he has turned his back to her and is walking away.

He seems to be carrying something, and as she stares after him in a momentary stupor she realises that on his shoulder rests a small head in a lace cap, the matching satin Christening gown Mama keeps packed in tissue in a trunk draped over the sleeve of his evening jacket.

"You lied to me," Richard calls back to her, his shoes making a staccato tap across the floor, like the beat of a snare drum, or the clack of typewriter keys, over the tinkle of the rag on the piano. "Liars make poor mothers."

Mary tries to cry out that she didn't even know she was to be a mother, she didn't know anything, but her voice is strangled in her throat and drowned out by the beat of the typewriter keys. At least her feet are not rooted to the pavement—the pavement? For a moment this confuses her, and she does stand stock still, contemplating her new surroundings. The newspaper district of Fleet Street, though somewhere the piano from the Cave continues to play.

She spies Richard's top hat in the midst of bowlers and trilbies and chases after him, shouting. Her throat burns with the rasp of her sob, but the sound of it doesn't reach her ears, only the baby's wail as she follows them into the warehouse in the back of the DailyTelegram office building, though that, too, is muffled by the roar of the printing presses churning out the evening editions. She pauses to look at the front page on the top of a stack of folded papers hefted by a newsboy, and sees her own face on it, gawking up at the sign of the nightclub; Richard is nowhere to be found on the paper or among the double-octuple presses.

Weaving her way through the maze, ninety-six thousand pictures of her bewildered expression flashing past in an hour, she at last spies the metal staircase that lead up to the main offices. Her shoes stamp and clank on the cage-like grid beneath them, and by the time she reaches the top and the door of Richard's office she is out of breath, panting in time to the rhythm of typewriter keys on the other side.
"Please, Richard, may I come in?" she shouts, pounding both fists against the door. "There is something I must say to you. It's about the baby!"

The door opens mid-knock and she nearly falls into Miss Fields, who peers disapprovingly down at her from over the tops of her half-moon spectacles. Mary tries to look around the secretary, but she only sees Gwen, bent over the back of a straight-backed chair drawn up to a desk, in a pose which for a moment reminds Mary of her old governess teaching her to play the piano. She strains her ears for the playful melody of a rag.

"Not to worry, Lady Mary," says Miss Fields, pulling the door closed on the scene. "We're teaching the child to type!"

"But she doesn't need to type!" Mary shoves herself into the narrowing gap between the door and the frame and wraps her arms protectively around her aching belly. "She won't be a secretary, she's a lady."

Miss Fields purses her lips as the typewriter click-clacks away in the office. "Don't be ridiculous. If she's a lady, why hasn't anyone fought for her?"

~*~

She fights.

Swats at the hand that shakes her shoulder. Presses her other one over her wrenching stomach. No. You won't take it. I won't let you. No one fought for me, but I'll fight for her. She doesn't know if she says any of it aloud or not, though the voice speaking to her is not within her head.

"I'm not going to take anything, Mary. It's just a bad dream. Wake up."

"Sybil?" Mary fights the sticky crust of sleep that seems almost to have pasted her eyelids shut.

"Of course." The sweet face, flushed in the candlelight, comes into focus above; fingers sweep over Mary's perspiring brow. "Who did you think it was? And what did you think I was going to take from you?"

Mary tries to answer, but her throat constricts and she chokes on the words. She rolls onto her side to reach for the glass of water on the bedside table, wincing at the twinge in her abdomen, and only succeeds in brushing her knuckles against the glass. Sybil's quick reflexes prevent a small deluge on the mahogany, and she presses the glass to Mary's lips, helping her to drink.

"Golly," come the husky tones as Mary gulps. "Is Dr Clarkson sure you've only got a cold?"

"Is that what Mama said is wrong with me?"

"She said you were highly contagious."

"Corrupting, I think she means."

"What is the matter with you?" Sybil asks, her brows knitting heavily together with her frown. "You
were disoriented and delirious."

"It's the laudanum." Mary blinks, and her bedroom comes into sharper focus, as much as it can in the candlelight, with the draperies drawn so that she doesn't know whether it's night or day, how many nights or days have passed since Dr Clarkson examined her and Mama left her to be punished by her own mind. "It's beginning to wear off now."

So is the pain, she notes, gingerly pushing herself to sit more upright against her pillows. She relaxes the muscles which she clenched during her nightmare, and does not think she feels the cramps as she did before. Though that could be the lingering effects of the drug.

"Doctors don't give laudanum for colds," says Sybil.

"Apparently they do for miscarriages."

Now it is Mary who prevents water from being spilt in her bed as Sybil's fingers go slack around the glass, slick with condensation.

"A miscarriage? But that would mean you're--"

"Pregnant," Mary says, sparing her little sister having to. "And Dr Clarkson isn't sure I'll lose the baby." Though I deserve to.

"You must be so terribly disappointed in me. Your big sister, fallen off her pedestal. If I ever was on one."

Sybil's lips hang open for a long moment before she sits back, one leg curled beneath her, and says, "Oh, Mary."

"But...Richard," she says. "He...abandoned you?"

Mary shakes her head, though she cannot shake the nightmare image of him walking away from her with her baby. "He doesn't know. I...tried to tell him, but...You see why it wasn't a simple matter of standing up and doing battle with Papa for him?"

"I do, and I'm so sorry I got so angry with you. Can you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive," Mary replies, choked again at this turning of tables, that someone should worry about her forgiveness when she needs it from everyone else in this house. Sybil scoots to sit beside her on the bed, laying her head on Mary's shoulder and grasping her hand as she's always done since she was a little girl.

"If you don't tell Richard, Papa's going to put you on the first boat to America when he finds out. He'll expect you to have the baby in secret and leave it for some relative to bring up."
"Heavens. Mama's efforts to censor your reading material and curb your appetite for the sensational really haven't proved very effective, have they? You probably know more on the subject of illicit love affairs and out of wedlock pregnancies than I do."

Though Sybil laughs softly, Mary can't help but think of her dream. It seems so absurd now, Miss Fields and Gwen taking the child away and teaching it to type—her; the baby was a girl in the dream—but the underlying thought is not. Mightn't it be better for the baby, whatever its sex, to be raised by someone else?

What kind of mother couldn't work up the courage to tell the man who wanted to marry her that she was pregnant? Was so selfish and reckless that she might have killed her unborn child? She is twenty-one, and scarcely has given more thought to motherhood than a vague knowledge that someday, if she married Patrick, she would have a son to inherit Downton as she would never be allowed to. She never desired children. How could she possibly make a good mother?

And Richard…He didn't even have time to eat breakfast, or to linger in bed after the act that made the child.

"What's it like?" Sybil's voice breaks gently into Mary's introspection.


"No." Sybil giggles again, but it trails away into a sigh as she sits up to look Mary in the eye, her face all sincerity and curiosity and not the least bit shy. "Making love with a man."

Across the room, the oval full-length mirror and the trifold ones of the dressing table reflect the illuminated circle of the bed where Mary sits. Instead of her pale face peering from the stark white linens and nightgown, however, she sees the ghosts of reflections past. Herself and Richard, undressing in front of each other—and undressing each other—with such ease. How is it that being naked with him was so much easier than being honest? In the mirror she watched the moment of their joining, too, when Richard asked if she trusted him before his warm weight sank onto her, into her.

"I wanted to do it again," she answers. "For the rest of my life."

~*~

"Ginger ale and ginger biscuits," says Aunt Rosamund, sweeping into the bedroom without knocking—and certainly without an invitation—on the second morning that Mary is confined to her bed, and inspecting the breakfast tray beneath raised ginger eyebrows. "I always thought it was tea and chicken soup that the doctor ordered for a cold? If one has a cold."

"Tell Rosamund that these absurd suspicions are the result of reading those hideous newspapers your beau publishes," comes Granny's voice from the doorway.

Though already half-recumbent in bed, Mary wilts further into her pillows at the sight of her grandmother entering the bedroom with no less aplomb than Rosamund, despite relying upon her cane. Mary feels much improved—bleeding and cramps all but abated—but not sufficiently recovered to receive her aunt and her grandmother at once. Not that taking on the both of them together is an
easy feat for a person in the pink of health.

"Because if she's right," Granny goes on, laying her left hand over the right as it curls around the ivory handle of her cane, "then it would mean my own granddaughter looked me in the eye and lied to me about Sir Richard being your..."

She cannot say lover, and Mary cannot Granny her in the eye this time, or tell a falsehood. However, after a swallow of ginger ale she does manage to say, "I'm not sure it's really fair to give Aunt Rosamund all the credit. After all, it was pretty obvious you didn't believe me."

"A lie doesn't cease to be a lie just because no one believes it," Granny replies in a thin voice as she lowers herself onto the bedside chair.

"Well," says Rosamund, almost gleefully as Granny lowers herself into the bedside chair. "It appears you're to be a great-grandmother, Mama."

"And you a great-aunt," Mary reminds her.

Rosamund tilts her head and purses her lips briefly before she says, "Cheer up, Mama. Mary and Sir Richard won't be the first couple who did things in the wrong order."

Mary is only momentarily surprised at her aunt's admission of an unconventional courtship. The apple, it seems, did not fall far from the family tree; she only wishes Aunt Rosamund thought to impart some wisdom before she shirked her chaperone duties about how not to bring forth fruit out of season.

"But why did you lie?" Granny asks, seeming not to have heard Rosamund. "What was the point? Did you think we wouldn't notice when you looked as if you swallowed a watermelon whole?"

"Or when the Christmas gown Lady Duff Gordon fitted her for...didn't fit?" Rosamund gives Mary much the same pointed look she did that day in the dressing room at the boutique. "In fairness, pregnancy is the very last fate we would wish or imagine to befall one of our girls. Though I could see from their body language at Fortnum's that the...dynamic...between Mary and Sir Richard had changed."

"I only wonder that he hasn't suspected," Granny says. "After all, he's a profiteer of just this sort of scandal."

"He did suspect," Mary says, her appetite for even Mrs Patmore's tasty ginger biscuits vanishing. "I lied to him, too."

"Are you still certain, Rosamund, that we'll be able to pull off this marriage? Or will we be sending Mary to her other grandmother until this problem resolves itself?"

"Obviously it hasn't occurred to either of you that this problem may be resolving itself as we speak!" Mary blurts out, her arms wrapping around her abdomen beneath the breakfast tray.

Her aunt and grandmother look at her, aghast.

"Oh, my dear," says Granny, one hand uncurling from around her cane, visibly trembling as it reaches out for Mary. "Surely you don't mean to say you're losing the poor baby?"
It's that same conflict of interests Mary detected from Mama; they don't want her to be pregnant without a husband, but they don't want her to cease being pregnant, either.

More importantly, they forgive her. Because they love her. And if they can, perhaps Richard...

"Really, Mama," Aunt Rosamund cuts in, "do you think she'd be sitting up sipping ginger ale if she were in the process of having a miscarriage?"

Mary smiles weakly at Granny. How strange--and yet how typical, in this family--that she should be the one offering reassurance under such circumstances. "I had a little scare, but Dr Clarkson said last night that if I continue as I am at present, I may be out of bed for New Year's Eve." The day after tomorrow.

"You see?" Aunt Rosamund draws up another chair alongside Granny's and perches at the end of it. "Now, Mary. As your grandmother said, there is the matter of the marriage to sort. I admit Sir Richard's ignorance complicates things, but we're a clever lot. Only you must tell us everything so we're playing with a full deck."

Granny cringes. "Must you speak of our Mary's fall from grace as if she were the heroine of some lurid romance you can't put down?"

"There isn't much to tell," Mary says with a slight shrug of her shoulders. "Richard said he intended to marry me, and I invited him to my room, where as soon as the deed was done he left to publish his exclusive interview with Mr Pamuk."

"And you thought he'd got what he came for and didn't mean a word he said to get you into bed?" Rosamund says, then awaits Mary's response with raised eyebrows. "That explains why you took his departure as such a personal affront."

"I assumed he wanted to marry for love," says Mary, struggling to keep her voice steady; for all the times she's recited this in her mind, speaking it aloud stirs emotions she thought she had gained control over. "He never stated so explicitly."

"Thank heaven for small favours," mutters Granny.

"I expect you not to understand affairs of the heart," Mary snaps. "You'd be as pleased as Papa for me to marry Cousin Matthew, though he's even less fashionable than Sir Richard."

Granny emits an offended gasp and looks to Rosamund for help.

"Believe it or not, Mary, that's not what your grandmother meant."

"Isn't it, though? You loved Uncle Marmaduke and from all accounts that counted for very little."

"Indeed," says Aunt Rosamund, "but we're not talking about my marriage. We're discussing your naïve assumption that cads talk marriage to seduce virgins. That's simply not true. They talk love."

"I don't agree with Rosamund's language," says Granny, "but I don't fault her logic. Has Sir Richard mentioned marriage since? That would give us more insight into his intentions."

_I am a man of my word. If I say I will marry a woman, I will do it. "He wanted me to elope with him. After Papa threw him out."_
"And you turned him down?" cries Rosamund, while Granny splutters and sags in her chair, looking as though she may require smelling salts.

"I couldn't run away with him after I'd lied to him about being pregnant. If I knew for certain that he wants to marry because he loves me...Is it so very wrong to wish for certain words to be said?" After all, it was Richard himself who put the idea into her head. *Has it never occurred to you that you might marry for love?*

In the ensuing silence, during which Mary is certain Granny and Aunt Rosamund think she's the greatest fool that ever lived, she can't think why she said all this to them. If Mama, an American, doesn't care about her sentiments—or whatever sentiments she hopes to receive from Richard—then why should Rosamund and Granny? *You are going to be a mother. You've made your last selfish decision."

Yet for all that, Granny seems almost encouraging as she says, "There's a little saying you might have heard. Actions speak louder than words. Sir Richard strikes me as a man of action."

"I should say so," Rosamund snorts; Granny presses her lips together in annoyance as she regards her, and the look emboldens Mary to reveal a little more of her feelings to her grandmother than she would ever have imagined herself doing.

"His life's work is built on words. If he loved me, wouldn't he have said so, without hesitation?" *I always say what I mean.*

"He's a newspaperman," Rosamund says. "The goal of which is to say as much as possible in as few words as are necessary."

"Mary, dear," Granny says, "you said yourself it would be wrong to marry him under false pretences. Have you considered the irony of expecting Sir Richard to say particular words to you whilst withholding an even more important truth from him?"

The weight of the words presses Mary back against her pillows, and she closes her eyes against the mirror image of herself reflected across the room.

"I think we ought to let her rest now," says Granny, the chair and old joints creaking as she gets to her feet. "I'll ring for someone to take away that tray."

"I'll ring for Sir Richard to come," says Rosamund. "He can't be too angry about a lie if you confess while there's a danger to your life or the baby's."

"You don't know Richard at all if you think he'd take such blatant manipulation sitting down."

She said the same to Mama when she repeated the offer yesterday. But she calls her aunt back after Granny has gone out—well aware of the probable eavesdropping on the other side of the door.

"When Uncle Marmaduke dropped you for work...Did it make you feel you weren't important?"

"Let me ask you a question," says Rosamund. "Once upon a time, you thought you'd marry Cousin Patrick. Would you have rather sat across the dinner table from him every night for forty years knowing he had little other care than all the pheasants he shot that day? Or would you prefer to go to bed alone on occasion and be kept company by the thought that Richard is preoccupied with how
Having done little but sleep or lie abed, resting, for the better part of four days, Mary awakens early the next morning. For the first time in weeks the churning in her stomach is with hunger, not nausea, and she sits up against the pillows, poised to ring for her breakfast when the bedroom door swings open and Anna comes in.

Without a breakfast tray.

"Thank you for looking in on me," Mary says; it is not the first time Anna has taken it upon herself to check on her beyond the usual requirements since the bleeding started. "I'm feeling quite well this morning. I think I'll take toast and eggs for breakfast. Perhaps a glass of ginger ale, just to be safe. Anna?"

For the maid stands at the foot of the bed, hands clasped in front of her, fidgeting with the apron of her day uniform, not seeming to have heard a word of instruction.

"Are you quite well?"

"Forgive me, Lady, Mary, but...It's just...William was ironing the Times to take up with his lordship's tea, and one of the headlines was so shocking that he nearly burnt it to a crisp. And I thought you should know."

"What could be published in the Times that I should care about?" Mary asks flippantly, though she knows her blood did not run so cold when she heard the news about the Titanic.

"Sir Richard's attacked Mr Napier."
The Fight

Chapter Summary

As Mary battles nature and her family for Richard, she discovers she's not the only one fighting her corner.

In the privacy of Carson's office, Mary leans back against the door, all too aware that the muted din in the corridor beyond, as well as in the servants' hall and kitchens, has less to do with the usual morning bustle than with the very reason for which she ensconced herself here.

Since childhood the butler has indulged her sulks and strops in his private space; if she opens the right-hand drawer of the desk, she wonders, will she still find the tin of toffees kept in reserve especially for her? She makes no move to look, however, her eyes riveted to the telephone Carson reluctantly agreed for Papa to have installed, the newfangled gadget a representation of the trouble she's found herself in as a result of her desire to be bold and modern.

Though...picking up the device and placing one call to London could save her, couldn't it? Why else would Richard risk making headlines rather than just printing them by storming into White's last evening? Apparently he hoisted Evelyn up from his card table and threw him against the wall where he delivered an unmistakable message via an uppercut that knocked the Honourable Mr Napier off his feet in his own club for precisely the reason of honour. If the papers are to be believed, that is--which she is not at all certain that they are, given that the Times is Richard's biggest competitor.

Nevertheless, Mary desperately hopes the quote attributed to him as two waiters apparently dragged him out by the arms, hair broken free from the pomade and falling over his heavy forehead beneath which his eyes blazed like hot blue wildfire, is true: How dare you accuse me of behaving dishonourably toward a lady whilst you smear her reputation amongst all your peers! It certainly fits with what transpired between them at Fortnum's. Or at any rate Mary could see Richard interpreting it as such, from the standpoint of a wronged lover.

Startlingly enough, Anna protested when she said she wished to dress and go downstairs. "Are you sure you should be out of bed yet? Dr Clarkson said--"

"That if the bleeding worsened I might miscarry," Mary cut her off. "It stopped two days ago. I think you and I both know I'm having this baby. And that it's time I fought for it."

After all, Richard fought for me.

The thought gives her the courage to push off the door and cross the small office to Carson's desk and pick up the telephone, although she does not immediately lift the earpiece from the cradle. She gazes absently out the office window through the spattering of sleet that clings to the pane, and thinks of the two other times she's spoken to Richard on the telephone. On the first occasion he called her, not willing to accept her refusal of a luncheon invitation at an unfashionable tea shop. How trivial that complaint seems now. But Richard liked her well enough then to look past her shallowness, to see that there is more to her than that. She lifts the earpiece and holds it to her ear, and speaks the Daily Telegram's London office into the microphone. She won't take no for an
answer, either; Richard must hear what she has to say.

It's early enough in the morning that she expects Richard himself to answer the phone, as he did that late night when she called him. The husky voice that asks how Mary's call may be directed certainly is familiar, but also distinctly feminine, the broad Northern accent restrained but unmistakable.

"Gwen? Miss Dawson, I mean," Mary amends, remembering the formality now due the former member of the household. "It's Lady Mary Crawley. I'd like to speak to Sir Richard, please."

"I'm sorry, Lady Mary, he hasn't been in yet."

This is so unexpected that she has to grip the telephone tighter to keep it slipping from her grasp. It would be one thing for Gwen to say he wasn't available—he ought to be occupied with destroying the *Times* editor for running such a damaging story about him, or at least avoiding calls from her if he regrets the brash actions for her sake—but not in the office at all?

"I see. Perhaps I may reach him at home?"

"I'm sorry, your ladyship, but I really couldn't say. I'll let him know as soon as he arrives that you wish to speak to him."

"Thank you. It's very urgent that I do. You must tell him that."

"I will, Lady Mary. Goodbye."

Mary hangs up the telephone and replaces it on the desk, sinking down upon the straight-backed chair as she does so. For a moment she sits with her shoulders slumped under the weight of her disappointment and her secret, then she grasps the arms of the chair to push herself to her feet again. Did she really expect she would blurt out over the phone that she was pregnant? Perhaps yes, perhaps not; in any case, she'll have her chance soon enough. Even now Richard is probably seated in the back of his Rolls Royce on the way to the office, a notebook open on his knee upon which he scratches out a scathing rebuttal of the *Times'* account to run in *Evening Telegram*—or, better yet, Miss Fields rides with him, taking down the editorial he dictates to her in a fit of pique. Perhaps she ought not expect him to return her call too soon.

As she makes her way to the dining room for breakfast, she encounters Edith descending the stairs.

"Decided to stop sulking, have we?"

Mary's arms encircle her waist as her belly constricts at her sister's words, striking almost as a physical blow. For a wild moment she considers blurt out the truth of what really confined her to her bedroom for the past three days, but then she lowers her arms to her sides again, thumbs twitching against her forefingers as she strides to the foot of the staircase to meet Edith as she steps down. Fight, don't defend.

"You'll be the one sulking when Evelyn Napier finds out the thrashing he got was all your doing."

Edith goes very pale, so that the red streaking up her neck is all the more noticeable. "What are you talking about?"

"Ask Papa to show you the *Times*."

In fact it is Granny from whom the ladies get their first look at the newspaper, bringing her copy with her up from the Dower House when she and Aunt Rosamund turn up for breakfast.

"His lordship," Carson informs them when Mama--also joining them instead of lazing the frosty morning away in bed, no doubt having heard the news from O’Brien, and looking, Mary notes, as if she has slept little the past four nights--remarks on Papa's absence from the breakfast table, "has asked that a tray be brought to him in the library as he conducts a matter of business."

"The library!" Mary exclaims in mocking tones. "Heavens, will he be having coffee and toast, too?"

Sybil smirks into her teacup, but Mama regards Mary like a frightened doe across the table.

"He told me he means to speak to Evelyn Napier," she choking out. "He feels directly responsible for his ever having become acquainted with Sir Richard."

Mary's heart quickens at this, and her teacup rattles against the saucer as she replaces it, but she manages a steady reply. "Perhaps someone ought to relieve him of that burden by informing him that the fault rests squarely on Edith's shoulders?"

"Edith's?" Sybil looks more astonished by this than about Mary's pregnancy.

"Mary always was the most horrible telltale," Edith hisses, but she recoils in her seat, chin tucked, eyes downcast on the newspaper account of the altercation.

"Not in letters to Diana Manners," Mary says, getting up from the table.

"Oh Edith," come Granny's tones of dismay above the screech of Mama's chair as she gets up, too. "Mary doesn't mean you were the informant, surely?"

"You needn't make it sound as if I'm the one who ruined her. Not when it was Mary's immorality--"

"Shut up, you!" Sybil cries. "At least Mary did what she did for love. You're a jealous, hateful little beast, and I hope you end a spinster."

"Girls!" Mama snaps at them. "Must I send you to your rooms like children?"

"It's that firm hand of discipline that saved these girls from being spoilt," mutters Granny to Aunt Rosamund.

"I'll deal with you later, Edith," Mama adds, before following Mary out into the hall and closing the dining room door behind her, though not before Rosamund slips out. "I'll try to get your father off the phone so you can call Richard."

"I already tried," Mary says. "He wasn't in. Something must have prevented him, or he'd be there already, wouldn't he? For damage control?"

"Did you try his house?" Mama asks. "He might be having a lie-in, if he was...intoxicated...when he..."
Mary shakes her head. "Richard has far too much self-control for that," she says dismissively, along with the thought that she must be a terrible person for preferring the notion that Richard went to such lengths to defend her honour whilst stone cold sober. Though Aunt Rosamund seems to share her unwholesome proclivity.

"The *Times* would have made drunkenness the headline," she says. "And he can't have spent the night in gaol, or there'd be some mention of an arrest."

"Evelyn may yet press charges," Mary says, the beads of her necklace bruising her fingers as she twists her strand of pearls. "We've no idea how badly Richard injured him. He boxes, you know."

"Does he?" Rosamund's eyes brighten beneath raised brows. "My."

Mama frowns darkly at her. "Sometimes I think she's your daughter." But the rebuke seems to have sapped her burst of early morning energy, and she sits heavily on the deacon's bench in the curve of the staircase, cradling her head in her hands. "Our only hope is that Evelyn handled this in the manner of the gentleman we've always known him to be."

The gentleman you always wanted me to marry, Mary thinks, but does not say. She sits beside her mother and lays her head back against the panelled staircase.

"And that Richard handles it like the gentleman he wants to be."

Aunt Rosamund sits, too, sandwiching Mary between her and Mama. "And that some act of God prevents Robert from getting a call through."

~*~

The existence of God never seemed more likely to Mary than the moment the library door opens with a bang against the wall and Papa emerges. He flings his folded *Times* on the sideboard in the hall and, not seeing his wife, daughter, and sister seated by the stairs and announces to Carson, for whom he apparently rang, that the phone seems not to be working, and he will require his coat and the car to go into the village to see if he can place a call there, or at the very least send a cable. As soon as he has gone, Mary gets up from the bench and approaches Carson as he comes back into the hall after seeing his lordship out.

"May I commandeer your office for the day, Carson? I'm expecting a very important telephone call."

"Of course, m'lady," the butler acquiesces, as his bushy eyebrows twitch together dubiously. "Although I suspect the ice is responsible for Lord Grantham's inability to place his call. It's unlikely we'll hear that telephone ring as long as this weather persists."

"I know," Mary says, with a glance at Mama and Aunt Rosamund. "But so many unlikely things have happened to me recently, I'm counting on the trend to continue."

Yet as the hours tick by, the only sound in the small room coming from the handsome brass clock that stands at the corner of the desk—a family heirloom willed to Carson by Grandpa—the telephone discouragingly mute, it seems his prediction may be accurate. From time to time she glances out the
darkening window, the view beyond increasingly obscured as if by frosted glass as the layer of ice coating the pane thickens. Mostly Mary leans with her chin in her hand, staring alternately at the phone, willing it to make a sound, and at the clock, wishing it would be silent, the monotony broken by moving occasionally to open the desk drawer to steal a toffee or, more frequently, by cat naps as the surprising heat of the little cast iron stove lulls her to sleep. Dr Clarkson may not officially have given her leave to get out of bed, but at least no one could accuse her of strenuous activity.

She's in the midst of one such snooze when the rattling clang, accompanied by low vibration on the desk, stirs her. She must have fallen into a deeper sleep than before, because her first thought is that it's an alarm clock. It rings a full three times as she opens her eyes, rubbing the crust of sleep from them, and massaging the crick of her neck where her head lolls against her shoulder, before her bleary gaze focuses on the phone.

At once she snaps upright and reaches for it, upsetting a bottle of ink in the process; she makes no attempt to stop the spill--Carson has tidied up far worse messes created by her, and will overlook this accident--but steps away from the desk to save her skirt--which the laundress won't forgive--as she puts the receiver to her mouth.

"Richard?"

"His secretary, Lady Mary," crackles the female voice at the other end of the line.

Mary exhales through her nose, the breath a loud static echoing back at her over the telephone. "Miss Fields," she says, smiling unnecessarily in her attempt not to show how discomposed she is at the moment. "Of course. Forgive me. I left a message for Sir Richard this morning, you see. With Miss Dawson. I have...there's an urgent matter I must discuss with him. Urgently." She cringes at her babbling.

"Yes. I've been trying to reach you all day to say that Miss Dawson was unable to pass your message along to Sir Richard because he's been out of the office."

"Oh God." The corner of the desk digs into Mary's hip, but she does not move away; her fingers press just as hard into the base of the telephone. "Is he in trouble?"

"I gather your ladyship hasn't seen the Evening Telegram?"

"Papa cancelled his subscription."

If Miss Fields takes it as the slight it was intended to be against her employer, there is no indication of it in her tone.

"If Lord Grantham had not, you'd read a brief item stating that the incident reported in this morning's Times concerning the Honourable Evelyn Napier and Sir Richard Carlisle was a misunderstanding between acquaintances that was solved at the time and scene of its having occurred, the two men shaking hands like gentlemen. And that Mr Napier suffered only superficial injuries."

Mary cannot even express her relief before she blurts out, "But where is Richard?"

There is a crackle on the other end of the line, so that she cannot be certain whether Miss Fields hesitated, or if her voice has been drowned out by interference on the precarious telephone lines before she hears, "To Belvoir."
"Belvoir?" Mary repeats, stupidly. "Did Lady Rutland invite him for the New Year?"

There is no sound from the telephone earpiece. Not even the crackle of static. It is simply dead.

~*~

"Of course Lady Rutland didn't invite Sir Richard for the New Year," Granny says when Mary gives her and Aunt Rosamund a hushed account of her conversation with Miss Fields in the drawing room after dinner. Papa and Matthew are still at their port, Mama engaging Sybil and Edith with Cousin Isobel and Miss Swire, who's travelled down for tomorrow night's New Year's Eve party, her father apparently recovered enough from his Christmas illness to spare her a little time with her fiancé in her future home with the people from whom she would usurp it.

"Why else would he go to Belvoir on the thirtieth of December, in the midst of a personal crisis?" Mary asks. "No doubt he wants to retain a shred of credibility with an influential family."

Aunt Rosamund lifts her eyebrows incredulously and inclines her head toward Granny's. "Isn't it rather too soon for her to be afflicted with pregnancy befuddlement?"

Granny looks a little askance, still not accustomed to having an unmarried expectant granddaughter for all she's taken it in her stride.

"Mary, dear," she says, ignoring Rosamund, "obviously Sir Richard's on the trail. Mr Napier would have heard the rumours about you from Diana Manners. It's likely the man has no more invitation to Belvoir than he did to White's."

"Though I should hope he has more control of his fists when he barges into the Duke of Rutland's home," says Rosamund.

"And when he comes here, having learnt that Diana had the story from Edith," Granny adds.

"He won't come here," says Mary, narrowing her eyes at Edith, who is watching their conversation from across the drawing room, but quickly looks away from her elder sister's glare. "Why would he want to ring in the New Year with one more Crawley who has made a fool of him?"

And why would he want to spend the next forty with a woman who lied to him?

"And anyway," she adds, blinking back tears, "you heard Miss Swire going on about the ordeal of getting here with all the ice on the tracks. Papa says we'll be lucky if the Russells can make it over from Haxby for the party, the roads are so bad. Richard's stuck at Belvoir."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," Mama says, joining them as Papa and Cousin Matthew walk through from the dining room, the burnt wood of cigar smoke clinging to their evening jackets and turning Mary's stomach across the space. "Sir Richard strikes me as one of those Jack London heroes. He's a force for nature to reckon with."

A slight pressure on Mary's fingertips prompts her to look down and see Mama's hand wrapped around them, and when she meets her eyes again, the corners crinkle with a gentle smile.
"In any case you can try phoning him at Belvoir in the morning."

Mary does, her desire not to be a disappointment to Mama any longer as great as her desire not to disappoint the child who will call her Mama. But when the dressing gong resounds through Downton on New Year's Eve, she goes not to her own room, but to her mother's boudoir, standing before the divan on which Mama reclines in her flowing tea gown. She might as well be sat on a judge's bench in foreboding black robes, for all Mary finds it impossible to meet her eye as she makes her tearful admission.

"It's no use. I still can't get a call through. To Belvoir or to Richard's office. I tried and tried all day, but nothing."

Chancing a glance up, she is relieved to see that while Mama's expression clearly holds disappointment, it does not seem to be disappointment in her. At least not entirely. It's enough that she is able to fling her palms wide open at her sides. "What am I to do?"

"Your father had a telegram from Evelyn Napier today. Perhaps you could send one to Richard in the morning."

Mary snorts. "Oh yes, I can imagine it now. RICHARD STOP BREAK OUT THE CIGARS STOP YOU'RE GOING TO BE A FATHER STOP KISSES STOP MARY."

"Mary!" hisses Mama, bulging eyes turned toward the doorway that adjoins her room to Papa's. Wide open. His heavy frame filling it.

"If I just overheard what I think I overheard," he says, lips scarcely moving in his reddened face, "then you can pack your bags and prepare to start the New Year on the next boat to America."

~*~

The door creaks softly on its hinges, but Mary, lying on her bed, does not flick her gaze from the ceiling to see who has slipped into the room.

"Anna told me you weren't dressing for dinner," says Mama, the click of the mechanism in the moulding indicating she has shut the door behind her.

Mary moves--just a hand from where it rests on her stomach to rub her shoulder, bared in her chemise with goose bumps prickling up over it. "I didn't think Papa would want the guests to see his daughter in her shame."

"There won't be any guests to see you at all," says Mama, stepping further into the room; in her periphery, Mary sees her take the poker from the brass stand of fireplace tools and stir the dying fire which crackles up at once, noticeably warming the room. "Not only have the Russells cancelled due to the ice, but when your father interrupted us, he came to say he'd had a note from Sir Anthony that Maud has fallen gravely ill. Dr Clarkson fears she might not even make it through the night."
"Heavens. What a terrible start to the new year." A knot tightens in Mary's throat, so that her attempt
at swallowing chokes her—though not with sorrow for poor Lady Strallan's likely and untimely
demise. "I suppose I'll be dead to Papa, once I'm in America."

"If he thinks he can hide my grandchild away like a dirty secret," Mama grinds the words out from
the, "he's got another thing coming."

Startled by the words and, even more, the fighting tones, Mary lifts her head from her pillows to see
her mother gazing at her from the foot of the bed, a fire glistening in her eyes that seems not merely
to reflect the glow in the fireplace.

"And not just my grandchild," Mama goes on, her lips twitching into a smile. "You, my darling girl. I
love you. No matter what social or moral codes you've violated, no matter what mistakes you've
made. We can redeem this. We will. Because you are my daughter, and I love you."

"Oh, Mama!"

Mary crumbles, certain that when she does Mama will round the bed to catch her, to hold the pieces
to her bosom and save any of them from being lost. She leans into her as the addition of her gentle
weight on the mattress draws her in as surely as her arms do, tucking her head beneath Mama's chin
and allowing herself to be rocked as if she were a very small child, and not a woman at the brink of
motherhood herself. Her own cold, trembling fingers cling to her smooth hands, and she breathes in
the sweet floral perfume that has always been a part of Mama for as long as Mary can remember, as
if it is her own natural scent.

"I don't..." A sob catches in Mary's throat; she sniffs, and tries again. "I don't know if I have it in
me to love someone this much. I've been so selfish. I just don't know if I can ever be a good mother.
Like you."

Despite Mama's previous speech, Mary's belly tightens as if in anticipation of a blow at this
admission of her own lack of maternal instinct being the final straw. But Mama only brushes her lips
across the top of her head.

"You won't know," she says. "Not until they place that bundle in your arms and you wonder how
something so tiny can be so warm, and so perfect, or smell so sweet. Not until you hear the first cry
and your heart breaks to fill her every need. Then you'll know, Mary."

Her thumb scuffs away the tears from Mary's cheek, then she tilts her face up to hers. "It never goes
away. No matter how they grow or what sort of needs they have. Now." Almost abruptly Mama's
demeanour shifts, and she releases Mary and stands. "Come along. Wash your face and change into
a dinner dress."

Mary watches from the bed as her mother opens the jewellery box on the dressing table and
rummages through it, as if in search of something particular. A golden chain flashes as Mama unfurls
it from where it nestles in the box, aqua and leaf green gemstones catching the light from their
settings around the sunburst pendant. Her breath hitches in her chest at the significance of the choice.

"Let's show Papa you won't go without a fight."
A fight appears to be already in progress as they round the corner of the staircase.

"How dare you darken the door of this house!" Papa's booming tones resound through the high ceilinged front hall.

Gasping in unison, Mary exchanges alarmed glances with her mother before leaning over the banister just in time to see him stride from the saloon toward the vestibule. Following his swift movement, Mary's heart ceases to beat, plunging into her stomach, at the sight of Richard standing in the archway. She has just time enough to register his dishevelled appearance--fumbling to fasten the cufflink on one sleeve, the other still rolled up to reveal the taut muscles of his forearm, waistcoat unbuttoned, as is his collar, the dark green necktie hanging loose about his neck--before it snaps back at an excruciating angle as Papa's fist connects with his jaw.

"You bastard."

"ROBERT!"

Mama's shriek echoes through the hall, underscored by other feminine cries from the family members congregated before the Christmas tree, and staccato click of her evening shoes as she scurries down the remainder of the stairs. Mary follows close behind, clinging to the railing as her gaze locks on Richard. He staggers from the blow, but keeps on his feet--like the seasoned boxer he is--and it is Papa for whom Mary fears as Richard stands his ground.

His face is whitened with rage, the paleness exaggerated by dangerous blue of his eyes and the blood that drips from the split in his lower lip. He raises his hand, and her heart leaps into her throat as she expects him to strike back at her father...

...but he only wipes the blood from his mouth.

"Is this further punishment for taking advantage of Miss Swire?" he spits the words, and Mary notices the fine spray of blood from his mouth onto the light birch floor just shy of where Papa stands at the edge of the Persian carpet.

Richard's electric stare is fixed over her father's shoulder, and Mary glances in the same direction to where Lavinia stands behind Matthew, clinging to his arm as if for protection. Mary draws in a breath of indignation that Matthew did not rush after Papa to stay his hand from assaulting Richard--the hand which, returning her attention to the pertinent action, Mary sees him rubbing as he addresses Richard again in clipped syllables.

"You know perfectly well what that was for. I've spoken your language at last, haven't I?"

"You refer to my encounter with Mr Napier," says Richard, his eyes cutting away briefly in an unmistakable expression of guilt--and annoyance that he should have to own his guilt in such humiliating circumstances, Mary thinks. "A regrettable misunderstanding, as last evening's Telegram reported so accurately."

Noticing the blood on his fingertips, he reaches into his trouser pocket and draws out a handkerchief to clean it off, then dabs at his chin where the blood has streaked from his broken lip. Mary notes the tension in his jaw as he does so, as well as the sudden softening of the lines of his face as he looks at her for the first time since setting foot in the house, his gaze drawn to the sunburst pendant nestled in
the hollow of her throat above the neckline of the gown that inspired his gift.

"But you should know that however misguided my actions were," he goes on, lifting his eyes to meet hers, "they were defence of Lady Mary's honour, which I believed had been tarnished by scurrilous gossip started by Mr Napier. I now know it originated from quite another source."

He glances over Papa's shoulder at Edith, who shrinks back behind a column.

"Lady Mary's honour?" Papa scoffs. "If this were another era I'd challenge you to a duel for her honour. Which you tarnished beneath this very roof, only to abandon her in this shameful condition--"

"Papa!" Mary's tongue looses at last, and she springs from where she has been rooted to the floor to stand between them. "Stop! He doesn't know."

Though he can't not know now.

"Please don't distress her, Robert," Mama says, clutching at his sleeve. "Mary, you ought to be resting."

Papa ignores her, lifting his chin imperiously to peer over her head at Richard. "I want you out of my house."

"I'll go if Mary asks me to," Richard replies.

She turns to him, looking up into his eyes. "I'll go with you."

Her hand finds his, and she pulls the handkerchief from his grasp and dabs at his bloodied lip again; he lets out a soft breath and she feels its warmth through the satin fingers of her glove, along with the slight lean of his body toward hers.

"There's so much I must say to you. If you're willing to hear it."

He nods, his lips pursing slightly against her fingertips in the subtlest of kisses, then turns away, murmuring that he has to crank the car. Perplexed--the Silver Ghost has one of the new electric starters--Mary moves to follow, but Papa's hand closes around her wrist, drawing her back, his face no longer etched so much with anger as with desperation.

"Do you really think that cad will fight your corner? After the abominable way he's treated you?"

"I've treated him pretty abominably myself. Perhaps worse than he's treated me." Mary lets out a shuddering breath. "I know he'll fight for me. And not just because of this nonsense with Evelyn. He has from the first moment we met, when I was a girl in black and he asked me for a dance anyway."

Papa shakes his head, releasing Mary's wrist to touch his temple as he glances back at Mama as if looking for help. He gets none, Mama looking on at Mary in approval.

"I know you fight for me," Mary tells him, feeling she ought to say something reassuring. "In your way. But I have to go my way now."

And that way, for the moment, is outside.
Mary rushes through the front door, heedless of Carson's offer to send Anna for her coat, out into the drive, where Richard stands silhouetted, except for the glowing end of a cigarette, against the outline of a car. The smoke mingles with the steam of his breath and a cloud of fumes from the tailpipe forming wraiths in the air illuminated by the glowing headlamps.

"This isn't the Silver Ghost," she says, squinting as she approaches. In fact, it's a Model T. "Did you get a new car?"

"You should have put on a coat."

Richard takes a drag from his cigarette, then flicks it into a puddle of slush in the drive, where it fizzes out. He opens the car door, and Mary sees his greatcoat draped over the back of the seat; he plucks it off and drapes the heavy wool over her shoulders, his big hands lingering there for a moment, thumbs scuffing lightly over the pendant where it rests just beneath the hollow of her throat.

"And, no. I didn't buy a new car. I bought quite an old one."

"But why?" Mary asks, though she is cognizant of the fact that she has spent the better part of two days desperate to speak to him, and now that he is here, they are discussing cars. "What happened to the Silver Ghost?"

In a smooth movement, Richard slides his arm across her shoulders whilst turning her toward the car.

"That's a long and vexing story." His hand trails down from her shoulder to her elbow to help her climb up into the passenger seat, assisting her with the trailing hem of her evening gown and his oversized coat. "One I'm not sure I can tell so soon after an equally long and vexing drive--at least not on an empty stomach. If you can wait till we've found a pub and a bite to eat..."

Mary is hungry, too, she realises, settling herself on the cold seat of the rumbling automobile. "But are you sure you care for another drive?"

Richard shuts her door, then, rubbing his hands together, hurries around the car and slides behind the wheel. He raises his eyebrows at her as he shrugs into his rumpled suit jacket. "More than I care to grovel before your papa to let me in for a sandwich."
On New Year's Eve, Mary and Richard finally say what they mean, and reach a decision about what that means for their future.

The story, which Richard tells her over the Hare and Hounds' New Year's Eve special roast leg of lamb--which, Mary says as she chews...and chews...and chews...is more likely boiled mutton; Mmm, just like Mother makes, he agrees as he struggles in vain to saw through gristle with his knife, gaining little leverage with his plate resting on his lap as he stretches out on the settee in the private parlour that in fact belongs to the publican and his wife--is that as soon as he learned that Evelyn Napier was not the perpetuator of any slander about Mary but only heard it traced back to Diana Manners, he set off on the next train to Leicestershire to confront the gossipmonger in person. (You know how she is, Mary, I never could have got a straight answer out of her over the phone. And it turned out the lines to Belvoir were knocked out, anyway.)

Due to the icy conditions across the country, the usual two hour train ride lasted through the night, and by that time it pulled into the station the morning editions were out, and Richard was forced to put off going on to the Duke of Rutland's whilst he struggled to get in touch with Miss Fields and his editor back in London about damage control in the Evening Telegram. His attempt the following day to get to Downton was similarly thwarted, the train delayed indefinitely just outside of Bottesford--not five miles from Belvoir, whereupon Richard, in a fit of frustration, disembarked the train, hiked back into the village, and bought the Model T off the first local he saw and spent the rest of the day contending with the treacherous roads to Yorkshire, stopping only for petrol.

"No wonder you turned up looking so untidy," Mary says, seated across the low coffee table from him in a wing-backed chair by the fireplace. She tests the mashed turnip at the end of her fork for edibility and, deciding it lives up to advertising better than the lamb, helps herself to a normal-sized bite.

"Forgive me for not donning tails and white tie to be punched in the jaw by Lord Grantham."

Richard's cross expression turns to a cringe as he washes down his meat with a drink of wine, the dry acidity of which no doubt stings his split lip, and Mary's amusement wavers as this draws her attention to the bruise darkening on his chin beneath the pale red-gold stubble of his day's growth of beard.

"Your jaw looks painful," she asks. "Do you need to have it looked at?"


"In other words, he didn't mete out the same punishment you dealt poor Evelyn?"

He glances away and takes another sullen drink.
"It's just as well you didn't do him any serious damage. Not only because Evelyn was innocent, but you'd have his medical expenses and whatever suit he levelled against you, on top of the cost of this impetuous car purchase."

"Three hundred pounds." Richard draws out the syllables as he peers into his glass as he swirls the wine.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I paid that greedy bastard three hundred pounds for his Model T. He probably only paid half that when he bought it new in '08." Creases form at the corners of his eyes as he glances over his shoulder at her, smirking; clearly he knows that until this moment, she had no notion of the price of a car. "I hope I haven't offended your aristocratic sensibilities by discussing money in such blunt terms."

"After you put that substantial roll of bills on the proprietor's desk and asked him for his best available suite?"

Indeed, her composure was put to the greater test by Richard's clear inference that they would spend the night together in Ripon, giving their names as Mr and Mrs Richards. Which could only mean reconciliation was inevitable, couldn't it? Though he looked more amused than annoyed when she remarked, fishing for some concrete idea of his expectations, that they made such an odd couple--she in her evening attire, he not fully dressed in rumpled travelling clothes, that the innkeeper's wife must think they were in fact a gentleman's daughter and a chauffeur on their way to Gretna.

Now she asks, "Do you always carry sufficient funds to purchase automobiles and rent innkeepers' personal apartments?"

"You are unaccustomed to being in the company of people who carry funds at all, sufficient or otherwise." Richard's slightly mocking expression presses itself into the lines of consternated focus as he resorts to tearing the stubborn clinging fat off the lamb with his fingers. "As you can imagine, I left London in rather a frenzied state to find out who started the rumours for which I blamed Mr Napier."

"If only I'd been able to buy my way into a line of communication that could reach you," Mary says, setting her unappetising plate on the table beside her wing-backed chair, a blob of gravy glistening in the glow cast by the old-fashioned hurricane lamp. "I could have saved you a lot of bother. And money. Though--I do appreciate it. I'm glad you're here."

"But that is why I'm here." Richard swings his legs over the edge of the settee, swivelling to face her as he sits upright. "When Diana told me it was Edith who wrote that you'd engaged in illicit extramarital activities..." Their eyes lock as he pronounces the damning phrase; though Mary flushes all over, she can't avert her gaze. ". . . I had no intention of going to Downton and being made a fool of again. I planned to stay on at Belvoir and lose myself in the New Year's Eve revels. Diana's Coterie were all there--Raymond Asquith and Duff Cooper, you remember him from the Cave..."

He rambles on about the guest list, which Mary cannot hear over the irrational rumble of a certain green-eyed creature who inhabits her mind, despite the reality that Richard is not currently revelling in the New Year at that den of iniquity.

"But when I woke this morning," the rasp of his voice catches her attention, drawing her out of herself and back to him, "I had a telegram from Miss Fields. That you needed me."
And he came.

As he always would have done, she knows in the depths of her, more certainly than she has ever known anything. The moment she asked him to.

If only she'd not been too proud to ask.

He doesn't wait for her to ask him to stand and step around the coffee table to her. Her pulse beats against the veins and the skin of her wrists in an instinctive reaction against his domineering stance, but she remains seated, conceding the advantage of position. Why she does so, she cannot say; she folds her hands suppliantly in her lap, but the jut of her chin as she peers up at him is not precisely submissive.

"You doubted me," Richard says. "I am unclear as to what action on my part gave you cause to do so, but the fact remains that you did."

His eyes, which seem to be carved beneath the ridge of his brow due to the fairness of the lashes that frame them, widen slightly as his nostrils flare with an indrawn breath. Reining in his emotions. And his words.

"Let me reassure you that I still want to marry you," he says. "If that is what you want. And if you can meet me and build our house on a foundation of truth. Even one lie, Mary, will bring it all crashing down."

"I've already lied." She stands, as if she is a defendant rising to plead her guilty case, though she has no intention of pleading, or even of defending herself. Only of admitting the truth. "I am pregnant."

He has to have known it was coming--this shameful condition, Papa announced to everyone with ears to hear--yet the blow of her confession seems to strike Richard harder than the punch he took earlier. She hears the puff of the breath he releases, sees the fall of his shoulders, the slight rock of his frame with the shifting of his weight, as though he is wrong-footed. The lines of his face slacken in surprise, and his eyes... She just glimpses the downward tug at the corners before he turns his back to her.

Good. He cannot look at her because he is too angry. When he strides away, through the open doorway adjoining the parlour into the darkened bedroom, Mary watches with a rush of relief through her. Richard's anger may last for a moment, but that wounded look...

However, after she has given him a moment to collect himself and follows him to the bedroom, she stops short in the doorway, grasping for the moulding, at the sight of him.

Seated at the edge of the bed. Hunched with his elbows on his knees. Eyes fixed on the toes of his socks.

He seems to be taking it all in, and Mary waits, unmoving, in the doorway for his response, but Richard keeps silent. The space between them seems to be full, packed with something thick and muting, which makes the room, the adjoining parlour, even the pub below stairs, seem unnaturally quiet. Aren't confessions meant to clear the air? Instead, hers seems to have made everything worse.

A chime from the mantel clock in the sitting room--the quarter-hour, just gone ten--makes her start, though Richard does not so much as flinch on the bed. If the truth is to set them free, then Mary can
see she must be the one to cut through the layers of lies and silence that enshroud them.

She pushes off the door frame, the Louis heels of her black evening shoes clunking heavily, resonant, in her ears, on the worn planks as she treads slowly across the room to him. As she lowers herself onto the patchwork quilt beside him, Richard doesn't move even to cast a sidelong glance at her, though his shoulder does brush against hers as her added weight tilts the balance of the mattress, springs squeaking in protest.

"I should have told you long before now," she says. "As soon as I suspected. But I--" She catches herself, watching her fingers pick at a loose gold thread in one of the sunbursts embroidered on the sheer black overlay of her gown. "I will make no excuses for myself. There are none."

"Ah, but there are." Richard's voice scratches out, as low as she's ever heard it, the remarkable calm of it frightening. "So many excuses, which you'd be fully within your rights to make."

The bed frame creaks again as Richard shifts, continuing to lean on one elbow as the other hand rests heavily on her shoulder; his fingers curl but lightly around it, though the span of them gives the illusion of a firm grip.

"You are very young," he says, "and very sheltered. It can't be easy for a young woman like you to recognise she is pregnant, much less to contemplate the ultimate ruination of being found in that condition, without a husband."

His grip does tighten around her shoulder now, and Mary's throat constricts in response, choking out any words she might have tried to utter in the pause. Richard turns, slightly, his knee pressing into the side of her leg as he draws her to face him.

"But that's the funny thing, Mary. You would have had a husband. Even with those rumours circulating in London, and your father's inevitable disapproval..." He lifts his other hand to rub his bruised jaw; holding her breath, Mary hears the scratch of his stubble against the callused pads of his fingers. "...I never would have abandoned you."

"I know that now," Mary says, her heart trembling in her chest as she hears the subtle change in his voice, the slight unsteadiness as his control slips.

As if to cling to it, he clutches both her shoulders. "Why didn't you know it then? Why did you doubt me? What reason did I give you? Is this all because I left you to break that goddamn story about Kemal Pamuk?"

"I was angry with you for that--at first--" 

"I'll concede I was insensitive to leave you like that, but that in your eyes it made a liar of me..." His fingers press into the soft parts of her arms beneath her shoulders. "After you asked me to be with you..."

"That's it, Richard. You were my choice. I wanted to be yours."

"You were!" He shakes her. "Of all the women in that ballroom last May--I wanted to kiss the one in black. I chose you--long before there was any question of it being necessary to do so. Except that you were necessary to my happiness."

"Then why didn't you tell me you loved me?"
As her voice echoes in the room, Richard's mouth opens in retort, but no words come out. Hands still on her shoulders, he grasps them harder before his fingers release her and he sits back from her at the edge of the bed. Beneath his open waistcoat his chest rises and falls beneath his shirt with the exertion of their quarrel. He draws a deep breath and then lets it out, slowly, before he speaks again.

"Didn't I?"

"Never absolutely."

He seems to accept this as the truth, but he turns away from her, the lines of his face deepening contemplatively as his fair eyebrows twitch in confusion. "I thought..." He ruffles the hair at the back of his head, squeezing the ends between his fingers, before his hand falls once more to his lap. "Actions speak louder, surely--"

"For most people. But you always mean what you say. So I thought--"

"--that what I didn't say must not be true," Richard completes the thought for her.

"I've been such a fool," says Mary, looking up at the cracked plaster of the ceiling.

"I've been a bigger one." He hunches forward on his elbows again, scuffing his hand over his unshaven cheek and chin, wincing as he rubs the forgotten tender bruise. "All of this was unnecessary. We could have spared ourselves everything.... If only we were both better at saying what we mean."

"It's not too late, is it?" Mary's eyes flick downward again, to the ends of Richard's hair which curl down into the back if his loosened collar with his bent neck. She cannot resist touching them, so fine and golden, with the occasional strand of silver, in the dim light of the bedside lamp. "We've meant all we said just now, haven't we?"

Her hand curls around his neck, fingers slipping into his shirt, pressed against the flutter of his pulse as he turns to look at her over his shoulder, eyes gleaming bright as they fix on her lips.

"Every word," he says, and he kisses her.

It's a gentle kiss, scarcely more than a brush of his lips across hers, and not at all what Mary expects under the circumstances and given how Richard has kissed her in the past. Cautious, almost, if she must describe it. When he reaches up to cup her cheek in his broad hand she leans against the roughened warmth of his palm, parting her lips slightly. But instead of deepening the kiss as his other hand cradles her chin, her own smaller hands covering them, he draws back, peering into her eyes with a clear steady gaze that speaks to her not so much of caution, but of warning. The pads of his fingers curl into her cheekbones and jaw.

"You must never lie to me, Mary. Never again."

"I swear it." He leans in, presumably to kiss her again, but Mary presses her forehead against his, and her hands slide down to clutch his wrists, holding him back from her. "But Richard, you must say--"

"I love you," he rasps, and Mary yields to him, so that the words seem to be a breath that fills her as he murmurs them against her lips. "My god, I love you."
Then his arms snake around her waist, pulling her firmly into his lap; he angles his head to kiss her more aggressively, pushing his tongue between her lips. There is a desperation to the manner in which he seeks her tongue with his own, though not fuelled exclusively by lust as she sensed when he sneaked into her room on Christmas Eve with the intention of claiming the promised tryst from November, and Mary opens to him without hesitation, hooking her fingers behind his neck. She surrenders to his warmth, to his solid strength: the lean muscled thighs beneath her, arms like ropes binding her to his firm body as the world as she's always known it spins and unravels into a place that is altogether foreign.

Or perhaps it is not the world that's changed but her, the scales falling away from her eyes. She closes them and sees him kissing her cheek on Aunt Rosamund's doorstep, on her lips on the veranda at Claridge's, in Papa's library during a thunderstorm. When Richard confessed a lonely heart and she a betrayed one, and both learned the power each had over the other.

All was open between them, then, and now she even tastes the lingering metallic tang of blood on his cracked lower lip before his mouth leaves hers to kiss her chin and along her jaw, the downward path moving down her throat.

Richard lowers her back onto the lumpy mattress, the indentations of the publicans pressed permanently into it, as he slips out from beneath her to stretch his frame out over hers, supporting his weight with elbows pressed tight against her arms. Mary threads her fingers through the fine greying hair at his temples, and his hand moves absently over the sunburst pendant that rests there before wandering lower to curl over her breast. He rocks slightly to one side of her, one knee slotting between her legs, nudging them apart as the hand not occupied with her breast hitches up her skirt and petticoat; the satin and its sheer overlay are hardly warm winter wear, but gooseflesh prickles up beneath her stockings at the sudden absence of the layers--and Richard's sensuous caresses. A hardness against the v of her thighs alerts her to his state of arousal.

She whispers his name, her hands in his hair flatten over his scalp, coaxing him to raise his head to look at her. "I don't know if we should..."

His chest rises and falls rapidly against hers as he catches his breath, and he blinks and a haze seems to clear from his eyes. They dart down to the hand on her breast, and Mary glimpses the telltale furrow of disappointment between his eyebrows. He starts to withdraw his hand, muttering an apology; she covers it with her own, clasping his palm to her chest.

"That is to say," she clarifies, "I've been on bed rest this week."

"Bed rest?" Richard's grip tightens around her hand, the lines of his face seeming to clench inward, too. "Because of the pregnancy? You've had difficulty?"

His eyes search hers, but Mary glances away, self-conscious, as she pushes herself more upright on her elbows, scooting gingerly back to lean on the thin pillows propped against the rickety headboard.

"A little bleeding." She flushes as her gaze is drawn once more to meet Richard's, though he appears unfazed by this indelicacy. It is, after all, the truth.

But not the whole truth.

"It began after I rode to hounds on Boxing Day," she confesses, hastening to add, "though Dr Clarkson says it's not unusual in the early days, and that I couldn't have caused it."
"Of course not." Richard brings her hand to his lips, and sits up, his expression still anxious. "But you're all right now? The baby? And here I've dragged out improperly dressed through the ice in a Ford with worn-down springs."

"I'm fine," Mary reassures him as he settles beside her against the pillows, enfolding her in his arms and kissing the top of her head. "Better than I've felt in weeks, actually. Dr Clarkson gave me clearance this morning to resume my usual light activities. But making love might perhaps be considered undue exertion."

"You mean you didn't ask?"

"I can't imagine he'd have told an unmarried woman that engaging in sexual relations is safe."

"What harm could it do? You're already pregnant."

Mary tilts her face up to him, but it's difficult to maintain a disapprovingly arched eyebrow with the low rumble of his chuckle against her back.

"Do you think...?" he begins when their laughter has faded, but breaks off abruptly; after a moment's hesitation, he changes tacks. "Of course I'll abide by whatever the doctor deems necessary to keep you both safe, but...Will we have to wait until after the baby is born to--?"

"Heavens, I hope not." She supposes she'll have to ask, and what an awkward conversation that will be. "I should like to enjoy our honeymoon properly."

To emphasise the point, Mary leans her head back to kiss the curve at the base of his jaw, where the strong stubbled line meets smooth skin scented faintly with the lingering musk of shaving lotion and cologne. His mouth tilts with a slow grin.

"I want to take you to Paris," Richard says, and kisses her.

"You've got it all planned out, have you?"

"I have." His dimples show as he draws back, combining with his dishevelled hair and clothing, the cuffs of his trousers riding up to reveal his stocking feet, to make him look rather boyish. "Although I confess my daydreams never imagined Paris in the dead of winter. But the hotel has central heating, so it won't matter."

Richard and his central heating. "I'm sure you never planned on a baby, either," she says. "Do you mind much?"

"Believe it or not," Richard says, giving her an encouraging squeeze, and a smile, "I'm very fond of children. I have three nephews and an infant niece."

"Your brother's children? George?"

Richard nods, seemingly pleased at her memory of the brother he mentioned once. Soon, she supposes, she will meet the family he's spoken so little of. Will they take the news of her pregnancy as badly as her own family?

"And I can believe it," she says. "You're so indulgent of Sybil."
"I'm not sure I like what you're implying about my age. Or my carefully established reputation as a ruthless man of business."

"I dreamt you put her to work in your office. The baby, not Sybil. Miss Fields and Miss Dawson were teaching her to be a secretary."

"It's not such a terrible idea, you know, for children to learn practical skills, cultivate a work ethic. They'll be heirs to a business empire, after all."

He chuckles, and Mary again enjoys the vibration of it as she rests her head on his shoulder, and the relief at how accepting—even welcoming—he is of impending parenthood—one of them should be—and that banter is once more a part of their relationship. Though part of her worries he's not joking about putting their child to work. Before she can ask whether he means it, his chin brushes her temple as he leans around to catch her eye.

"You dreamed we had a girl? A daughter?"

"It was more of a nightmare, actually. I shouldn't like to set any store by it." Yet the nervous fluttering inside her changes to a quick strong beating heart when she looks up and sees a smile on his face that can only be described as an expression of hopeful delight. "You'd let a female child inherit the newspaper empire?"

Richard shifts them so that they lie facing each other on the bed, legs tangling together. His fingers stroke a loose lock of hair back from her face.

"Whether we have one child or ten," he tells her, without a trace of irony in his voice or expression, as if he's making a business agreement, "they'll have an equal share of everything, regardless of sex. I can give you that."

Mary doesn't miss his slight emphasis on the word I, or the inferred dig at Papa. Nevertheless she snuggles against him, burrowing her face into the soft poplin of his shirt to hide her face as it screws up against emotion—although her whispered thank you surely betrays her.

When she has swallowed the lump in her throat, she adds, "I think I'd prefer it if you don't give it to me ten times."

"I should have taken precautions." Richard massages circles her shoulder blades, bared by her low-backed evening gown. "The thought did cross my mind, but I never imagined one time would yield...results."

"It's in-character for you, though, isn't it? To get a thing done the first time?" Richard smirks, but scuffs his thumb tenderly over her cheekbone. "We can be more careful in the future, you know."

She doesn't know, but daren't ask. Another thing to ask Dr Clarkson, she supposes. Does Mama know? Or Aunt Rosamund? For the first time, she wonders if her aunt chose not to have children. She and Uncle Marmaduke avoided having a baby on the way prior to the wedding, after all, and now she thinks of it, Rosamund isn't exactly the most maternal woman she's ever known.

Neither, of course, is Mary. Not wanting Richard to outdo her too much in the department of parental instinct, she says, "We'll see if I share your fondness for children. I've never been around any to
know. Not since I was a child myself. Though in the interest of full disclosure, I don't much enjoy childbearing so far. I've been frightfully ill...

"That day at Fortnum's. God, I'm so sorry."

"It's an effective diet, though Dr Clarkson assures me I'll gain all the weight back, and then some. Eating for two. In future you may not have any interest in the sort of activities that require precautions."

"I highly doubt that," says Richard, loosening his embrace just enough to peep appreciatively down at the swell of her breasts, clearly noting they have grown. The hand at her waist sweeps down over her bottom. "I could teach you to box, so you can stave off the affects of childbearing whilst I wage war on middle age."

"Can't you find a form of exercise that doesn't present such a danger to your face?" Mary touches his chin, gingerly. "Like riding?"

"Where I'm only in danger of breaking my neck?"

"I hear it's the sort of headline that sells a lot of newspapers."

Richard glowers, but the creases at the corners of his eyes and mouth tug into a smile instead as he twines his fingers through hers. "We're in this together."

"Maintaining our svelte figures?" Mary again staves off rising emotion, wondering if Richard does the same when he replies, "What else?"

He kisses each of her knuckles, lingering on her fourth finger, remarking that he'll have to get her an engagement ring. Mary starts to remark that it's not really the thing for her lot, but bites her tongue, saying, with a glance down at her pendant, that she looks forward to more of his good taste in jewellery.

As they lie in each other's arms in bed, the implication of his statement gradually dawns on her.

"It won't be much of an engagement, will it, as it's only a few hours' drive to Gretna?"

"Who says we're eloping?"

Mary props herself on one elbow, moonlight on the bed in lacy patterns through the yellowed curtains, beyond which chimes the clock from a nearby church. "Wasn't that your intention when we jumped into your new old car and drove north? You asked me to elope at Christmas."

"Our new old car," Richard corrects her. "And that offer is now off the table. As for intentions...I intend for everyone to know I married you because I wanted to, not because I had to. I intend to do things properly." At her arched eyebrows, he grins. "For once."

Beyond the window, the village clock chimes the hour, half a beat out of synch and a step out of tune with the one on the mantel in the parlour. Counting twelve, Mary says, "Is that your New Year's Resolution? To do everything properly in 1913?"

Richard's eyes reflect the moonlight as Mary lies down again beside him, tilting her face in for a kiss. "Well--maybe not everything."
The Arrangements

Chapter Summary

The wedding is inevitable, but as plans get underway, will Mary have the full support of her family?

January 1913

"I'm in the bath!" Mary calls out at the rattle of the bathroom door handle. It turns anyway, despite her making her presence known; she rolls her eyes and lolls her head on the high curved back of the tub, toward of the door so that whoever has decided to interrupt her ablutions will be greeted by her expression of intense irritation.

"Carson just told me you came back." Mama appears unperturbed by Mary's glare--or even to notice it--as she blusters to the tub, lifts Mary's left hand from where it dangles over the porcelain, and inspects it her fingers. "You're not married."

"Why should you expect me to be?" Mary asks, pulling out of her mother's grasp, though she knows perfectly well why, having climbed into Richard's recently acquired Model T with the same expectation. Not that she isn't pleased with how the events actually transpired.

"Because you drove off with Richard...You stayed out with him all night...We assumed you'd run off to Gretna...Your grandmother and I almost convinced Papa it was all for the best, and that Richard would at least be able to keep the scandal out of the papers..."

"On the contrary," Mary says, smirking, even though she knows it's cruel to mock Mama's distress, "I think Richard means our wedding to be the story of the decade."

"Well what did you do last night, if not get married?"

"We spent the night in Ripon. At the Hare and Hounds."

"Oh Mary." Mama sits down heavily on a towel folded on the bench at the foot of the bathtub, facing Mary. "After all the drama, you stayed at an inn with man you're not married to? So close to home? Where you might have been recognised?"

"Richard gave them false names. And rather more money than room and board should cost."

Mary lathers her sponge with the lilac scented soap she can bear the smell of again and rubs it over her arm, though her air of unconcern is difficult to affect in light of Mama's expression changing from the exaggerated mask of bug-eyed horror to a frown of disappointment.

"As you said," she goes on, with a touch of contrition, "on the small chance that there's a scandal he'll be able to keep it out of the papers. We had a lot to sort out. Including setting a wedding date."

Mama closes her eyes as she tilts her face upward. "Thank the Lord."
"The thirteenth of February," Mary says. "Assuming Richard can get the church, but there's very little he can't do with a few bills pressed into the right hands."

"Not the fourteenth?" The blue eyes pop wide open. "Only Valentine's Day would be so very romantic."

Mary can't restrain her smirk--nor does she try; she predicted this reaction, and laughed over it with Richard over breakfast in bed at the pub. "Richard and I aren't very romantic, I'm afraid. And really, would you want us to put the wedding off one day longer?"

Getting up from the bench, Mama catches Mary's eye and says in all seriousness, "I should go warn Richard to put off running into your father until after the guns are locked up again from the shoot, or he's liable to find himself shot for New Year's Day."

Though Mary scoffs at her mother's clichéd hyperbole, her eyes widen in a near approximation of one of Mama's faces when Papa stalks into the drawing room at teatime, the acrid odour of gunpowder still clinging to the shooting tweeds he hasn't bothered to change out of, and the expression with which he regards Richard, seated beside her on the pale pink jacquard sofa, seemingly unchanged from the previous night's encounter.

"For heaven's sake, Robert, you can stop glowering," says Granny, presiding over the tea table from her favoured armchair, as if she is the Countess of Grantham still and not merely the Dowager. "It seems you and Sir Richard share an opinion at last."

"Not of himself, I shouldn't imagine."

"Papa!"

Mama hastily pours a cup of tea and offers it to him. "He didn't think an elopement was in Mary's best interests."

She retreats to her chair as Papa accepts the tea. He brings the cup to his lips, eyes hard and small in his round face and trained on Richard.

"Oh?" he says, tightly. "That does make two of us."

"Everything is settled," Richard says. His tones are measured, but the smile he gives Mary reassures her that he intends no trouble with Papa. He wipes sandwich crumbs from his fingertips on the lace-edged serviette spread across his lap and takes her hand, giving it a squeeze. "I'm pleased to say that Mary and I are engaged to be married. As soon as the arrangements can be made for a proper wedding."

"As proper as can be with a most improper little third party present."

"Granny--"

"Everything may be settled between you and Lady Mary," Papa says, setting his teacup in its saucer with a clink that makes Mama jolt and regard her wedding china with alarm, "but you have yet to settle things with me."

"If you mean I require your permission, I'm quite happy to ask for it now."
A little more tension creeps into Richard's voice, matching the tightening of his grip around Mary's hand. Abruptly, his fingers uncurl from around it. He places his serviette on the tea table and pushes up from the sofa, giving Mary another smile before he turns to Papa—though not without her noting the deliberate twitch at the corners, the hard line of his jaw, the slight flare of his nostrils as he draws a breath.

"It may ease your mind, Lord Grantham, to know that before...everything...I did imagine the scenario of how I would petition for Lady Mary's hand."

"I assume you never imagined I would not grant my permission."

The difference in the two men's height is so slight as not to exist; as Richard slips his hands into his trouser pockets, he draws back his shoulders and lifts his chin so that he seems to look down on Papa.

"You assume wrongly. I've wanted to marry your daughter for months, but I knew you wouldn't consent to an engagement. I planned to wait until I gained your approval."

"As you waited to engage in acts reserved for marriage? No, sir, it seems more likely this was all part of a nefarious plan to give me no more choice to accept you than you gave her."

"It was my choice!"

Mary rattles the tea things as she scrambles to her feet, off-balance, and knocks her shin against the low table before the sofa. Richard's hand catches her arm, steadying her. She shoots him a grateful look, wrapping her other hand around his bicep, flexed beneath his dark suit, and he glances down at her with much the same expression before he returns his attention to Papa.

"Nefarious." Richard's mouth curls around the word as he repeats it, drawing out the pronunciation.

"Oh dear," Granny says, shaking her head. "I'm afraid he took that as a compliment."

"You are not being helpful," hisses Mama, but Richard's smirk deepens.

"My nefarious schemes are generally more foolproof than this scenario might have played out. As it is..." His voice softens, as do the lines of his face as he looks at her again. "I imagined saying to you, with the utmost of sincerity, that I admire and respect Lady Mary more highly than any other lady I've ever known. I would be honoured to have her for my wife, if you will give us your blessing."

Papa huffs and rubs his fingers across his forehead, considering the teacup in his other hand for a moment with as much disdain as he previously regarded Richard, clearly wishing it was something else. He takes a drink, anyway, then says, "Very well, then. Permission granted. But do not consider it an honour bestowed on a worthy suitor."

"Believe me, Lord Grantham, I don't." Richard pauses, giving Papa just time to look smug about the deference, before adding, "My view of marriage is rather a modern one."

"Indeed," Papa's reply comes through tight lips, as if to stop himself from deflating, though his broad shoulders sag. "Alas," he says, squaring them again as he takes a step nearer to Richard and imitates the jut of the pointed chin, "my views of engagements are decidedly old-fashioned. Therefore I am afraid my conscience will not allow me to play host to you prior to the wedding."
"Papa!" Mary says at the same time as Mama cries out, "Robert!"

"If business brings you to Downton during that time," he barrels on, as if no one interrupted, indeed, as if there is no one in the drawing room but him and Richard, whose face has gone very red around thin pale lips, "you will have to seek accommodations at the Grantham Arms."

At Granny's snort, however, Papa's gaze drifts over Richard's shoulder, his own face flushing and flickering with an almost boyish shame under his mother's reproof. "That's locking the stable door after the horse has bolted, don't you think?"

"But Mama," he argues, reinforcing Mary's notion that his behaviour is childish, indeed, and destroying the remotest inclination she might have had to sympathise with his paternal plight, "surely you agree that under the circumstances, a church wedding will be nothing short of farcical? Let's not make a complete mockery of holy wedlock, and ensure things are at least kept chaste, shall we?"

"I assure you, Lord Grantham, that I will not lay a hand--"

"You needn't bother attempting to convince me of your trustworthiness," Papa cuts him off, reaching across to set his teacup on the table. "There is absolutely no chance of your succeeding."

"You needn’t pay for a bed, either, Sir Richard," Granny says, her voice heavy with exasperation. "You may stay at the Dower House."

"Who's staying at the Dower House?"

They all turn to see Aunt Rosamund, changed from her shooting attire into a flowing forest green velvet tea gown that sets off her russet curls, slip through the drawing room doors.

Granny purses her lips. "On second thoughts, I'm not entirely certain I trust Rosamund in the house with you."

Regarding her a little askance, Richard tugs at the cuffs of his shirtsleeves beneath the hem of his jacket. "Thank you, Lady Grantham, for your warm welcome into the family, but I'm catching the evening train to London anyway. If we're to pull off a society wedding in six weeks, I'll need to secure St Paul's and the Ritz."

"St Paul's and the Ritz!" splutters Papa as Richard places his hand on Mary's where it still rests in the crook of his arm, and moves to quit the room. They pause to acknowledge the outburst.

"Be glad she's not marrying your heir, Lord Grantham. None of the bills will go to you."

Despite his having got the last word, and looking rather more pleased about it than perhaps he ought to as they leave the drawing room together, Mary can't stop picturing his white-lipped anger or flush of mortification, or feeling the twinge of his muscle beneath her fingers.

"I'm sorry you're not getting a more amiable father-in-law," she says a bit later, as they wait in the vestibule for Taylor to bring the Model T from the garage so Richard can drive himself to the station. "Give him some time. He'll come around. Perhaps after the baby comes."

Richard raises his brows beneath the brim of his trilby. "When he has a tangible reminder of my sexual misconduct with his daughter?"
Mary looks down at her shoes, frowning. She hadn't thought of that.

"It's all right. I can take it. If I curled up and wept over not having the approval of men like the Earl of Grantham, I wouldn't have acquired the top floor office in the Daily Telegram building."

The scuff of shoes on the floor draws Mary's gaze to Richard's polished black boots stepping almost toe to toe with her. She sees his briefcase thump softly onto the rug as his arm encircles her waist, pulling her hips closer against his than is strictly proper, even for an engaged couple, his shaven cheek smooth against hers.

"Though I wish I did have it, for your sake," he murmurs, and brushes his lips over her temple. "I promise to try very hard for amicable relations."

Mary bites her lip to stifle a *hmm* in response to the light warm trail of kisses he makes down the side of her face, his breath tickling her neck when he lingers to nuzzle at her earlobe. Grasping the heavy lapels of his greatcoat, she turns her head to capture his mouth with hers. The sigh that escapes her lips when Richard tilts his head, however, changes to huff of annoyance as he stops just shy of deepening the kiss to continue the conversation instead.

"Especially since there's very little chance of you having an amicable relationship with your mother-in-law."

He leans in to resume the interrupted kiss, but now it is Mary who resists. She pushes back against his chest, her hands having slipped inside his coat, and lifts an eyebrow. "It seems you've withheld crucial information about Mrs Carlisle in order to secure our engagement."

His chuckle rumbles against her hands and through her chest as his long fingers span her back, pressing her tighter to him. "Your Papa wasn't wrong when he accused me of having a nefarious plan," he says.

And if Mary has any notion of interrogating him further on the subject of his mother, Richard distracts her most effectively with his kiss.

~*~

At least one relation is amenable to her forthcoming marriage not merely because of its necessity, but because of who it is to, Mary thinks the next morning when her entrance to the dining room for breakfast is greeted with Sybil rushing over in a blur of smiles and streaming hair ribbons from where she has been leaning over Papa's chair against his protestations.

"Mary! Your engagement's been announced in this morning's Times!"

That certainly explains Papa's unusual irritation at her reading over his shoulder.

"Right across the page from Lady Strallan's obituary," says Edith, retreating into her teacup, though not before Mary glimpses her wrinkled nose.

Mary rolls her eyes, but otherwise ignores her middle sister as she allows the younger to grasp her
hand and tug her toward Papa's chair. "I shall have to walk into the village later and pick up a copy of the Telegram to save. Richard would never let me hear the end of it if I kept the Times version for my scrapbook."

"For heaven's sake," says Papa, leaning to one side in his chair as Mary bends to read over his shoulder. "Where do all of you come by this vexing habit?"

She's vaguely aware of Sybil's wispy tones tweaking him about how it wouldn't be a problem if he kept his subscription to the Telegram, and of the clang of the telephone in the hall--and, in her periphery, Carson leaving his station at the sideboard to step out and answer it--as her eyes rake over the item. The bold black typeset seems almost to glare off the newsprint in the first brilliant morning light they've had in days, which breaks and scatters through the coating of frost that has only just begun to melt from the windowpanes.

The engagement is announced between Lady Mary Josephine Crawley, eldest daughter of the Earl and Countess of Grantham, and Sir Richard Carlisle, son of Mr and Mrs Mark Carlisle of Morningside, Edinburgh. The wedding is to occur on the thirteenth of February, 1913, at St Paul's Cathedral in London.

She reads it over at least a half a dozen times before she actually takes in all the words in their entirety, and once she has, probably would another half a dozen times as excitement starts to take hold, when Papa's voice echoes her thoughts--though not her mood.

"This is really happening," he says, posture wilting.

"My wedding, or Maud Strallan's funeral?"

Papa starts to turn in his chair, but his attention, along with Mary's, is drawn by Carson's sonorous tones as he chooses that moment to re-enter the dining room.

"Pardon the interruption, my lord, but Sir Richard Carlisle is on the telephone for Lady Mary."

"At this hour of the morning?" Papa seizes upon the new complaint. "Honestly, it would have been less irritating if the man had stayed."

Mary hurries to the hall to avoid his rant, and Carson's eye, as well; what does he think about the news of her pregnancy? Does he protect her from the servants' gossip as Anna said he did when the rumours from London reached the servants' hall? Or is he too disappointed in her tarnished reputation to care for it as fastidiously as he does the silver?

Richard's voice crackling over the miles of telephone wire before she has scarcely spoken her greeting into the mouthpiece, provides a most welcome distraction.

"I've secured St Paul's," he says, without preamble, and Mary leans back against the telephone table and lets out her breath. "And the Ritz for the breakfast and the ball."

His eagerness is unmistakable, even amid the static of the still uncertain connection, and Mary grins--though she presses her lips together, as if to conceal her own giddiness.

"So I assumed when I read it in the paper," she replies, her tone restrained, as well. "Tell me--are newspapers always to precede my hearing anything from you? Evelyn Napier, now this?"
"Of course not. Do you think I'd allow the *Times* to be read in my house? Good morning, by the way."

It ought to annoy her that his greeting comes as an obvious afterthought once the business is concluded, but it's so quintessentially Richard. She can just see him: previously hunched over the imposing oak desk in his vast brownstone office overlooking the city, demanding the necessary parties accommodate his wedding plans just he deals with business associates, now leaning back in his swivel chair, cradling the receiver of his more modern telephone between his neck and shoulder, perhaps the fingers of the other hand wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee just brought in by Miss Fields. The smile stretches across her face till her cheeks ache, and she no longer tries to hide it, hugging the microphone against her as she speaks into it, as if doing so will bring him into closer contact.

In just six short weeks, she will be there with him, away from all this.

"Good morning," she returns, her voice low as she remembers saying the words to him the previous morning, when they woke together at the Hare and Hounds.

"And how did Lord Grantham take the engagement announcement?"

Mary glances back toward the dining room, but the door is shut, and no muffled voices sound behind it. "I only just came downstairs, and he hasn't said much. Edith, on the other hand, was very quick to remark on its having appeared opposite Lady Strallan's obituary. You remember Sir Anthony's wife, don't you? Maud. You sat beside her at dinner."

"Ah, yes. The funny woman. My condolences," he adds. "Ought I to come down for the funeral?"

"Do you mean will it ingratiate you to Papa?"

"I mean..." A creaking sound indicates the movement of his chair--perhaps as he hunches over his desk again, grinning at her suggestion that his mind operates in a diabolical fashion. "...that I'm looking for any excuse to come see you between now and the wedding."

"I imagine we'll be in town soon enough. To see about my wedding gown. And my trousseau."

"In that case, I'd best give the funeral a miss and go shopping for a ring."

"Will you take Frida along?" Mary can't resist teasing.

A brief pause, then: "Maybe."

She smirks, and he must picture it, because he chuckles low. But they do not laugh together for long--he must go for his nine o'clock appointment--so he tells her he'll phone again later, and she places the earpiece back on its hook, resisting another sentimental urge to let her touch linger on it, and returns to the dining room.

"What did he want?" asks Papa, not looking up from the paper as she goes to the sidebar.

"To wish his fiancé a good morning." Mary's frustration is underscored by the clanking of the serving dish lid as she checks the contents within and replaces it. With an apologetic glance up at Carson, she opens the next one more carefully, and spoons a generous helping of eggs onto her plate under the butler's approving gaze. "To let me know he finalised the venues."
Papa grunts, but Sybil says breathlessly, "You're really going to be married in St Paul's?"

"What a joke," mutters Edith.

Sybil shoots her a dark look, but beams at Mary as she lifts her glass of orange juice, as if in toast. "It's going to be marvellous. You might as well be marrying royalty, it's going to be so lavish."

"Lavish does not equal tasteful, Sybil dear," says Papa, and as Mary slips past Carson to go to her seat, she notes the tuck of his chins in what seems to be a nod of agreement.

"Oh, Papa," Sybil chides, "you sound just like Granny."

"She did raise him," Mary says, slipping into the empty place beside her little sister, who squeezes her hand beneath the table.

"As if you would ever allow anything in poor taste."

Edith eyes Mary over her teacup. "One might argue that falling pregnant out of wedlock is in very poor taste indeed."

"I'll hear no more of this bickering, girls," Papa says, rattling his *Times* as he folds the broadsheet and lays it aside. "Mary."

His eyes beckon hers down the table, and for the first time since he overheard her discussing the pregnancy with Mama, he looks at her without anger or accusation. Only confusion and...regret.

"Is this truly what you want? I don't mean Sir Richard, I mean this..." He casts about for a word, settling on, "...circus. It's a far cry from being queen of the county, with the villagers all turned out to wish the future countess all joy."

She looks down at her plate, her appetite vanishing as her stomach constricts. Though having been at odds as she's been with Papa for the better part of the past year, he has known her for the twenty that preceded it. He is quite correct; these are primarily Richard's ideas. She got swept away with him in that lumpy bed at the Hare and Hounds, teasing about letting him have the wedding of his dreams, whilst surprising him with the confession that she hardly gave any more thought to how she would marry than to whom she would be married. It was one more thing she took for granted. As Papa did.

"I hope I am not stepping out of line, Lord Grantham," says Carson, coming over to pour more tea, "but the villagers will wish Lady Mary all joy regardless of whether they see her paraded through the high street in a carriage, or read about a city affair in the newspapers. We shall always be proud of her."

His face blurs as Mary's eyes mist, her voice too choked with emotion to offer a word of thanks. Even when she has swallowed the lump in her throat along with her tea, she doesn't think she can speak to him without undue emotion.

Instead, she says, "In either case, we can be assured that my wedding will feature prominently in the society pages. As will everything I do from now on, so you'll have to get used to it. Let's leave the bunting and villagers strewing confetti to Miss Swire. They're much more suited to her, and St Paul's and the Ritz will make for a glamorous newspaper spread."
"Yes, but will it hey make you happy?" Papa persists.

"Funny," she says, scraping marmalade over her toast, "I don't recall you being so concerned about my happiness when you thought I might marry the Duke of Crowborough?" She takes a bite and, dabbing at a blob of sticky orange from the corner of her mouth, turns to her little sister. "Sybil, darling--will you be my bridesmaid?"

"Oh yes!" cries Sybil, clutching Mary's hand again.

"Shouldn't it be Edith?" asks Papa. "She is the eldest. Or can't you include both your sisters in your wedding party?"

"After she set the London gossips' tongues wagging about me?" Mary narrows her eyes at Edith, wondering what on earth her parents intend to do about her wrongdoing.

"As if I could stand up in support of Mary's flagrant immorality," Edith sniffs, drawing herself up as if she is more offended by Papa's notion of including her than by being overlooked. "We'll see if I even attend the spectacle at all."

"If you don't," Sybil flings at her, "it's only because you daren't show your face now that everyone knows what a jealous, spiteful little cow you are."

"None of you sounds mature enough to have anything at all to do with weddings," Papa interjects. "Or even to sit in this dining room as adults. You may all leave the table this instant."

He unfurls his Times as and hunches behind it as his three daughters rise to obey, and Mary imagines him as a younger man in his Army uniform, hunkering down beneath a barricade against enemy fire.

Amid the crunching of his toast, he mutters, "No wonder your mother always takes her breakfast in bed."
Chapter Summary

Mary and Richard are properly engaged and making inroads into each other's worlds. But will their past improprieties haunt them as London society has already caught the whiff of scandal?

28. The Engagement

Midday sun glares off the frosty London rooftops and the spire of St Paul's beyond Richard's office window. Still battling a lingering headache and slight nausea from the morning's train ride, Mary blinks against it and contemplates drawing the heavy green velvet draperies; Mama, on the other hand, seems unperturbed as she peers down at the street from four storeys up.

"This reminds me so much of my father's office," she says, resting her gloved hands on the window ledge. "Only instead of St Paul's, he had a riverfront view. I used to love to sit at his desk and watch the steamboats coming up and down the Ohio River, trying to guess which ones were bringing products for the store."

Ordinarily such bouts of nostalgia--admittedly infrequent--induce eye rolling from Mary, but today she welcomes Mama's soppiness with something like gratitude. Certainly this attempt at finding common ground with Richard is preferable to Papa's determination to cast him in the role of outsider as well as villain.

When Mama shared their plans for the London trip, in particular that Richard's chauffeur would collect them from King's Cross and drive them to the Telegram office where they would take luncheon, Papa asked, Is that why he took Gwen on as a secretary? To pencil his marriage in to his diary between meetings?

Of course this made Sybil irascible, and Aunt Rosamund, perhaps in part for the simple sake of annoying her brother, took up for men with careers: What Robert fails to see is that all brides fit themselves into their husbands' lives. If more marriages included secretaries, fewer wives would suffer the indignity of a forgotten anniversary. Why, I dare say Miss Thompkins was one of Marmaduke's most appealing attributes.

And Mama ceded that Grandmamma always spoke much the same way of Grandfather's Miss Brown. Only I frequently heard her add, "But thank god she was homely!"

"Your father was a dry goods merchant, I believe?" Richard says.

He gives Mary a quick smile and squeezes her fingertips before he releases her hand--which he took hold of the instant Miss Fields showed them into the office, letting go only so she could shake hands with the investor he was seeing out as they arrived--and leaves her side to join Mama at the window.
"My grandfather was." As Mama turns to him, clearly pleased to discuss her family history, it occurs to Mary how seldom any of their acquaintance inquire about her previous life in America--or if they do regard her as a curiosity--or eccentricity--rather than with the genuine interest Richard shows. "He emigrated to Cincinnati with nothing, but by the time he died he was running a successful shop. Then Father expanded it into a department store."

"The classic American rags to riches story."

"Indeed."

"I find it both admirable and relatable."

His brow furrows as his gaze drifts out the window, and Mary remembers the last time she was here-the first time-when they looked down on the boy selling newspapers on the corner and Richard told her the sight reminded him of where he came from, and where he had yet to go. Where will he go, with her at his side?

He looks up at Mama again, his hand going up in that unconscious gesture to smooth the curling hair above his collar.

"Only please don't tell my mother I said so," he adds. "She was something of a seamstress, and took great pains to see that we were never ragged."

Though Mama's smile doesn't falter, the subtle tilt of her head, the slight dimple between her eyebrows belying the questions that tumble beneath the politely serene veneer. She darts her eyes sideways as if to ask Mary whether she has any answers, but her knowledge of Mrs Mark Carlisle is nearly as piecemeal. In fact, all Richard has said about his mother--apart from the dire warning that she will make a difficult in-law--is that she sews and boils mutton and, presumably, like the family in general, is uncomfortable with his wealth and social position.

Perhaps his silence on the subject of his family should trouble her, but it doesn't. It's telling, she thinks, and strangely reassuring. Surely a lack of attachment from his own world must indicate that he means to fit himself into hers?

In any case, she'll meet the Carlisles soon enough, and see for herself everything Richard hasn't said.

"I'll have to bring my mother here." Mama steps away from the window and, as she moves around the side of the desk runs a hand over the surface, polished to a high oaky gloss. "She'll feel right at home."

"Mrs Levinson will be very welcome," Richard says. "Dad's already asked for a tour. He hasn't seen these particular facilities."

"I'm sure a printer will fully appreciate your Double Octuple Newspaper Presses," says Aunt Rosamund.

"We can make it a tour, with your mother," Richard goes on. "Perhaps she can inspire my brother with tales of Mr Levinson's stores."

"Is he a retailer as well?" asks Mama.

Richard snorts. "George would like to think so. He runs a small shop in Morningside. He does well
enough to support his family—if living in a few rooms above the store qualifies. But the business isn't what it could be. He lacks ambition."

Once again Mama seems unsure how to respond, glancing from Mary to Aunt Rosamund, though her expression indicates a silence borne not from awkwardness, but awaiting eagerly for him to continue. Her interest is piqued—as Mary cannot deny hers is—by his candid criticism of his family. No one of their kind of people would speak so in the company of his future in-laws.

Sybil gives him a sympathetic smile that looks astonishingly like Mama. "Perhaps George finds you a tough act to follow."

For once, her sweetness does not evoke an indulgent glance or soften the edges of his face. Richard doesn't ignore her, precisely, but goes on in the same vein as he began, as if schooling the young girl. Or perhaps schooling all of these sheltered highborn ladies.

"George's wife, Aileen, is a lovely woman, but she has rather...superstitious...notions about wealth. Her Presbyterian upbringing, perhaps. In any case she thinks just getting by is enough, which I find unfathomable in a mother of four." Richard catches Mary's eye and the corner of his mouth pulls upward at the corner, along with the brow above, as of to reassure her that their child shall never want—not that there was ever any question. "She doesn't want George chained to a desk, and he's only too happy to oblige her."

"That's not so unfathomable in a mother of four," Rosamund opines. "Especially one who doesn't have the help of nurses and nannies."

Her gaze is fixed on his hand resting on the edge of his desk; Richard withdraws it, slipping it into his pocket as he makes his way around the end of the desk to return to Mary.

"Oh, believe me, Lady Rosamund," he says, "one of the many credits I give my working class upbringing is knowing the value of a hands-on father. I may have looked on the Telegram as a child of sorts until now, but I know my children will be my most enduring legacy. They should—and shall—have my influence as well as my interest."

The hand not in his pocket goes around Mary's waist as he stands beside her, the heel of his palm resting firm against her hipbone as long fingers sweep over her abdomen in a bold and unapologetic acknowledgment of her condition. Heat prickles up from her belly, streaking colour through her neck and cheeks, though Mary isn't sure whether the reason is embarrassment or excitement at these notions of parenting her fiancé has. She's never heard anything quite like it, and though she's unimpressed enough with Papa's method of leaving child-rearing to women, she is nevertheless surprised at how much more thought Richard has given to the subject than she, when she was the one raised for no other purpose than to bear children. Preferably boys. And now not even that matters. She feels the weight of Richard's hand on her waist, the firmness of his side against hers, and wonders whether she isn't the one being squeezed into his world after all.

"What a modern view," says Sybil.

"Common, I should think," Aunt Rosamund says.

"Then I think I should like to marry a commoner," Sybil retorts.

Mary rolls her eyes, as much at her sister as at Richard's amusement. "Don't romanticise him."
"It must make your parents very proud," Mama interjects, looking rather flustered, "to see you embrace their values though you've moved up in the world."

"I hope it will."

Richard’s resonant tones, tinged with bitterness, fill the office, making the space seem less expansive than it is as his low voice rumbles through Mary as well. As intimately as they know each other, much remains to know about him. She has her guesses, of course, but she's learned a hard lesson about assumptions. Before she can give it further thought, he brightens, his hand relaxing about her waist.

"Perhaps Mary and I will visit Cincinnati someday. It's the commercial hub of the Midwest, I believe?"

Clearly he could not have said anything better to her, because Mama looks as delighted with Richard as Mary could hope her to be with any suitor. How many suitors deemed acceptable for an earl's daughter would take an interest in their mother-in-law's family history? Her heart gives a little twinge; the earl's daughters themselves haven't even taken an interest in their own mother.

"I'll go along," says Mama. "I haven't been back since I was married."

Mary glances up at Richard just in time to catch the slight narrowing of his eyes around the gleam that accompanies a wicked thought. Is it anything like the one that has just flickered through her mind, that she supposes Papa wouldn't want to be confronted with the business that generated the new money that propped up his own ancient, dwindling estate?

"My mother mostly keeps to Newport and New York, especially since Harold moved there," Mama's babbling breaks into Mary's musing again. "We could take the baby to see the Reds!"

"Who are the Reds?" asks Sybil. "Levinson family friends?"

"Heavens no!" Mama says, as though this is a grievous gap in her daughter's knowledge. "A professional baseball team. The Cincinnati Red Stockings."

"My child will see cricket matches, thank you very much," Mary says, in spite of her softening attitude towards her American heritage.

Thankfully, Mama seems to have been transported back there and doesn't react to the tweak. Or perhaps she's simply too accustomed to it to notice.

"I used to love those summer afternoons when Daddy would leave the office early to go to the game," she says. "Harold never cared for baseball, so I'd go along instead. I didn't have to dress for dinner and we ate bratwursts and he gave me sips of his beer."

"Why can't we ever do anything like that?" Sybil asks.

"If Mama and Richard really do take this little holiday," Mary tells her, "you can go in my place. I simply refuse to have anything to do with baseball or bratwursts."

"I will," Sybil says with a tilt of her chin. "And you can stay with Granny and pass judgments on Americans while we have a jolly time."
"Perhaps the American invasion for the wedding will warm her up to the idea," Richard says.

"Invasion is the word for it, where Martha and Harold Levinson are concerned," mutters Rosamund.

"Don't pay any attention to Aunt Rosamund," Sybil says. "Grandmamma and Uncle Harold and Aunt Ruby are such tremendous fun. I'm sure the girls are sweet, too. They were babies when we saw them before."

"But don't count on them warming me up to baseball games," Mary scoffs. "And anyway I'm not so like Granny. I'm very warm to the idea of our Parisian honeymoon, and she holds the French in much the same regard as the Americans."

Richard chuckles low, and Mary finds it difficult to feign annoyance as she feels the vibration of it as he draws her against him, bending kiss her hair.

"How many daughters did you say Harold has?" he asks. "I've forgotten your bridesmaid count."

"Three," Mary replies, as Sybil answers, almost on top of her, "Isodora, Ginevra and Virginia."

"Isodora's named for our father, of course," Mama says, "and Ginevra and Virginia are twins. Just two little peas in a pod, from the pictures Ruby sends."

"Peas with hair as red as carrots," Mary adds. "Grandmamma calls them Ginger One and Ginger Two."

"I can't imagine that causes sibling rivalry," Rosamund remarks.

Richard turns to face Mary more fully, regarding her with his head cocked. "Your mother and her brother each had three daughters."

"So they did."

His eyes leave hers to flicker down to her stomach, his thumb stroking over the wool of her coat. "A Levinson trait, would you suppose?" He speaks low, as if they are the only people in the office. "Didn't you dream about having a girl?"

It's not the first time he's brought it up, and Mary is starting to believe he is no longer merely accepting of the possibility of their child being female, but would even prefer it. Perhaps Papa is correct, that luncheons with her husband will be scheduled by secretaries between meetings; but Mary will be very pleased to bit fitted in to Richard's life in this world where sons are not necessary and daughters are wanted.

At the prick of tears evoked by the thought, she lifts an eyebrow. "I dreamt one girl. Not twins." She hastens to add, "Touch wood."

The lines of his face do harden at that, his eyes clouding with the same regret present the night they spent in Ripon, that their road to here, planning their wedding, needn't have taken such a desperately wrong turn. But Richard doesn't dwell on his mistakes--and thankfully not hers--and he moves back around his desk and slides open a drawer.

"As much value as I place on your approval, it's Mary's that counts. I think she expects a token of my romantic desperation slightly more traditional than a Model T. Even if the Ford is practically
vintage." Dimpling, he withdraws an object which his long fingers curl easily around, though Mary catches a glimpse of blue velvet before they conceal it. "Miss Fields will take you through to the board room for luncheon, if I may have a moment with Mary."

"Of course." Mama gives Mary a misty smile before she tucks her arm through Sybil's; Rosamund shows no such sentimentality.

"The board room. Now that's a place where I always felt I should belong."

"Invest in my publications, and you can."

When the office door clicks shut behind them--Miss Fields pulls it closed--Richard beckons to Mary, and she approaches, gaze trained on the hand holding the jewellery case with the expectation of seeing his fingers flip open the hinged lid to reveal the gleaming gemstone nestled on the satin pillow within. His hand does move, but the ring box remains clutched in his fist and digs into the small of her back as he puts his arms about her waist and draws her body flush against his, so tight that he lifts her up onto the balls of her feet as he presses his lips to hers. For an instant she toys with pushing him away and telling him she'll kiss him after he gives her the ring, in thanks, but he's stolen her breath. Anyway, wanting this is exactly why she sighed earlier when he pecked her chastely on the cheek in greeting in front of her family, so she traces her fingertips along the smooth line of his jaw and the fine hair swept back from his forehead and opens her mouth for a proper hello from her fiancé. Though even this is not enough to stop another sigh escaping her warm lips when he draws back after some minutes that still seem too few.

Lingering with his forehead against hers, Richard hmms. "If only I'd known that was the traditional token you expected, I wouldn't have gone to the trouble and expense of procuring an engagement ring for you to wear to our party tonight."

Party? When she spoke to him last night on the phone, all he said of tonight's plans was that they were invited to dine with Sir John and Lady Horner.

Without giving the matter further thought, she says, "We are still engaged then? What a relief. I was beginning to worry you were going to throw me over to buy up a chain of department stores and watch baseball with Mama."

"I prefer contact sport."

The rasp of his voice and the gleam of his eyes beneath his slightly dishevelled hair combines with the dimpling of his cheeks to make him look deliciously rakish. He gives her a squeeze, then in a smooth movement steps backward from her, disengaging her from his embrace, and opens the velvet box.

Before Mary can stop herself, her left hand flies up to cover her mouth. She knew he would choose a ring that would be the envy of all ladies of her station and a testament of all he has the means and power to provide for her. Leave it to Richard to not only push the bounds of good taste, but of her imagination, as well; never could she have dreamt an article of jewellery could be so accurate a representation of who he was. Who they were. We are not so very different, you and I. He's known that from the very beginning.

Intricate scrollwork engraved in the gleaming platinum band hints at the romantic, but her eye is drawn from those details by the contrasting right-angled geometry. Tiny diamonds twinkle in perfect lines on either shoulder of the band, even studding the sides and tops of the prongs that clasp the four
corners of the large square-cut central diamond. On closer inspection, she sees that the edges are bevelled in a stair-step, reminding her of the infinite reflection of two facing mirrors within each other.

_How appropriate_, Mary thinks, and swallows a knot in her throat.

"It's three and a half carats," Richard says, sounding husky himself. "In total. There are twenty diamonds. I hope you still think I show good taste in jewellery."

Mary's lips part against her fingertips. She feels the warmth of her own breath against them, though she can't get a word out. She manages a nod, at least, and Richard exhales, standing a little straighter with his renewed confidence.

"It certainly caught my eye. Much like the lady I intend to wear it."

She becomes aware, suddenly, of the callused pads of his fingers stroking the jut of her wrist bone; apparently he drew her hand from her mouth whilst she was still unaware. She quirks an eyebrow at him.

"Are you calling me dazzling and ostentatious?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of strong. And sharp."

"Well then, in that case..."

"Shall I put it on you?"

"Please."

His fingers uncurl from around her wrist to pluck the ring from its silken bed and set the box on the desk beside them, then return, warmer, to take her hand. She feels rather than sees the cool platinum wrap around her fourth finger, her eyes riveted to his face as he slides the ring on, so that she witnesses the smile of satisfaction as it settles there at the base of her knuckle. Only when he remarks that it suits her does she look down at her hand curled around his. She does like the look of it, though it fits a little loosely.

"We can have it sized, of course," Richard tells her. "Frida told me pregnancy can make the hands swell, so you might prefer to wait until--"

Mary cuts him off with a kiss, pulling away briefly to say, "I don't want to talk about being pregnant." She arches up toward him again. "I don't want to talk about anything."

Richard's murmured agreement against her lips brings the conversation to an end--with the exception of a mutter that might be an expletive when she inadvertently bites down on his lip, the momentum of him pulling free from her grasp to cup her face in both hands having pushed her against the edge of the desk. Her hip throbs where the corner bores into it, but she makes no attempt at sidestepping it to find a more comfortable position. Instead, prompted by his fingers slipping into the coils pinned so meticulously at the base of her neck, she hooks her fingers over the knot of his necktie where the backs of her curled fingers press against the tautness of his throat where she can feel the roll of his Adam's apple, the beat of his pulse as she draws the solid masculine planes of him heavier against her.
Before she closes her eyes the new diamond on her finger flashes in the sunlight. All hard edges and sharp lines, which once existed as little more than lumps of coal until the heat and the pressure turned them into these precious glittering unbreakable stones to which men and women aspire. His teeth rake over her lower lip, and she releases the button of his collar so that her fingernails may scratch over the hot hollow of his throat.

They've withstood much to achieve this, and though Mary cannot be sure it's made her a better woman, she has no doubt that she is a stronger one.

And they will shine.

~*~

"I thought this was to be a formal dinner with political friends?" Mary clings a little tighter to Richard's arm as he dips his head to hear her over the jazz music that blares over a phonograph somewhere in the drawing room to which Sir John Horner's butler escorted them.

"So did I," Richard says, darting a glance back over his shoulder into the hall through which they just came, more art gallery than entryway, electric lights strategically placed to beam down on numerous paintings. Pre-Raphaelites, Mary notes, and remembers some titbit stowed away in the recesses of her memory that their hostess, Raymond Asquith's mother-in-law, is an avid collector from a line of patrons of the arts as well as the Liberal party, her own father a Glasgowegian MP. "Lady Horner must have decided to make it more of a party after I asked Sir John if I might bring you along."

He takes a step to enter the drawing room, but Mary falls back, her hand slipping from the crook of his elbow as a heat floods her face that is not caused by the lighting. "You asked?"

"Sir John keeps telling me how keen they are to meet you." Richard spreads his hands open at his sides in a gesture of innocence that doesn't quite match the lines on his forehead which clearly state he doesn't see the problem. "I couldn't imagine how it would put Lady Horner out much to add one to her party."

"Have you forgotten the drama when I invited you to Downton without Mama's knowledge?" Apparently she forgot that there are reasons--however shallow--why her family objected to him as a suitor before they knew about Marconi or the other scandal he brewed in her bedroom. She does have her work cut out for her as his wife.

"It's an extra chair and place setting," says Richard.

The weight of annoyance in his tone increases his volume in the marble-tiled hall. A glance into the drawing room soothes Mary's jolt of alarm that they are creating a scene. She places her hand on Richard's arm again and gives his arm a squeeze to indicate they should join the party, though as they step through the open French doors, she continues the argument through her smile.

"Never add anyone to one of our dinner parties without my consent."

"I'm sure Sir John had Lady Horner's consent," Richard hisses back with a sharp exhale of exasperation.
"She could hardly say *No, dear, I won't have Sir Richard's fiancée to dinner, could she? Never put me in such a situation as hostess."

"What if my friends are as ill-bred as you think me and invite themselves over? Will you turn them away? Relegate them to sandwiches in the library?"

He takes a champagne glass from a passing footman's tray and thrusts it at Mary. She doesn't take it, eying it dubiously.

"As much as I'd like to take the edge off the prospect of unexpected future dinner guests, I shouldn't."

"You shouldn't drink it." He presses it into her hand in spite of her protests and takes another for himself. When the footman is out of earshot, he continues in a lower tone, "You *should* hold it--unless you want to confirm everyone's suspicions about why we're marrying six weeks after announcing our--"

"Engagement ring!"

They both turn their heads, though Mary knows who the shriek belongs to before she catches a glimpse of the figure who can only be described as pirouetting across the drawing room, wearing a poufy shepherdess-style gown of buttery yellow taffeta festooned with crimson netting about the waist and elbow sleeves, looking like nothing so much as a ballerina come to life from a Degas painting--which would not be unsurprising in this house.

"I have to see!" cries Diana Manners, gesturing with a graceful arc of her arm before catching Mary's free hand in both her own.

Mary performs quite the acrobatic feat not to slosh champagne onto her grey-green dress and shoes as Diana tears off her white satin evening glove, and draws her bared hand up close to her glassy near-sighted eyes for inspection.

"Blimey, it's gorgeous! And such a romantic story, what with Richard punching people and commandeering vehicles to fight your disapproving family for you. It ought to be a novel. Oh! Maybe I ought to *write it*!"

Alarmingly, Mary finds her hand caged against the rosette at Diana's bosom as the younger girl claps it to her chest in glee. She twists to look to Richard for help, but he watches the scene as if he's in the audience of a comical play.

"Though it'd just scandalize the socks off everybody!" Diana's giggle gives away to another squeal as she squeezes Mary's hand tighter to the jiggling swell of her breasts above the neckline of her gown, which has begun to slip down off one shoulder. "And to think I was the one who brought you together!"

"In the novel version?" Richard asks.

"Oh Richard, you darling tease!"

Perturbing as it is to hear Diana calling *her* fiancé *darling tease*, Mary forgives it in her relief at her hand being freed from its confinement to the buxom chest as Diana unclasps it suddenly--only to
capture Richard's arm instead. *That* invokes a glower.

"You know perfectly well that if it hadn't been for me inviting you to the Cave, none of this ever would have happened. I saw you fall in love dancing the Argentine tango."

Richard's gaze drifts over Diana's head to meet Mary's, the glint of amusement in his eyes blazing into a look she well remembers, which gives her a sense that the room spins about her as it did that September night when he twirled her with a final flourish and held her a moment too long.

"She wouldn't be wrong about the last bit," he says.

"Don't tell me!" says Diana. "I'll bet Frida's going to throw you an engagement party there. Or your wedding ball!"

"Do tell her, Richard. Is she wrong about that bit?"

As Diana looks up expectantly He quickly glanced around the room, as if he's been scanning the mingling guests for a face all this time, eyebrows lifting in recognition along with a hand in greeting.

"You will excuse me, Diana," he says, extracting himself from her grasp, slackened with disappointment, "but Sir John has something important to discuss with me. Mary will be all too happy to gush with you about our plans."

"Since I've always been prone to gushing," Mary glowers after him as he turns away with a smirk.

"Are you going to drink that, Mary darling?" Diana asks, the pink tip of her tongue darting out between her lips as she eyes the champagne glass. She leans conspiratorially, though doesn't lower her voice accordingly. "Only if you really are expecting, you shouldn't drink."

Mary allows her to prise it out of her hand; Diana has noticed she's not taken a sip, and no one else who might be looking on will think it odd that Diana stole a drink. Her hands free, she tugs her glove back on as her companion tipples and gushes enough for the both of them. Which is probably what Richard meant anyway.

"You don't *look* pregnant, at all. Though you were so green that day in Liberty, you must have been frightfully ill. Being sick is one way to stay thin. Ugh, the Christmas season has been *awful* for my figure. I can teach you lots of exercises. I do calisthenics, you know, to stay trim."

"Richard's going to teach me to box."

"What fun! Can he teach me, too?"

Mary blinks, and Diana drinks.

"In any case, Lucile works miracles with corsetry. God himself couldn't do better with foundation garments. No one will know you'll be walking down the aisle for two."

"Unless you tell your maid?"

That Diana hears the pointed remark at all, let alone feels the barbed tone with which it is uttered, comes as the most shocking interaction Mary has had with the girl to date.
"Gosh, Mary, I'm sorry about that. I really didn't mean to blab--ask Edith, when I got her letter, I wrote back that I do not spread damaging gossip. It's the chlorers, you know! When I've done those, I just never know what will come out of my mouth!"

The most ridiculous part is that, as much as Mary would like to say something snide about Diana's drug habit, she can see how sincerely the apology is meant. Before she can get a word in, snide or otherwise, Diana has moved on.

"Lucile is doing your gown, though, isn't she? Or gowns. I expect you'll need two if you're marrying in St Paul's and having a party at the Cave! When's your appointment? That's why you're in town, of course. I'd just love to tag along and help you choose! Oh, please say I may!"

"I'm sure Lady Mary will have enough help from her mother," Lady Rutland says, appearing rather suddenly at her daughter's side. They make quite the pair; the Duchess' evening gown, a drapey concoction of royal purple charmeuse embellished with silk flowers, gold lace and fringe and embroidery, as suited for a stage as Diana's. "Or didn't Cora accompany you to London? I can imagine how very trying the circumstances of your wedding must be to her. I'd probably take to my bed if one of my daughters--"

"Mama is in town, yes," Mary interrupts.

"Well. I suppose no more harm could befall you now. But everyone needn't know that. Especially in light of all those rumours your sister started. Oh, Poor Cora!" Lady Rutland's dramatic tones contain a quaver of vibrato; she actually touches a hand to her upturned forehead. "I really must call on her, and offer some advice about raising daughters."

Mary is, thankfully, spared hearing how the Duchess of Rutland raised Diana and her sisters by the dinner gong, though her discomfort is only temporarily relieved as her brief introduction to Lady Horner--though warmly made--reminds her that she's only here because of Richard's faux pas to begin with. When he offers his arm she takes it stiffly, lifting her chin as she avoids looking at him.

"Tell me," she says, "what was the point in being so uncouth as ask that I be invited to a dinner party so you can show me off, only to abandon me to Diana Manners and her mother?"

"I just thought you needed to know what you're getting into, marrying me."

"One last chance to back out?"

"The ring was insurance against that," Richard replies, reaching across with his left hand to cover hers where it rests on his arm and rub over the bulge of the diamond beneath her glove.

As they make their way around the long dinner table toward their places together at the centre, Mary says, "I can think of one benefit of a short engagement."

"Only one?" Richard murmurs as he leans over to get her chair, his fingertips brushing--and lingering--on her bare shoulders unnecessarily as he seats her.

Mary holds herself rigid against the shiver induced not so much by his touch but by the promise behind the words, but she has less luck restraining the twitch at the corners of her mouth.

"I won't have to endure too many of these awkward discussions about how short the engagement is."
"That reminds me." Richard keeps his voice low as he takes his place at her side. "I saw Reggie Swire today. He offered his congratulations, as well as his regrets that he wouldn't be able to host a party for us."

If it were not for the upward twitch of his eyebrows, and the tinge of a sneer in his tone, Mary would have shrugged off this breech of friendship as the result of Mr Swire's ill health. The significance of the glance, however, sets the gears of her own suspicious mind spinning.

"Surely Lavinia didn't tell him--"

"The little mouse? No." Richard emphasises the point with a shake of his head. "Although it would seem she's not as mousey as we thought. She told Reggie it would be too painful for you to have a party given by the future Earl of Grantham's fiancé."

Though the other dinner guests are filing in, Raymond Asquith, their hosts' son-in-law, occupying the seat next to her, Mary hardly notices the low rumble of conversation around her as the meaning of what Richard has said sinks in. Although on the surface Miss Swire's excuse to her father is in keeping with the meek character Mary observed, her first instinct lines up with Richard's: that the seeming sensitivity is in fact meant to touch Mary's most sensitive place--and, by extension, to strike at him.

"Not painful, exactly. Awkward. Though not as awkward as it will be for her when she receives an invitation to our wedding."

Richard studies her for a moment as the footman reaches around him to fill his wine glass, a smile softly spreading. He lifts the glass to her. "You are my perfect partner."

"You'll be mine--if you'll turn and speak to the guest seated at your right."

She smirks as Richard, mid-sip, turns to find himself looking into the dramatically disgruntled visage of the Duchess of Rutland, and chokes.

"Congratulations on your engagement, you darling man," she says, cutting Richard off when he starts to thank her, speaking low through scarcely moving lips. "But six weeks? You couldn’t have made your fornication more obvious if you’d published it in one of your papers."

“I could if we’d waited the customary six months.”

Cheeks prickling, Mary turns to Mr Asquith as etiquette demands of her, but as the Prime Minister's son speaks, she scarcely hears what he says for training her ears on Lady Rutland's discreet dressing down of Richard.

"How could you? An unmarried girl…!"

“I suppose you think out of wedlock pregnancies are more virtuous for married women?” Richard rejoins. "At least my child will know who her father is."

"So did you do it, Lady Mary?" Mr Asquith's wistful tones slip into her consciousness, so that she nearly chokes on her water. "Charm the truth about the Marconi source from Sir Richard," he clarifies.

"As a matter of fact I do know who it was. But I'll never tell."
"Of course not," says Mr Asquith. "How else will you keep him in line?"

“I hope you do have a daughter,” Lady Rutland huffs, "so that you’ll understand someday what it is to wish to protect her reputation from cads like you!"

Long, strong fingers clamp around Mary’s hand where it rests in her lap beneath the tablecloth, and Mary, feeling their earlier score is settled, gives it a squeeze. In a breech of etiquette--it certainly isn't the most shocking one she's made--she inclines her head toward his to whisper:

"This is so much more exciting than dinner parties in the country."
A visit to Lady Duff Gordon's dressmaking establishment yields more than a wedding gown for Mary, as continued reminders of her misdeeds lead to a confrontation with her mother. And will her first visit to Richard's house reveal more about her husband-to-be and the place she is to occupy in his life? Or will the stresses of wedding plans erect more barriers to honesty?

Diana Manners did not follow through with her threat to join in on the fun of wedding gown fittings at Maison Lucile, but her presence, Mary thinks, could hardly make it more awkward than it is.

"Lady Mary Crawley," greets Lady Duff Gordon as a shop girl escorts her, along with Mama, Sybil, and Aunt Rosamund, into the dressmaker's office which, with the exception of the kidney-shaped mahogany desk in the corner, seems more a parlour than a place to conduct business; plush carpets and a floral upholstered Rococo Revival suite arranged to accommodate intimate conversation in front of a bay window framed by velvet draperies provide a marked contrast to the stone and oak panelled walls of Richard's office, his heavy furniture designed to intimidate. "Though not for very much longer," Lady Duff Gordon adds. "Five weeks, isn't it, until you're Lady Mary Carlisle?"

Mary purses her lips in a polite smile and tries to give the dressmaker the benefit of the doubt: it is not her intention to be catty; not every woman in London has Lady Rutland's claws. It's only that Mary is still raw from last night that she bristles now. The muted squeak Mama emits, however, says that she feels a sharp swipe.

"Congratulations on your engagement," Lady Duff Gordon says, grasping Mary's hand gingerly in her own. Perfume and too much scented hand cream combine nauseatingly, though Mary finds a blessed distraction in the callused fingertip. Before the premier dress shop, they remind her, Lady Duff Gordon lived a less genteel life. Before she married Sir Cosmo, she had another husband...other lovers. Even now, shining in the bright lights of society's upper echelon, she is shadowed by the Titanic scandal. No, Lucy can cast no stones. Though god knows how many have been cast at her. Maison Lucile, however, is proof that not one has cast her down. A thought which makes Mary lift her chin and stand a little straighter.

"You and Sir Richard will make the most handsome couple at the altar," Lady Duff Gordon goes on. "I remember seeing you together in The Sketch."

Mama blanches again, and Aunt Rosamund's eyes flash with the same indignation as filled them the morning the incriminating photograph appeared in the paper, so that Mary cannot quite bring herself to thank Lady Duff Gordon for the dubious compliment because it may rub salt in the wounds. Thankfully, Sybil saves the moment.

"Wasn't that the most wonderful photograph? I thought Richard looked so in love." She nudges Mary in the side. "Mary didn't believe me."
Lady Duff Gordon smiles and inclines her head conspiratorially toward Sybil as she shakes her hand. "I thought the same thing, my dear."

The taut lines at the corners of Mama's smile relax slightly at this—briefly; perching at the edge of the settee, her posture stiffens to rigid rather than properly erect at Lady Duff Gordon's remarks as she pours out tea from a pot in a modern design that seems almost to have been made from silver fabric falling into folds, like the trailing hem of one of her gowns, and remarks.

"A wedding gown and trousseau—such a delightful change from the usual winter fashion fare. February brides are such rarities. I'm honoured you've chosen me to design your clothes, Lady Mary." Her eyes flash bright over the rim of her teacup, the flecks of gold brought out by the gold filigree painted with the tall irises on the china. "Especially after that unfortunate error with your gown at Christmas."

"That reminds me." Mama chokes on her tea. "Lady Duff Gordon--"

"Lucy, please, Lady Grantham."

"You're too kind. You've been far, far too kind already. It turns out the error with Mary's measurements was due to..."

Her eyes bulge beneath swooping brows as she casts about for an adequate euphemism. *Due to an error in my judgment,* Mary thinks, but of course does not say.

"Please accept my sincerest apologies, and...reimbursement."

Mary closes her eyes, unable to bear the sight of Lucy Duff Gordon's mortification as well as her own. Mama fretted the whole drive here from Aunt Rosamund's about the matter of the Christmas incident, for which they blamed the assistant, resulting in the dressmaker giving Mary a new gown. It seemed that Mama dismissed the notion of adding more awkwardness to an already dubious situation—at least, Rosamund shut her up by saying, *Just have Lucy bill Richard for it. After all, it's as much his responsibility as anyone's."

"Would you like to see my sketches?" Lady Duff Gordon hastily gets up from her armchair, looking composed again when she returns carrying a leather portfolio. "I hope you don't mind that I took the liberty." She draws the silver tea service aside to open the folder on the low table over which Mary and Mama lean as she spreads out sheets of drawings. "You're always a dream to dress, Lady Mary, with your height and your complexion and how beautifully you wear the modern styles. And your ring proved such an inspiration—"

"My ring?" Mary looks up to see Lady Duff Gordon's gaze fixed on the diamond glittering on her left hand; her thumb chafes her thumb against the underside of the platinum band, conscious of how ostentatious it is.

"Didn't Sir Richard tell you? He brought it with him when he came to discuss the, erm, arrangements for your trousseau. He thought I might like to design around it."

"Did he?"


"I daresay he's put more thought into his fiancée's wedding clothes than any bridegroom before him,"
The back of Mary's neck prickles, and her cheekbones radiate warmth beneath her skin, but as she
studies Lady Duff Gordon's dress concepts—which really are dreams—she can't find it in herself to be
any more embarrassed by this untoward act than by the jewel that prompted the creations before her.

"Did Mary's ring inspire any modern styles for bridesmaids' frocks?" asks Sybil eagerly.

Lady Duff Gordon laughs. "I have just the dress to suit you, Lady Sybil." Her laughter fades, and
her brow furrows. "Though I'm not sure how it would suit your other sister's colouring."

"It's only Sybil," Mary says, acutely aware of the hitch in Mama's breath beside her. "And three little
cousins. None of whom share Edith's colouring."

Beside her, Mama draws in a sharp breath in reaction, so that Mary is not at all surprised later, when
they have been shown to a changing room to begin the dress fittings, that Mama begins to implore
her, "Can't you overlook your differences and ask Edith to be in the wedding party?"

"Mama," says Mary heavily, trying not to let her gaze drift from her own reflection in the mirror to
Mama's behind her, as she shrugs out of her jacket, handing it off to Sybil who hangs it on a peg by
the curtained doorway. "Edith started those rumours about me. If she stands up as my bridesmaid, I'll
look like a fool."

"Do you want Edith to look like a fool?"

The harsh note in Mama's voice draws Mary's gaze against her will to her eyes, which are,
surprisingly, more wounded than angry. The expression arrests her for a moment, during which
Mary is aware of the slow thud of her heart against her ribs, and of a twinge. Is this what empathy
feels like?

She looks away, muttering as she fumbles with the eyelet closure at the back of her skirt. "Better her
than me."

Sighing heavily, Mama gets up, gently brushing Mary's hands away to unfasten the stubborn hook
herself. She stands close for a moment, so that Mary can feel her breath ruffle her hair, but not until
she pushes her skirt down over her hips does Mama speak, catching her elbow lightly to help her
step out of it.

"I know what your sister did was extremely hurtful, but...Even Lady Duff Gordon thinks it's odd. It's
the look of the thing."

"No one will be looking at Edith. Not with me as the bride."

Mary sheds her blouse and turns slightly to study her silhouette in her corset and petticoat, noting the
strain of the front fastenings of her corset beneath her enlarged bust. She will, indeed, have to place
her faith in Diana's gospel of Lady Duff Gordon's corsetry, or all eyes will be on her for the wrong
reason.

Which may well be Mama's point. It is all about the look of the thing, and there is so much already
that appears wrong, despite Richard's best efforts—which she sanctioned—to make all appear proper.
Her stomach turns, and it is on the tip of her tongue to apologise for shaming Mama so much already.
But what actually comes out is something quite different.
"She's refused anyway. On moral grounds."

"I don't believe she truly feels that way."

"She's just jealous and spiteful," says Sybil.

Ignoring her little sister, Mary glances over her shoulder to raise an eyebrow at Mama and not merely her reflection. "This is Edith we're talking about. The one whose idea of a fun afternoon is touring country churches."

"Any time I wish I had daughters," says Aunt Rosamund, "I have only to spend an afternoon with you, Cora, and all regret vanishes."

"I'd never trade any of them for a boy, but you're right. It's not exactly Little Women."

"It won't be in Mary's case," Sybil says, eyes sparkling mischievously.

"Excuse me!" Mary rejoins. "I'll have you know I haven't gained a--"

The scrape of curtain rings against the rod silences her, and Mary turns to find herself face to red face with Miss Brown, looking more severe than ever armed with a tape measure and notebook.

"Lady Mary," she says, her thin colourless lips scarcely moving to form the clipped syllables. "Here for a bridal fitting? Shall we take new measurements today, or use the ones made at Christmas?"

~*~

The roar of an approaching automobile's engine in the street makes Mary pause in the front hall, and at the succession of sounds--a car door slamming, the click of shoes on the walk leading up to the house or the next, the rap of the knocker unmistakably against this door--Aunt Rosamund halts her ascent upstairs.

"Sir Richard may not be punctual," she says, turning on the step to face her nieces on the ground, as the butler, Wood, scuttles to get the door, "but one cannot deny he has the most impeccable timing."

"Forgive my tardiness," he says as Wood opens the door, sweeping off his top hat and thrusting it at the butler, then shrugs out of his greatcoat. "I got tied up at the office."

"In evening wear?" Mary says sarcastically. He makes an absurd picture, in his tailcoat and white tie, clutching his briefcase in one hand.

He knits his brow at her. "Obviously I didn't get the memo that we weren't dressing for dinner. Or that you were already retiring for the evening," he adds, noting Rosamund halfway up the spiral staircase.

"Already?" Mary repeats. "It's half past ten."

Richard's mouth opens as if to argue, only to form a wordless scowl as a glance at the hall clock,
then at the silver pocket watch at the front of his waistcoat, confirm her claim.

Sybil intervenes, "After a day of being fitted for clothes, none of us could face changing again. Especially not into anything formal."

Or the thought of eating much, Mary mentally adds, her appetite thoroughly squelched by the fragrances of French perfumes that hung thick as fog in the Rose Room of Maison Lucile, where she was pinched and squeezed into corsetry and other lingerie. Mama picked at her food, too, and went to bed shortly after eating, complaining of a headache.

Though Sybil's explanation appears to have a softening affect on Richard, Mary's irritation mounts as his gaze sweeps her, scrutinising for signs of her fatigue.

"You didn't have to tear yourself away from the office," she says, "if you had so much to do."

Richard follows her line of vision down to his briefcase; his knuckles whiten as his grip tightens around it. "In fact I've brought paperwork for you."

"Riveting as this little tiff is to watch," Rosamund interrupts, "I should like to retire."

"Then I suppose I really needn't have torn myself away from the office."

"Do stay," Aunt Rosamund says. "Sybil can chaperone, and anyway neither of you seems inclined to romance at the moment."

But as soon as their aunt has had time to ensconce herself in her bedroom, Sybil grins and goes upstairs herself.

"Oh dear," Mary says. "It seems Aunt Rosamnd was wrong about Sybil's capacity for chaperoning."

"And about my inclination toward romance." Richard sets his briefcase on the floor and takes Mary's arms as he steps toward her. "That's the one benefit of a tiff. Being able to make up afterwards."

"Is it afterwards?" Mary asks as he tilts his head, his only reply the softness of his lips on hers. She sighs, and relaxes--or sags--in his hold, feeling the fatigue seep out of her as he supports her.

"That's more like it," he says, drawing back; his hands slide down from her arms to take one hand, his fingers threading through hers as he turns her to go back to the drawing room, to which Wood, eyes wide with panic, flies ahead of them to turn the lights back on and stir the dying fire.

"Not feeling quite so cross?" Mary asks.

"I only became cross because you were."

Mary opens her mouth to argue but, realising this is indeed true, she huffs and instead mumbles, "It was a long day."

As he sinks onto the sofa, leaning his briefcase against the coffee table, Richard requests a glass of Scotch from Wood, who bobs his acquiescence and bustles to the drinks cabinet to pour it; then, regarding Mary with a furrowed brow, he asks, "Didn't you have fun shopping?"

"That's one way to describe it."
He offers her a hand to help her sit, and as his long, capable fingers close around hers, drawing her
down close beside him, she notes the genuine concern etched so deeply upon his handsome face.
She remembers what Sybil said earlier about his interest in her trousseau being thoughtful and
romantic, and purses her lips together in a flirtatious smile.

"I chose my wedding gown. Well--more like you chose for me, and I agreed."

"I merely provided the inspiration," Richard says, suddenly intent on taking the Scotch from the
silver tray Wood proffers.

"One wonders if it's you who wants the dress," Mary can't resist teasing, upon the emergence of his
dimples as he drinks. "I should happily wear a morning suit. A waistcoat would hide a great deal
without having to be stuffed into a corset."

Her gaze travels along the roll of his throat in profile as he swallows; she flushes as his eye cuts
sidelong, catching her staring, but she can't stop watching. The hollows deepen in his cheeks as his
mouth smirks around the lip of the glass for another sip, the tumbler appearing almost absurdly small
in his hand as he lowers it to the coffee table, fingers lingering over the top for a moment.

"I've wanted to see you in white for some time, as you recall."

The rake of his voice draws her eyes up again to his, and for a moment she is transported back in
time to that afternoon when he lingered in her bedroom after they made love, when his gaze mirrored
her own inner feeling of her desire having been at once satisfied and stirred for more. Now, he props
one elbow on the back of the sofa, his fingers unfurling to touch her face, almost lazily at first, but
then the callused pad of his thumb scuffs over her cheekbone and his fingers rake back into her hair.

"Though now you mention it," he continues, "a cravat and top hat on you do hold a certain appeal."

A pin falls from her coif, cold upon the back of her neck, though that is not what makes Mary shiver,
nor even Richard's touch as his fingers slip into the collar of her striped blouse to pluck the pin out.
Their conversation itself has stirred her desire for him, somehow heady in spite of its utter
ridiculousness. She lifts her own hand to his neck, finding the end of his ivory bowtie and tugging it
loose, then undoing the top button of his shirt to free him from the restraints of the stiff poke collar.

"You should see me in my riding habit," she murmurs, scarcely knowing what she is saying. "I even
wear breeches beneath the skirt."

Richard makes a low sound of approval as he draws her in for a kiss, which is unexpectedly--and
disappointingly--light and brief considering the flirtation that proceeded it. When she huffs her
exasperation, his lips purse sympathetically, but amusement lights his eyes as they dart to indicate
Wood; standing at attention beside the drinks cabinet, looking like nothing so much as a Macaroni
penguin with feathery straw coloured hair framing his red face and protuberant nose, chest puffed
beneath the starched white front of his shirt.

Leaning back on the arm draped over the sofa, Richard asks, "Will I like it? Your wedding gown, I
mean."

Mary considers Lucy's sketch of ivory satin cut in square lines and embellished with embroidery
reminiscent of the designs engraved on the band of her engagement ring, with sleeves and a high
yoke of elegant but undoubtedly demure lace.
"I suspect you'll prefer the one I'll wear to the ball," she tells him.

"Ah, yes." Richard's gaze drops to the neckline of her blouse, and then he leans in again to kiss her cheek, the trace of stubble on his chin raking over her collarbone as he nuzzles her; he had time to dress for dinner, but not to shave."Churches require a certain standard of modesty, don't they?"

"Is that why you don't attend?"

"I will this Sunday, to hear the banns read," he says. "Will you still be in town?"

They didn't plan on it, but it seems having a trousseau suitable for the bride of so prominent a figure as Richard in so short a time requires many appointments and fittings. Which reminds her, the plan to see his house--finally--tomorrow, must be truncated to accommodate one such appointment.

"But you have to see your new home before you move into it."

The vehemence of his protest makes Mary look up at him with a furrowed brow. "I will," she says, for the first time feeling the strangeness of any house but Downton being home. Especially a house in Knightsbridge. "Just not for longer than an hour. Surely that ought to be sufficient? It's only a townhouse, after all."

Richard gives a noncommittal jerk of his head and withdraws his arm from around her.

Nonplussed by his abrupt shift in mood, Mary says, "It seems a bit much to me, too, agonising over fabric choices for gowns and undergarments I shall only be able to wear for a few months at most."

"We'll find a designer to do you a maternity wardrobe in Paris," Richard replies curtly, nothing remaining of his prior demeanour with regard to her wedding clothes. He drains his Scotch, signalling Wood for another, then retrieves his briefcase and opens it on the coffee table. "Until then, we have stationery choices to agonise over. For the invitations."

He takes out numerous sheets in subtly varying shades of white, ivory, and cream, in differing thicknesses and textures, some trimmed with ribbons. Mary's eyes glaze as they did after several hours studying samples of cloth which her inexpert eye could hardly distinguish from each other.

"Must we do it now?" she asks, sinking into the cushion at her back. "It's past eleven."

She expects Richard to understand, finally, what a trying day she has had--whilst in her third month of pregnancy, no less--but instead he regards her over his drink in much the same manner she imagines he would an underling who has not complied with his wishes.

"Perhaps Lady Rutland's reminders didn't stress enough how short on time we are for wedding preparations. We must get the invitations posted. We're already later than is strictly proper."

Unbidden, an image comes to her of him sat behind that imposing oak desk in his masculine office, poring over a book of wedding etiquette, and she snorts. He raises an eyebrow in challenge, and she crosses her arms over her chest.

"Then perhaps you should have got here earlier."

"I have a job, Mary. I'm trying to put in as much time in the office as possible so that I can devote my
full attention to you during the wedding and our honeymoon."

He waits for her rejoinder, appearing further annoyed when she merely shrugs and says, "You know paper better than me. Whatever you like will do."

"Fine. I'll get the double octuples rolling with newsprint, and I'll be sure to state on the invitations that everyone should feel free to bring a friend."

He gathers everything except one sheaf of papers haphazardly and tosses them back into the briefcase. Mary starts to protest but her voice is cut off by the click of the lid latching shut.

"Will you at least go over the guest list with me?" Richard asks. "We need to finalise it."

Mary reluctantly takes the guest list from him, but line after line of typed names--aristocracy she recognises, but then there are others who must be his business associates, and relatives--runs together as indistinguishably as the script samples. Until one seems to grow large and bold on the page as a newspaper headline: The Hon. Evelyn Napier.

"Oh, honestly, Richard! Do you think Evelyn will want anything to do with our wedding after you punched him in the face?"

He looks sharply away, obviously displeased with this reminder of his bad behaviour, though his face reddens as if he feels some shame for it.

"If you think it's less insulting to omit Mr Napier than to include him, then of course I bow to your superior social graces. It was my thought that he might overlook his differences with me and attend for your sake--if he really is as true a gentleman and as dear a friend to you as everyone always says."

_Overlook his differences._ Mary's temper goes out of her with her breath as she considers who else uttered that phrase today--and about whom. Leaning back into the sofa cushions, her fingers slacken on the list, and it slips from her lap onto the floor as she passes her fingertips over her brow to rub the ache in her temples.

"How can I finalise a guest list when I haven't even settled the bridal party?"

"I thought you were having Sybil and your little cousins?"

Mary lowers her hand again and lifts her head from the cushion; Richard looks as weary of all this as she feels. But at least he's allowing her to say her piece. She tells him about the discussion with Mama about Edith.

"I see," he says when she's finished. "And you think that respecting your mother's wishes in this will somehow compensate for the embarrassment of her daughter going pregnant to the aisle?"

"I don't know that Edith would accept my olive branch at this point if I did offer one. But at least...At least Mama would see I made the effort."

"Effort never counted for much with my mother. On the other hand, Lady Grantham is nothing like her." He bends, his arm brushing her skirt as he reaches for the guest list. Straightening up again, he lays it on the coffee table, at a perfect angle beside his briefcase. "It's your wedding, Mary. Ask who you like, and don't worry about how it looks to other people."
"It doesn’t bother you? Edith’s rumours caused people to talk about you, too."

"They’re talking about me now. And I’ve asked George to stand up with me. I’d be lying if I said we haven’t treated each other as badly. Or worse."

"I suppose you can empathise with where Edith is coming from."

Richard twitches his head, eyes narrowing as he regards her a little askance.

"Your rivalry," Mary clarifies. "Has he always been your parents’ favourite?"

For a heartbeat he stares at her, then he turns to pick up his untouched second glass of Scotch from the coffee table. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"It’s obvious you resent his lack of success."

Richard swallows, and his lips curve as if in amusement, only Mary can see he is not at all amused. "I resent his lack of success? You never said anything so absurd."

How did Mama manage to draw so much from him in his office yesterday, while she has succeeded only in making him defensive? She doesn’t do herself any favours by lashing back, having felt his insulting words.

"Because your parents are proud him. For his family, one can only presume."

He throws back the remainder of his Scotch, and stands. "You’re right. It is too late to discuss this."

~*~

"This seems bigger than Grantham House." Mama's voice bounces through the dining room. "And Rosamund's, too. Don't you think it seems bigger, Mary?"

"I don't think so," Mary replies flatly, though her words, too, echo in the space, unadorned by carpeting or cloth of any kind. "It must be typical of any house in London. The size is only an illusion because there's nothing in it. Rooms always seem large when they're not cluttered with furniture and pictures."

Indeed, the only things in the space are the table and chairs, which seem to float like an island chain in the middle of an ocean of walnut panelled walls and floors and built-in shelves. The only break in the wood comes from the black marble and gilt fireplace on one wall and the wrought iron grates of the radiator covers beneath the bay windows; beyond them stair-stepped red brick upper floors of the houses on the other side of Cadogan Square provide the only touch of colour against the winter sky and upstretched barren arms of the trees in the park. No draperies soften the hard angles of the casements, no rug absorbs the resonant clunk of shoes on the floorboards. Overhead, a ghastly modern chandelier, all electrical and metalwork, hangs from the centre of the stark white plaster ceiling, but somehow this only invokes the idea of a skeleton. The dining room is not merely empty, but naked.
Much like the expression that briefly flickered across Richard's face last night, when she so tactlessly asked him about his relationships with his brother and mother. And again just now, when she turns from the vacant shelving opposite the fireplace.

"I never took you for a minimalist, Richard," she says. "You never cease to surprise."

"I believe it is the largest house in the neighbourhood, Lady Grantham." He ignores Mary to favour Mama with a pleasant smile as he gestures for her to go through to the adjoining room. "At least, the agent's insistence that it is persuaded me to buy it. And one of the newest. This row was only completed in '85--though I still had to have the place wired for electricity, telephones, central heating, modernise the bathrooms. It's all en suites upstairs."

"How convenient for your guests," Mama remarks, and Richard gives her a grateful look. Though when he turns again to Mary as they enter what must be the drawing room, his confidence wavers.

"As for the rest...it needs a woman's touch."

"Or a decorator's."

If she is honest, she does like the stormy grey-green walls and the voluminous turquoise velvet sofas trimmed in gold tasseled cording that face each other before the massive white marble fireplace. It's not difficult to imagine the room—which is larger than the one at Grantham House—filled with guests mingling with cocktail glasses to ragtime tunes played on a phonograph tucked into a corner, or tinkled live on the keys of a piano by one of their musical friends. Yet for all that, Richard's insistence that bigger and newer are better rankle, and she can't seem to speak to him without being sarcastic.

"How do you live here?"

Richard flinches, as if she's touched a raw nerve, and glances away, muttering. "Mostly I stay at the club. Garrick's is only a few minutes' walk from my office. Very convenient."

"Oh. So I'm to look forward to living here alone?"

As Mary's voice rings through the mostly bare room, words uttered another time, before she knew Richard beyond their first encounter, echo in her mind: Feel sorry for Aunt Rosamund? All alone with plenty of money in a house in Eaton Square? I can't imagine anything better.

"Have you talked about what you'll do about a country house?" Mama asks, her attempt at intervening before the quarrel can escalate obvious in her too eager tone.

"Yes," Mary flings at her, "let's discuss a second residence since we're as of one mind about this one."

But Richard seizes on the topic. "I suppose we'll have to have a country estate, won't we? So we can have weekend house parties."

"Our lot call them Friday to Monday parties."

"Your lot don't value economy of language."

"Not only for parties," Mama says, darting her wobbly smile back and forth between them, "but it
might be nice for the baby closer to Grandmama and Grandpapa, as well."

Richard softens a little at this. "Is there anything available in the neighbourhood?"

"Downton Place."

Mary snorts. "That dinky little house?"

"Intimate, I always thought," Mama says.

"One of Lord Grantham's properties?" Richard asks.

"It's the prettiest Tudor house--"

"I should prefer to build," Richard squashes Mama's sales pitch.

Somehow Mary squelches her own impulse to make a Granny-like remark about it being indignity enough to have one house less than thirty years old, and says instead, "I think we have enough to be going on with here."

Remarkably, Richard doesn't argue. "You can understand why I was anxious for you to see the house. I thought perhaps you might like to meet with a few architects while you're in town."

Mary stares at him, speechless. Architects? Like to? Seeming to read her thoughts, Richard's hopeful expression droops into a heavy frown that seems to pull his voice to a lower register, too.

"Or at least look at some bloody wallpaper samples."

"Heavens. More paper. And I thought once I selected the invitation stationery you'd stop badgering me."

Richard's mouth opens in an obviously sharp retort, but Mama speaks first. "Excuse me...I think I'll just step out to the terrace. It seems you've a lovely view of the park."

By the time Richard has got the door for her, he's reined in his temper—though only just, Mary observes as he saunters toward her, the tendons in the backs of his hands flexing beneath the pale skin before he slips them into his trouser pockets.

"You know I did quite a lot of thinking after I left your aunt's last night," he says. "And I wonder if all this is too much? The wedding, I mean. St. Paul's and the Ritz..."

"Papa described it as a circus."

Richard scowls down at Mary as he comes to stand almost toe to toe with her. "I don't give a damn about his opinion. What matters to me is what you think."

As his eyes dart back and forth, searching hers, Mary reads his confusion plainly in his.

"Is this about Downton?" he asks at length.

"Downton?"
He draws his hands from his pockets, extending them palm up in a pleading gesture. "Do you want to be queen of the village as you always envisioned? It doesn't have to be St Paul's and the Ritz."

"Haven't we discussed this extensively? I thought we were quite agreed that since we met in London, and are to live London, that it seems appropriate to be married in London."

"It seems," Richard snarls. "From where I stand, Mary, it seems you don't care much about any of this."

"Do I need to?" she asks as he stalks away toward the room's entrance. "You care more than enough for the both of us."

Richard halts in the doorway, one hand braced against the carved oak moulding.

Realising how he's taken this, she hastens to explain, "I told you a long time ago, I've never been the sort of girl who sits around planning her perfect wedding."

"We're not just planning a wedding. We're planning a marriage."

"Oh Richard. When have we ever done anything according to a plan?"
Chapter Summary

The American side of Mary's family arrive at Downton for the wedding, and insert themselves into everyone's affairs. But Martha isn't the only Levinson who thinks Mary needs a little help mending her fences.

February, 1913

The plan, so far as Mary--or any of the family, by all appearances--knew it, was not for Richard to arrive in the same party as the Americans. Yet here he is, sweeping off his trilby as he as he alights from the Renault, turning back to hand Grandmamma down from the car. He offers her his arm, and they commence up the walk toward the receiving line, chatting and chuckling like fast friends though they have not been formally introduced. Not only with her, but with Uncle Harold, whose shoes crunch in the gravel as he leaves Aunt Ruby's side to stride briskly around the front of the car to catch up to them, clapping a hand on Richard's shoulder as he resumes some conversation begun during the drive.

Granny makes a sound of distaste and a face to match. "The Americans adore him. Typical."

Harold throws back his head at some remark of Richard's, and Papa says, "I wonder whether Harold will find Sir Richard so amusing when it dawns on him that he's to be the man's uncle?"

"Unfortunately," Granny replies, "that's exactly the sort of joke I would expect Cora's brother to find wildly hilarious."

Indeed, Harold makes it before Papa has a chance, as he catches Mary in a hug and bestows a smacking kiss on her forehead.

"Contrary Mary," he invokes the old nickname, at which, try as she might not to, she rolls her eyes, making it seem most accurate.

"Congratulations!" He says; when she starts to thank him, he cuts her off. "You're about to be the owner of a yacht. I've almost talked my new nephew here into buying one."

Richard only looks slightly more amused by this joke about his age than Granny and Papa, though Harold chortles at his own hilarity, Grandmamma joining in his laughter.

"Isn't it just a scream, the idea of Harold being uncle to a man old enough to be his big brother?" But Grandmamma winks up at Richard, tilting her head back at an excruciating angle to look over the absurdly thick fox fur collar of her coat in a large black and white floral print that Mary finds truly dizzying. "I make the joke at my son's expense, of course. It should make you feel young, Richard dear."

"Positively boyish," Richard indulges her.
A banshee-like wail emits from the second car as the door opens and the twin red-heads tumble out, locked in a sisterly squabble. The sight is not unfamiliar at Downton, most of the family's journeys having ended with Mary and Edith playing out a similar scene.

Harold squeezes his eyes shut, pinching the bridge of his nose. "That's because Richard doesn't have kids yet. He'll find out soon enough what we know: fatherhood makes old men of us all. Especially fatherhood to three girls, eh, Robert?"

"It only gets worse as they grow up," Papa says.

Mama's eyes round as they dart about, not sure who or where to help out, before finally settling on Aunt Ruby, struggling with the younger girls as the nanny rolls up belatedly with Lynch in the wagon bearing the luggage, and the elder daughter, Isodora, bursts into tears, too.

"They're just worn out from a week at sea and a train ride, poor darlings," Mama croons, hurrying toward her sister-in-law.

"They get it from their daddy," Grandmamma says cheerfully. "I've always been a terrific sailor. And oh," she adds, squeezing Richard's arm before releasing it to embrace Mary, "I'm so glad we were able to make it over for your wedding on such short notice." She turns her head, as if to peck Mary's cheek, but instead murmurs low in her ear, "In America we call that a shotgun wedding."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you--"

Mary stops short, her grandmother giving her a look as she draws back that tells her there's no point in concealment. In fact, if she has to guess, Grandmamma is more critical of such a pitiful lie than by what Mary would attempt to hide with it. Her hands slide down Mary's arms to clasp her fingers.

"Let me take a peep at this rock!" She lifts Mary's hand for closer inspection of her engagement ring. Uncle Harold leans in and lets out a low whistle, and Grandmamma exclaims, "Mm-hmm. And I'll bet all your friends are just green-eyed monsters. And Edith?" She turns to the younger girl, whose face goes hideously scarlet. "Any prospects? Have you considered going after this heir so you can be Countess of Grantham? Though I'm too American to really get my head around kissing cousins."

"Fourth cousins once removed," Mama squeaks, rejoining the group in front of the house, a whimpering twin dandled on her hip. "But let's talk about all that later, shall we? You've had such a long journey, and I've promised Ginevra we'd go in and have some cake."

"I want cake, too, Auntie Cora!" wails the other twin, Virginia--though Mary never would have been able to tell them apart if Mama had not said a name.

Virginia lunges out of her weary-looking mother's arms, though Grandmamma steps sideways as if this is old hat and catches the child.

"Come on, Ginny Two," she says, setting Virginia's feet on the ground and taking her firmly in chubby hand as Carson sweeps open the front door. "If there's one thing the English do well, it's tea."

"I'm glad American sentiment has changed since they tossed it all into the harbour," Granny says.

The servants break ranks to retreat around the side of the house to have tea brought up, and the family file through the front door. Mary moves to follow suit, but Richard's fingers close around her
wrist and tug her back to him. Her pulse races beneath his glove, though she knows as she gazes down at the contrast of the supple black leather against the white of her skin instead of up into his eyes that it is not merely a tingle of desire, but of nervous anticipation.

More than two weeks have passed since her excursion to London for her trousseau. Their quarrels over the wedding plans and his house lie between them, unaddressed, the tensions barely constrained in his voice during their few meetings and telephone conversations squeezed in between his seemingly ceaseless office hours now contained in his grasp on her arm.

However, when she finally drags her eyes up to his face, he looks at her with surprising tenderness.

"You've had a long journey yourself," she says. "With my American grandmother. Couldn't you do with tea?"

Richard shakes his head. "I just disembarked a crowded car following a six hour train ride preceded by nearly two weeks at a desk. I've drunk enough tea to find the idea of tossing it into a harbour rather appealing myself."

"Scotch, then."

"Believe me, I've had my share of that, too. A walk to stretch my legs and breathe the fresh air would suit me better. With you."

His eyes flicker from her face, and Mary follows the glance over her shoulder to see Carson standing sentry at the open door, trying very hard not to look as if he disapproves of her fiancé or his schemes to be alone with her.

"Unless you're not up to it?" Richard adds. His thumb slips just beneath the cuff of her sleeve to scuff the veins of her wrist, drawing her almost imperceptibly closer to him except for the whisper of her skirt against the hem of his greatcoat.

"I'll just get my coat."

Richard waits for her on the porch, and when she rejoins him he wearing his hat again and drawing from a cigarette. He exhales the smoke as he smiles at her, and offers his arm, which she takes gingerly, falling into a slow yet decisive pace with him across the brittle lawn. Can the man ever truly relax? The tension in the muscle beneath her fingers ought to alarm her, but instead--ridiculously--she remembers the squeeze Grandmamma gave his arm earlier, and holds a little tighter to it herself, allowing her body to brush against his arm as she looks up at him.

"We weren't expecting you till Saturday," she says.

He looks down at her, twitching his eyebrows together. "I hope that's not a tactful way of saying you'd have preferred not to see me today."

"In fact it's my not so tactful way of saying you're awfully brave."

"Brave?"

"For turning up unexpectedly, after your previous unannounced visits resulted in less than warm welcomes."

At least she convinced Papa to rescind his ban on Richard staying at Downton until after they are properly married, on grounds that it would arouse Grandmamma's suspicions; though perhaps now that she knows, he'll exile Richard once more to Granny's.

"I suppose two out of the three occasions have resulted in my being made to take luncheon alone in the library, and coming to fisticuffs with your father." Richard takes a long drag from the cigarette.

It was more Papa's fists that gave the cuffs, but Mary presses her lips together and says nothing.

"In that case," he says, "it should relieve you to know that Cora conspired with me this time."

"You're on a first name basis with Mama?" Mary can scarcely contain her surprise as Richard guides her to sit on the bench beneath the cedar.

Nodding, he puts the cigarette once more to his lips, then flicks it onto the ground, stamping it out with the heel of his boot, before lowering himself onto the bench beside Mary. "She wrote me a helpful letter."

"Did she?"

Richard does not look at her, though he does shift positions so that his body angles slightly in toward hers, his left arm stretched behind her on the back of the bench. "She pointed out that while it's true we're planning a marriage as well as a wedding, we've only a matter of weeks to plan the wedding."

He reaches his right hand across to take her hand which rests in her lap. "But years of marriage lie ahead of us."

Mary looks down at Richard's hand, so large that it covers hers completely. Her breath has seemed caught in her chest these last weeks, suffocated by his insistence on planning every detail of their wedding and home during her week in town--even though she truly does not have any grand vision of her own to conflict with his notions. Now she releases her breath, the steam of it swirling palely in the cold air, and moves her hand beneath his palm to thread her fingers through his longer ones.

"We've scarcely had any time at all," she says. "If you added it all up, we've probably spent all of a fortnight together. Less, perhaps."

"Let it never be said that I'm not efficient with my time," Richard quips, shifting their joined hands so that his knuckles just brush the front of her coat.

"That's just the thing." Mary looks up at him now, imploring him to take her seriously; the darkening of his eyes beneath his heavy brow satisfies her that he does, and she goes on. "Our courtship and our engagement have been a blur, and soon we'll have a baby making demands on our time and our attention."

"We'll have nannies and nursery maids."

"Of course we will. I just don't want the time before to be a rush of getting ready for the next thing."

Now it is Richard who beseeches her for understanding. "You do know it's because of the baby that I want to have everything ticked off the checklist? That I don't want you to come back from Paris further along in your pregnancy and thrust into chaos?"

His thumb chafes the jut of her wrist bone, and she nods, inclining her head just so that her hair
tickles his cheek. As Richard sits back he lowers his arm from the back of the bench to wrap around her shoulders. For a moment they sit silent, he turning his gaze to the expanse of property beyond; from the up-tilted angle at which she studies him, his eyes appear green as they reflect the cedars which colour the otherwise drab winter landscape.

"Write for the paper," his voice rasps through the quiet. "Edit the paper. Publish the paper. Publish more papers. Acquire a bigger printing press to facilitate the publication of even more papers. Become a millionaire. Receive a knighthood. It would seem that for the past twenty years I've lived a checklist rather than a life."

"If take a wife and have a baby are next, I'm flattered they rank higher," Mary teases. "Though I suppose that means they're a little further down than receive peerage and become a billionaire?"

The lines of Richard's face do not relax in amusement at her teasing; in fact, they deepen with his scowl. "I should hope I've learned my lesson about what it is to rank anything above you. It was painful enough." He faces her again, his expression the nearest to remorse Mary has ever seen. "To both of us."

Mary lifts her free hand to stroke the line of his jaw. The bruise from Papa's blow has long since faded, but she does not know if she will ever be able to look at Richard and not see it. She hopes she will never forget how he fought for her.

Seeming to know her thoughts, his lips curve in a smile as he turns his head to brush them over her palm. His mouth is so soft and warm against her skin that Mary realises how much she has missed kissing him during this fortnight's separation, his absence worsened by their misunderstanding. She leans in to kiss him properly, but instead her nose grazes his cheek as he turns his head, resuming their conversation over her sigh.

"You shall have to bear with me. It'll take some getting used to stopping work for more than just a celebratory cigar between rungs of the ladder. Not that I've had much reason--"

The rest of his sentence is muffled against Mary's lips as she loses patience waiting for a kiss. At first Richard does not react, apparently surprised by her initiative, but in a heartbeat his grasp on her shoulder tightens and the hand clasping hers releases it to go about her waist and draw her to him as he opens to her. She tastes the bitter tinge of tobacco on his breath, and likes it, and rubs the pads of her fingers over his jaw until she finds a patch of fine stubble amidst smooth skin missed by his razor this morning.

"Is this reason enough?" she asks.

"I don't know if I could ever get enough of this." Richard murmurs between kisses. "Though I'm in full agreement with you. It will hardly do to rush this time together."

Tilting his head, he returns to kiss her slowly, as if to make his point.

When Mary draws back some moments later, it is to say, "You're right, too, though. I need to at least find a lady's maid before the wedding."

She sighs; this was one major point of contention during a recent telephone call, Mary not having wanted to face the reality of all her new life would mean leaving behind at Downton--namely, Anna. Though she still has not come to terms with this particular change, it seems less daunting a prospect in light of how pleased Richard looks with her compromise.
The argument forgotten, he smooths her hair back into place where it became mussed and says, "I had Miss Dawson look over a number of applications and vet the ones she thought best suited to you."

"Why am I not surprised?"

Chuckling, Richard leans in for one final, soft kiss, and says, "I always knew we'd make a good team."

~*~

When they return to the house, Edith is just rounding the corner of the staircase, Uncle Harold's girls scampering up ahead of her. Spying Mary from the gallery, they squat down to peer at her between the openings in the balustrade, ruffles of petticoats and bloomers showing, and shout down to her to come to the nursery and see the new dollies Grandmamma gave them for the voyage.

"Practice," Richard murmurs to her, brushing his lips across her cheek which makes the little cousins giggle.

Mary lifts a brow at him. "Unless we have a boy."

"Then you'll have to learn about trains and tin soldiers."

Straightening up, he tells Mary he's going to go rescue Harold from being so outnumbered at tea, and she admonishes him not to buy any yachts he's going to regret later.

"I'll join you in a moment, girls," she calls up to them. "First I need to speak to Cousin Edith."

"Hurry up then," says Edith. "I'd like to rest before it's time to dress for dinner."

"Not as much as me," Mary mutters as she starts up the flight of stairs, which brings on the fatigue that seems to have become a daily late afternoon occurrence. Even so, she ascends as quickly as she can, not liking how the staircase gives Edith the advantage of being able to look down on her.

"Grandmamma missed you at tea," she says. "Really, Mary, I would've thought you'd have learnt your lesson about what happens when young women avoid company to sneak off with men."

"Yes, you're in danger of discovering they want to marry you." Alighting on the landing, Mary exhales heavily, her snippiness leaving with her breath. She is too tired for that. "Haven't we had enough of this nonsense? Soon enough we shall have two hundred miles between us and our differences. Surely we can bridge the gap until then?"

"Listen to you, talking like a mother. Or trying to. You'd better practice. You haven't much time to perfect it."

Sneering, Edith turns away, lifting her skirt slightly to resume her ascent upstairs, and Mary very nearly lets her. But she thinks of how Mama smoothed things over with Richard, and it's the least she can do to thank her to try and make amends with Edith.
"Mama's right," she says, and Edith halts on the stairs, though she does not turn around. "It doesn't reflect well on the family if you're not a member of the wedding party."

For a moment she thinks Edith will face her again, but she only turns her head slightly as she mounts the next stair. "I didn't think you ever cared about any reflection but your own."

"Why do you hate me so?" cries Mary, flinging out her open palms at her sides.

Edith wheels on the stairs, appraising Mary from head to toe with eyes which narrow as they move from her waist to the ring on her left hand as Mary moves it instinctively to rest over her stomach.

"Why shouldn't I despise you?"

Mary remains where she stands on the landing, staring at the now vacant spot where Edith pronounced the hateful words which seem still to echo through the high ceiling above the staircase, when Richard calls her name from below. Shaking off her stupor, she turns to find him emerging from the drawing room into the saloon.

"Tiff with Edith?" he asks, leaning against an arch as she descends.

"Something like that." Mary twitches her thumbs against her curled forefingers, too raw from the exchange to talk about it just yet. She plops down onto one of the slipper chairs by the fire, her head lolling back against the low curved back. "How did you and George overcome your differences and end your rivalry?"

"We threw a few punches."

She raises her head, and an eyebrow, as he stands in front of her chair so casually, hands shoved into the pockets of his trousers. "You know I'm beginning to worry that brawling is how you deal with all your conflicts."

"I didn't strike the Sketch editor. But you'll note that among those men I have got into fights with, George is going to be my best man, your father regards me with civility--"

"Grudging civility."

"--and the Honourable Mr Evelyn Napier sent me a note thanking me for inviting him to the wedding. He also says that he hopes we can put our unfortunate misunderstanding behind us because he regards you as a very dear friend."

Mary's heart gives a little twinge, Evelyn's kindness compounded by the contrast with Edith's bitter resentment, but she maintains her flippant tone with her reply.

"If I remark on what a nice fellow he is, will you fly into a rage and attack him at his club?"

"Absolutely not." Richard smirks. "Because I happen to know you have no desire to marry a nice fellow."

"I ought to take you up on those boxing lessons. I could punch Edith in the nose."

"Her nose is already at enough of a disadvantage, don't you think?" Grandmamma's broad American
tones fill the saloon as she sweeps into it, still swathed in her fur-trimmed coat—no doubt a silent remark on how poorly heated these English manor houses are.

"Mother!" Mama squeaks, while Granny splutters, "But Edith has my nose."

Grandmamma sizes her up. "I mean it's always out of joint."

Mama seems to accept this answer, but Granny clearly takes it as the further affront Mary does not doubt her American grandmother means it to be. If only Granny did not make the point by turning her head haughtily, sniffing as she tilts her nose slightly upward.

"I tried, Mama," says Mary. "I asked Edith to be a bridesmaid, and to put aside our differences for the good of the family, but she's bent on punishing me. For what, I really couldn't say." She pushes up from her chair and shuffles the few steps toward her mother, to look her in the eye at last. "I'm sorry. I know it's going to look awkward not having her in the wedding—"

Mama's index finger presses to Mary's lips, muffling any further attempt at protest.

"It matters less to me how our family look to other people than how we look to each other. You're not responsible for how Edith responds to your overtures. I'm proud of you for making one."

"Well isn't that just like Little Women?" Grandmamma says with a snort. She adjusts the collar of her coat with all the flair of a diva draped in a boa about to take the stage, then sweeps toward the staircase. "Now let's see what Grandmamma can do."

~*~

Mary doesn't have to wait very long at all to see the fruits of Grandmamma's labours with Edith. As she sits at her dressing table before dinner, Anna salvaging her hair from the ravages of the nap that became absolutely necessary after the quarrel and a quarter of an hour in the nursery with her little cousins, the bedroom door creaks open and Edith pokes her head in.

"All right," she says.

Briefly, Mary's gaze flickers up to meet Anna's in the mirror, then she swivels on the bench to look at her sister. "All right? You mean you've decided it won't compromise your strong moral convictions to be my bridesmaid?"

"I didn't say that. But yes. It's fortunate Mama had the foresight to have Lady Duff Gordon do a dress for me, just in case you changed your mind. Though you've no doubt chosen a colour that will look horrid on me."

Mary pinches her lips together against the automatic response—It's a good job you're used to being overlooked in my presence, then—and instead settles for the slightly less barbed, "I'm sure your martyrdom will be lauded by all the wedding guests."

When Edith is gone again Mary turns back to her mirror, and Anna resumes dressing her hair. "I hope your ladyship doesn't mind me saying, but I'm happy Lady Edith's changed her mind about the wedding. And that everything's turned out all right for you in the end."
Though Mary blinks against the tears that suddenly well in her eyes, the maid's kindness so much more sincerely meant than her sister's, swallowing the knot of emotion in her throat does nothing to relieve her voice of the pinched quality as she thanks Anna. "Even though I didn't make the best of beginnings?"

"I can't say I wouldn't do exactly the same, if I were in your ladyship's shoes. If I loved a man."

Anna tucks a final pin into a curl at Mary's nape and smiles. A private smile, the gentle blue eyes not meeting hers in the mirror, the lips just curved. Like the Mona Lisa, Mary thinks. Does Anna speak of love merely in the hypothetical? An image leaps suddenly from a corner of Mary's memory, of Anna walking happily beside Bates to church on Christmas morning. At once Mary dismisses the notion. Anna can do better than Papa's crippled former batman.

"You may be giving me too much credit," Mary says, "but thank you for your good wishes. Everything has turned out well, hasn't it?" She picks up the sunburst necklace Richard gave her for Christmas and fastens it around her neck. "So well that I'm tempted to breech another bound of etiquette and ask you to come with me to London. I don't know how I shall get along without you."

"Maybe I could be spared a few weeks so your ladyship won't have to take an unfamiliar lady's maid along on your honeymoon. But more than that and Lord Grantham might never forgive Sir Richard for poaching two housemaids in a year."

"Why, Anna," Mary says, in tones of mock surprise as she turns on the bench to face the young woman, "are you asking for a paid holiday to Paris?"

Anna giggles as she hands Mary her ivory evening gloves. "I've always fancied seeing the Venus de Milo in person."

"She's lost her arms, I hear," Mary says, tugging the satin over hers.

"It will be strange," Anna says softly, all joking going out of her voice, "to wait on only Lady Edith and Lady Sybil once you're gone to London."

"It may only be Sybil," Grandmamma says, barging into the bedroom. Mary tries to swallow her irritation it since Grandmamma's meddling will ease Mama's mind about one element of the wedding's lack of impropriety. "I told Edith I'd take her back to New York with me if she'd be your bridesmaid."

"Bribery," Mary says. "No wonder you and Richard are bosom friends. But I think there's a flaw in your plan, Grandmamma."

"Oh?"

"Papa will never let Edith go off to America. Not after everything I've done."

Grandmamma purses her lips. "We'll see. Though I have a backup plan. I had Edith pretty well convinced by pointing out to her that even though you've broken the ultimate rule and still got a rich, handsome husband and a society wedding, you're still marrying a difficult man you barely know and will start your new life with the added challenge of a baby."

"How encouraging."
"Don't worry, dear. I've still got an ace up my sleeve."

"Do I even want to know what it is?"

Leaning in conspiratorially, Grandmamma stage whispers, "Telling Edith to just think how fat you're going to be!"
The Dinner Party

Chapter Summary

A simple dinner party to celebrate the upcoming wedding may not be enough for the Crawleys and the Carlisles to cross the great social divide, but their inevitable clash brings Mary and Richard closer together.

Two evenings before the wedding, Anna must lace Mary's corset looser than usual to accommodate the slight swell of her abdomen which, alarmingly, seemed to have popped out overnight.

"That's just how it happened for me!" Mama gave a little clap of delight, followed by the misting of her eyes, at this new evidence of her first grandchild's presence, in spite of its revealing itself before its parents are properly married. Mary supposes she ought to be relieved by this joyful acceptance of her condition, but thanks to Grandmamma's dire predictions about the effects of pregnancy on her body, she enters Richard's drawing room to meet his parents more self-conscious than she could have imagined. Is this how Edith feels, always the ugly duckling among swans?

If the beaded overlay of her black gown doesn't hang in quite as clean a line as Lucy Duff Gordon designed, Richard makes no note of it as he offers his arm to lead her into the drawing room. Neither does his father, who grins broadly at her as he approaches, and though Mrs Carlisle and Richard's brother and sister-in-law are more restrained with their emotions as they rise from the two oversized teal sofas, Mary thinks it's safe to assume from the slightly old-fashioned Sunday best worn by all that their knowledge of the correct silhouette of fashionable evening gowns is not extensive.

A less charitable part of her fears what clothing they--especially Richard's brother, whom everyone will see as best man--will turn up wearing to the wedding.

"Mary, my dear!" The informality of Mark Carlisle's greeting is exaggerated by his lilting Scots brogue; his large hand--like Richard's, only rougher and covered in wiry white hairs and the spots that belie his age--closes around hers not to shake it, but to draw her in for an embrace.

"My new daughter-to-be," he adds, and Mary's breath hitches in surprise as his lips press to her cheek in a kiss which, combined with the scratch of his white pencil moustache, contains an earthy affection absent from any bestowed by her own father. Her stomach flutters as his hands close around hers again and he draws back, smiling beneath his white pencil moustache as he draws back to look her over. "Why, you're even more beautiful than Richie said."

"You're even kinder." Indeed, Mr Carlisle's kindness is as prominent as any of his physical features, and distinguishes him utterly from Richard, though she suppose they are quite alike in build. She turns to Richard, her lips twitching at Richie, which she makes a mental note to tease him about later. "And you ought to have done me justice. Isn't it your job to exaggerate?"

Richard's eyes narrow in an expression Mary is not entirely sure is mock annoyance, while Mr Carlisle chuckles, his laugh deep like his son's--a smoker's laugh--except that it rattles out more readily, as though loosened by a lifetime of use.
"Pretty and smart as a whip, too. I know what Richie sees in you. And this is his mother, Jean," he adds, as she comes to stand beside him.

"Delighted, Mrs Carlisle," Mary says, though that emotion is far from what she feels as she shakes the slight but callused hand. The top of Mrs Carlisle's severe iron grey coif scarcely reaches her husband's shoulder, but Jean's diminutive height is belied by the flash of the downturned eyes beneath the sharp ridge of her forehead, which seems to cut Mary most efficiently down to size.

"Now, that's Jean and Mark to you," Mark interjects.

"Only if Lady Mary is comfortable with it." Jean drops her hand as if she didn't want to take it in the first place. "I'm sure it would be quite proper for us to stick to more formal terms of address until we know each other better."

At Granny's snort from the doorway, where she and the family await introductions, Mary remembers Cousin Isobel meeting Granny and asking what she ought to her. Mary would like nothing better than to invoke the air of a Dowager Countess, but the laundress from Morningside controls the conversation.

"Well, well. My son's finally decided to settle down, with a beautiful and clever woman. Tell me--why are you marrying him? For his money?"

Is she being ironic?

"Certainly not," Mary replies. She tucks her arm through Richard's again--he has slipped his hand into his trouser pocket--and makes herself smile up at him. "For his bone structure."

Mark laughs again, as do Richard's brother and sister-in-law--albeit quietly. Politely. Jean's thin lips only pinch into a hard line as her eyes narrow and drop from Mary's face.

"If only Richie had taken that into consideration. Obviously he didn't, or he'd have noticed that despite your aristocratic cheekbones, you haven't the hips for childbearing."

Richard's forearm and bicep tense so hard beneath Mary's hand that he shakes. Though his mouth opens in white-lipped rage, it is Papa who booms his umbrage at Jean's untoward remark.

"I say! I expect this is a rite of passage for all expectant mothers, but if you must insist on regaling Lady Mary with ghastly tales from the delivery room, mightn't it wait until the men are at their port and cigars?"

It makes a nice change to have Papa stick up for her--even if it is mainly because his masculine sensibilities have been offended by such a purely female matter as birth; in any case, he's berated a woman to whom he has not been formally introduced in her name, which has to count for something.

And rather knocked the wind out of her sails, it seems from the way Jean's mouth opens in a silent o and closes again, several times, before she splutters:

"Rite of passage...Expectant mothers...Richard, does he mean...? This girl is...?" She squares her shoulders and lifts her chin, seeming almost to look down on her son though he stands a full foot above her. "Well. I thought it seemed a rushed engagement, but when you said a St Paul's wedding--"
When Granny insinuates herself into the conversation by planting her cane firmly between Richard and his mother, Mary hopes wildly that she means to extract them from the awkward conversation, but of course they are not so lucky.

"I'm Lady Mary's grandmother. Please let me assure you, Mrs Carlisle, that you are not the only member of our two families who finds this utterly distasteful."

"Distasteful! Why, it flies in the face of God!"

Mary glances over her shoulder for help, but Mama stands looking on in helpless amazement; Edith catches her gaze, however, and grins nastily.

"Now Jeannie," Mark says, pulling his wife gently aside whilst their other son moves into place.

George is unquestionably Richard's younger brother, only with thick auburn hair and eyes obscured by a glare on his wire-rimmed spectacles; his hand rests lightly at his wife's back.

"She's only been after me for the last decade to marry and start a family," Richard growls beneath the frantic counterpoint of Mama following Granny's suit and introducing herself, Papa, and the girls to his parents.

"You know Mother," says George, quietly. "Impossible to please."

"I know that better than you."

"And I'm sure you know Richard." George turns to Mary with a conspiratorial half-grin. "Better than everyone at everything."

"I believe that answers the question as to why I'm marrying him."

"Which is exactly the right answer." George's grin stretches. "Welcome to the clan, Lady Mary. Are you ready for us?"

"Just Mary. I'm quite comfortable with informal terms of address. And yes, I believe I am ready. Anyway, I'm inflicting the Crawleys and the Levinsons on you."

She glances toward the doorway; Grandmamma and Uncle Harold's family delayed their arrival so the immediate families might first become acquainted "Without the Americans hogging the limelight," Grandmamma said, without any trace of irony, but they're due to descend at any moment, along with Aunt Rosamund. "Richard may be running for the Highlands by the time this dinner party's at an end."

"So far your grandmother and my mother-in-law seem to be kindred spirits," says George's wife, Aileen, whose soft voice and the upward lilt of the encouraging words remind Mary a bit of Sybil.

Lifting her brows in acknowledgment, Mary shakes the other woman's hand and says, "Let's hope they continue to find the same things to complain about."

~*~
"What's that?" asks Richard's middle nephew, George, Jr, a miniature of his father down to the spectacles behind which he warily eyes the silver serving tray Jameson the butler offers.

The boys were playing in the neighbourhood park while the adults made their acquaintances and, seated diagonally across the table to the children, Granny looks as if she wishes they were still there, or upstairs sleeping like the baby.

"I don't know," Aileen whispers to him over little Andrew, seated between them. "Eat it anyway."

Hearing her, Granny answers through tight lips, "Turbot in lobster sauce."

Mary sighs at the unveiled annoyance at the Carlisles' lack of refinement; she hoped the previous week of dining with Americans and their manners and their children at Downton would prepare Granny for Richard's family.

"Turbot is Mama's favourite," remarks Aunt Rosamund.

"Not mine," George, Jr says. "I don't like it at all."

"I don't wike it tall," echoes Andrew.

"This from children whose favourite is probably haggis," Granny mutters.

"That's right," Jean retorts, occupying the seat opposite Richard. "We don't rear picky children."

"We do try to rear polite ones, though," Aileen says, flushing. "Is that how we behave when we're guests at someone else's table, boys?"

"Or at our own?" George leans around his wife to raises his dark eyebrows above the rims of his spectacles in an approximation of the imposing expression that so frequently crosses Richard's face.

Andrew shakes his head, while George, Jr says with heavy resignation, "We eat what's set before us and don't complain."

Jameson starts to serve him, but Mary indicates otherwise. "Perhaps the red mullet or the filet de sole for the children, Jameson?"

They turn huge grateful eyes to her, and she smiles. After a week in the company of Uncle Harold's girls, which made her both grateful for how little time she's spent with young children and afraid that she may not be fond of her own, she dreaded meeting the Carlisles. Yet she found it genuinely endearing when they came in rosy-cheeked from the park, and little George solemnly asked, Is this Auntie Lady?

"I don't care much for turbot, either," she adds, and Aileen smiles shyly. Beneath the table Richard's fingers squeeze her knee, and beside him, Mama leans in to beam her approval of the smooth bit of hostessing.

"My girls loathe seafood," says Aunt Ruby, her vowels like molasses due to her Southern drawl. She grins as the twins at the end of the table put out their tongues and make unladylike and unappetizing sounds when the whitebait goes by. "Except for fried catfish with a lot of ketchup!"
"I should buy Heinz stock." Uncle Harold guffaws at his own joke.

"Do you have any ketchup, please sir?" the oldest boy, Mark, at the other end of the table, asks the bemused footman who serves him a portion of sole.

"I'm afraid not, young man," the butler apologises to Mark; Mary lifts up a silent thankful prayer that they're not at Downton where Carson, Lord love him, would take such a request as a personal affront to the social order.

Richard looks up at Jameson as if he did give one of Carson's disapproving looks. "You know what to do about that, don't you?"

"It's half-past eight, Sir Richard."

"Yes." Richard slices into his whitebait. "I have a watch, and am accustomed to being aware of the time. Now send the kitchen maid out for ketchup."

Crimson-faced, Aileen protests that Mark doesn't require special treatment, whilst Jameson splutters that he only meant to point out that the shops are closed.

Richard's knife scrapes against his plate, and his eyes glint silver in the light of the electric chandelier over the table. "Find some."

Without delay Jameson obeys, his footsteps receding down the kitchen stairs leaving the dining room uncomfortably. Mary knows that as de facto hostess it's her duty to put the guests at ease, but she is too flabbergasted to do so. Not by Richard's outburst so much as by Mark's reaction to it; he stares across the table at Richard for a long moment, then away with a shake of his head, for the first time seeming to share Jean's disappointment in their son.

"Condiment preferences aside," Mama's voice blessedly fills the void, "your boys are perfect little gentlemen at the table, Mrs Carlisle."

"Why shouldn't they be?" Jean demands over her embarrassed daughter-in-law's thanks. "They know good and well they'll be sent to bed without supper if they misbehave."

Mama laughs nervously. "I'm afraid all my notions about raising boys come from Little Men."

"Are they as idealistic as your notions of raising daughters from Little Women?" asks Aunt Rosamund, and beside her, Edith snorts.

"Cora's a great admirer of Louisa May Alcott," Grandmamma chimes in. "Mary's middle name is Josephine--for the heroine."

"How fanciful," Jean says sarcastically. "I believe in family names. Or biblical ones."

"We'll have to agree to disagree on the subject of names," Granny says. "But I think the Levinsons would do better to rear children by your example, Mrs Carlisle, rather than American novelists."

She sips her wine, cringing as the twins finger paint with the fish sauce on the table linens, unreprimanded.

"Hear that, Ruby?" says Grandmamma, leaning across Harold to address her. "Violet must be
coming around to having kids at the dinner table if she's talking about sending them away from it."

"Fancy having the luxury of room to dine in separately from one's children," Jean says with a snort. "Nursery, indeed."

Across the table Mary catches George and Aileen's eyes, which twinkle with their shared joke. So ends the alliance between Lady Grantham and Jean Carlisle.

"I suppose it's too much to hope, Richie, that you won't foist your babies off on nannies and nursery maids like all these fashionable people?"

Mary darts a guilty glance up at Richard, recalling their recent discussion about filling precisely those positions in their household staff, but he is intent on the silverware lying crisscrossed on his empty plate. "Not foist, no."

Jameson's timely return with a silver sauce boat of ketchup puts an end to further discussion on that subject. Mark, Jr tucks into his sole as if it is his favourite dish, and as if he is in a race against the footman and butler clearing away everyone else's fish plates in preparation of the second course. He startles, as they all do, and drops his fork when Virginia suddenly cries out.

"Cousin Sybbie!" The ginger-haired twin sits up on her knees in her chair, supporting herself with one sauce-covered hand on the table as the other gestures wildly down the table at him. "That boy talks funny. Also he's very handsome."

Ginevra leaps up, too. "And he tried to kiss Izzy at the park!"

During the ensuing mayhem--George ordering the culprit to bed, Aileen mortified nearly to tears and stammering apologies to Isodora's parents, Uncle Harold chortling, and the servants shuffling to bring in the meat course--Mary decides that some bold and modern values are worth far less than the old-fashioned ones. This is the last dinner party in this house that will include children. Including her own.

Of course, that doesn't solve the problem of adults who behave like children.

"Clearly certain behaviours run in the Carlisle blood," Granny's voice emerges as calm settles.

"The curse of having handsome dimpled sons," the elder Mark says, not looking especially scandalised at his grandson's or his son's amorous deeds, though Jean disagrees. "You always indulged their vanity."

, breathless and red-faced from laughing. "It takes two to tango," says Uncle Harold, wiping away tears of mirth, "and Izzy's a little minx. That runs in the Levinson blood." He winks at Mary who fails to stop a flush. "Though it looks like the Carlisle clan got the knack for making boy babies."

"I say, Harold!" Papa speaks at last. "There are still young children present!"

"Obviously George's know the facts of life." Jean glares at him.

"Don't be such a prude, Robert," Grandmamma chides. "Harold only means it'd be fun to have a boy in the family again."

"Sons or daughters--it makes no difference to men like us, does it? Richard is intent on the mutton
platter from which he serves himself, though he aimed the remark at Papa, who looks duly insulted.

"Talk to me after your three daughters' weddings land you in the poorhouse," Harold says. "I'm worried Mary's shindig will give mine grand ideas."

"That's all Richard's doing, I assure you," she says.

George smirks as he chews, then washes down the bite with his claret. "No one doubted that for a moment."

"He's always been a dreadful show-off," says Jean. "And to what end? His millions haven't bought their approval." She glances at Papa, who has the good grace to flush and start to protest, though she cuts him off. "Twelve years Richie's been in London, and he hasn't even properly furnished this house."

Her eyes dart around the unadorned dining room before snapping back to Richard. He flinches—or does Mary only imagine it? She does, though it is her own conscience that stings for not understanding her fiancé sooner. There is no time to ponder her realization now, however, as Jean deals her final blow.

"Have you hosted a dinner party before tonight? Or do you live at that bloody office?"

Her thin pale eyebrows twitch upward on her brow in challenge. For a moment Richard's face mirrors hers, features as though etched in stone. Then he raises his wine glass, drinking slowly until he has drained it, sets it down, and smiles at the Levinsons.

"I may have to, if I'm to afford this yacht Harold insists I must have."

The conversation carries on around Mary without her hearing more than the odd snatch about boating and fishing, vaguely aware of Mark and George joining in, until Grandmamma groans. "Boats, boats, boats. That's all I ever hear from Harold. It was his first word."

"I expect you've had quite enough of them after your voyage, as well," Aileen ventures.

"Honey, don't get her started," Ruby says, and Jean takes her at her word.

"I don't approve of transatlantic travel."

"Neither do I," Granny says. "Robert's agreed to allow Edith to go to America with her other grandmother." He told her she might if she'd be Mary's bridesmaid, not knowing she already struck that bargain with Grandmamma. "I don't know how he can, after poor Patrick..."

"If the good Lord intended man to cross oceans, we'd have fins." Jean takes a bite of lamb and says as she chews, "Now we have these great ocean liners whose captains claim even God can't sink them. The Titanic was a modern Tower of Babel, if you ask me."

"It seems unorthodox views of the Titanic are a Carlisle family trait, too." Edith's waspish remark recalls that awkward tea at Fortnum's. How gladly Mary would trade Jean or Grandmamma for Frida Uhl now.

"Captain Smith did not say that," Richard cuts in. "It's only a rumour. I should know. And you should know that the Titanic is a sensitive subject for Mary's family."
For once, Papa regards Richard with something like gratitude as Mama explains in a crooning way, as though to children, "Lord Grantham's cousins were aboard the ship."

Mark makes profuse apologies for Jean's blunder, but despite his evident embarrassment and the tragic subject matter, Grandmamma remains cheerful as she saws her meat in that appalling American fashion.

"One of them was Mary's fiancé. The heir to Downton and the title and my late husband's fortune."

Jean's eyes narrow on Mary. "How quickly her broken heart mended and transferred its affections."

"She was only going to marry Cousin Patrick for the house and the title," says Edith.

"But she fell in love with Richard before she could think twice about the new heir," Sybil offers, helpfully, but Edith shrugs off this attempt at painting their sister as anything but a gold-digger. "Cousin Matthew was already engaged."

"In any case," says Grandmamma, "I'm glad Mary's escaped this vicious circle of marrying heirs and bearing them."

"The circle you thrust Cora into?" Granny says.

"That was Isodore, mainly," Grandmamma says over Mama's soft pleas for her to stop. "He may have made his fortune in America, but he always admired the European aristocracy." She gestures at Mama with her fork. "And of course Cora fell in love with Robert. There was nothing I could do then but try to love him, too." She winks at Mary.

"Why," asks Granny, "when he already had a mother to love him?"

"For an hour a day, before dinner?"

"Talking of children," George says, getting up again, nearly bumping into Jameson as he comes to clear the dinner plates, "I'd best go see Mark's not getting himself into even more trouble."

Aileen rises, too, saying she must check on the baby. She suggests they put the younger boys to bed, but the footman have just entered with Charlotte Russe and strawberries, and George, Jr and Andrew beg to be permitted to have some. Richard comes to his nephews defence, saying it would hardly be fair to let them have their pudding when the girls are having theirs; George's cheek muscles flickers at this, as though he resents being advised about his children, but Aileen nods her assent.

"I don't like pudding!" shrieks Virginia as the Carlisles exit the dining room, while Ginevra says, "I want dessert!"

"Dessert is pudding, chickadees," Ruby says. "It's one of those funny old English things!"

"Lots of English things are funny," Grandmamma says.

"You'll have no argument from the Scotsmen at the table," Mark says, a twinkle in his eye, at which Harold throws back his head and laughs.

"Take this whole entail business," Grandmamma says after a moment, when everyone is too busy
enjoying their Charlotte Russe to fill the conversational void. "It never occurred to me what might happen if Cora didn't have a son. That her money might go to her husband's fourth cousin once-removed instead of her daughter. It just doesn't work that way in America."

"Or thankfully," Richard says, getting up, "in most classes. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll just take the boys up to bed, since they've finished their pudding."

"Can't we have more, Uncle Richie?" asks George Jr, looking like Oliver Twist in the workhouse clutching his empty bowl.

"Pwease Unca Witchie?" Andrew's pleas turn to delighted shriek as Richard slings him over his shoulder, heedless of the custard rubbing off his nephew's cheeks onto his tailcoat.

"You won't sleep if we allow that," Mary says, pulling on her gloves as she rises to accompany them, "and your mother would never forgive me."

"She would, Auntie Lady." George slips a sticky hand into her own. "Because you're so pretty and nice."

"Well, well," says Grandmamma as they make their way around the table. "She may have more of you than Violet in her than we thought, Cora."

Apparently she doesn't notice Mary cringing for her soiled glove, or holding George's hand well away from her skirt. Nor does Mama, looking so gooey-eyed that Mary must look at Jean to restore the balance. Instead she finds herself entirely off-kilter when she notes a subtle softening of her future mother-in-law's features. Papa, too, seems to regard Richard's retreating form as if he has stepped suddenly beneath a new light, and not the one cast by the neon sign of the Cave of the Golden Calf.

~*~

They deposit the boys in a guest room where all three share one bed--That's how they sleep at home, George says, in a smaller bed than this. Like we used to, eh, Richie? He ensconces himself with his sons to read Kipling before they sleep, while Aileen retires to the next bedroom to nurse little Jeannie, which is also how they manage at home. If such is a mother's lot, Mary is doubly sure she will disappoint Jean's burgeoning acceptance by foisting her baby off on nursemaids, after all.

Then again, the children were George and Aileen's ticket out of the uncomfortable atmosphere of the dining room. This could prove most useful in the future for avoiding such awkward gatherings, Christmas night Charades at Downton leaping immediately to mind.

At the click of the latch behind George, Richard leans back against the midnight blue and olive patterned wallpaper. His exhalation of breath goes on for so long that Mary thinks he must have held it in all night; as it leaves him his shoulders sag and he slouches down the wall, long legs angling out into the green carpeted hall. The garish arts and crafts wallpaper makes Mary's eyes cross, so she stands next to him against the wall, bracing herself against it for the inevitable rant about the unmitigated disaster of the family dinner.

After some moments' silence, Mary wonders if his pride is too wounded to speak first, so she lays a light hand on his arm and opens the conversation.
"I see now why you wanted to have the house in order. Why you want the society wedding."

The criss-crossed lines at the corners of his eyes deepen as he regards her intently, almost asking what she means, but Mary finds that she has no ready answer, her dinnertime realisations difficult to put into words—at least, words that will not wound him further. Tonight proved what he once told her, that his fortune made his working class family uncomfortable. His rise in society distanced him from his own people, yet as Jean rightly pointed out, Mary’s do not fully accept him, either.

_I go everywhere and know everyone_, his voice whispers to her from Aunt Rosamund's porch last September, _but it's always work_. The news didn't stop; how could he? was her response, but he insisted he could—_If I met someone worth stopping for_. His fingers curled around her elbow then, and his lips brushed a soft kiss across her cheek. Now, their roles are almost reversed, though instead of kissing him Mary reaches her other hand across her body to stroke his face with her gloved fingertips. Richard's hand covers them, pressing her palm briefly against his cheek before grasping her hand firmly and straightening up.

"Actually," he says, "there is something else I want you to see. One part that is in perfect order."

He guides her down the hall and across the staircase landing to the wing where the family rooms lie. She saw this part of the house last month when she was up, of course; her cheekbones prickle warm and the tips of her fingers tingle and her pulse races with exhilaration at the thought of going back to his master bedroom, this time without Mama along to chaperone. For a moment she worries that he will have had it redecorated to more feminine tastes, when truly she likes it just as he's done it up for himself with an imposing dark four-poster bed and earthy hues of fabric and upholstery. Richard's stride doesn't slow as they approach that room, but continues on to a door at the end of the hall which was totally empty when she saw it last.

And which he told her he thought would make a fine nursery.

Her heart thuds in her chest as his fingers curl around the knob and twist. The door swings inward and his arm stretches out over her shoulder to hold it open for her as she passes through into the dark, the filmy white curtains all she can make out in the moonlight until a flick of the light switch makes her blink against the sudden lightning brilliance of the chandelier at the centre of the room.

He _has_ had a bit of redecorating done, the formerly plain room now a fairy land. A mural wraps around all four walls, the two largest covered with a castle up which a latticework of roses climb, and a knight in shining armour fighting a fire-breathing dragon, the smaller spaces filled with long-haired maidens in towers, boys climbing beanstalks toward gleaming golden treasures atop clouds, and pumpkins transforming into carriages.

"Oh, Richard."

"The furniture came from your grandmother," Richard says, and Mary realises she unconsciously was running her hand over the high arched foot of the cot, the head of which is canopied with soft blue silk draping all the way from the ceiling. "She brought it with her from Cincinnati on a hunch. A family heirloom, apparently."

Mary wouldn't know, never having been to Cincinnati. "A funny wedding present," she remarks as his arm snakes around her waist, drawing her back against his chest.

"It would be--if it was a wedding present, and if it was for you." The rasp of his voice contains an
edge of irritation, though Mary knows it is not really directed at her, and she leans against him, enjoying the deep rumble of his voice at her back. "It's more a birthday present. For little Mister or Miss Carlisle."

"Don't forget Honourable. You'll have a peerage one day."

Richard's hand on her belly presses her tighter against him, and she knows she has pleased him. Nevertheless, his reply surprises her.

"Even if I don't...Our children won't be deprived of any material good or any opportunity because they lack the right title. Or because one side of the family tree put down roots in Morningside, Edinburgh as a printer, a laundress, and a shopkeeper."

As he speaks he leans his face over her shoulder so that they stand cheek-to-cheek, swaying slightly. Long fingers trace absent patterns over the beading at the front of her gown, while the other strokes her exposed collarbones at the neckline. Now and again his pinky skirts down into the exposed valley of cleave; the thumb of the other hand stretches up to skim the underside of her breasts.

"The other half's never worked a day in centuries, yet we never had a nursery like this."

Mary pauses as his warm lips kiss her temple, then her cheekbone; in a gold-framed mirror above an opulent Louis XIV dresser, she glimpses herself smiling slightly as the image and his touches make her bite down on her lower lip to stifle an unchaste moan. When she draws a deep breath she regains control of her voice to speak, albeit in a husky tone which she is not at all certain is any more proper than a moan would be.

"It's more like a little kingdom."

She tilts her head back against his shoulder to accommodate the downward path of his lips to her jaw and the sensitive spot where it meets her ear. The fine hairs at the back of her neck stand upright as his warm breath makes goosebumps pimple on her skin; she resists the ensuing shiver, which seems to make him kiss her all the more intently, the pressure of his thumb hardening on her breastbone. Mary looks up at the ceiling, noticing for the first time that the gilt mouldings, aglow in the bright light of the chandelier, melt into golden orange into pink into mauve into the bright unbroken blue of the morning sky.

His hand curls around her throat and his thumb at the base of her jaw turns her head toward him, their noses bumping. Their eyes meet, and Mary lifts a brow at him.

"The sun never sets on the Carlisle empire?"

He covers her mouth with his, then, his tongue sweeping between her lips and past her teeth as his thumb presses against the throbbing pulse point in her neck. Mary feels him harden behind her and her own desire mounts. She hooks her fingers over his stiff collar and works the button open so she may touch the beating of his pulse in tempo with her own. When she does she breaks the kiss to press her lips to it, to taste his cologne and the slightly salty tang of his skin, but as she does his relentless caresses at the front of her gown cease, his fingers curving gently over the subtle rounding of her stomach.

"This is new."

Again Mary's heart accelerates, though now from self-consciousness; she bites her lip, relieved that
his gaze is not on hers, but wishing it weren't on the latest effect of pregnancy. In her periphery, she notes their mirror images and thinks how she was not this unsure of herself when they stood naked together in her bedroom before they committed the act that yielded these results. She gives her head a little toss and rolls her eyes in imitation of her former confidence, though she cannot help but fear that Grandmamma's prophesied doom to her figure will come to pass.

"I looked normal last night. You don't think anyone saw a bump before dinner, do you?"

"I didn't, but I want to now."

Richard's hand sweeps lower, fist bunching the fabric of her skirt. He lifts it, exposing her slender ankles and calves clad in black silk stockings, and the ivory lace at the hems of her drawers above her knees, and she gasps. Not because he's taking a liberty, but because he pronounced want with a tone of gentle awe.

_I always get what I want_, he telegraphed her when Papa summoned her to Downton. It sounded so rakish then, but since she's learnt that what Richard wants from her is a home, a wife, a child. Before knowing him, she would have bound herself to a man who would give her the best house and the highest title. She never dreamed of marrying for love. Neither to receive it, nor to give it.

_There is more to you than that_. She never believed it, though Richard knew. And now she is more, and the realization makes her wrap her arms around his shoulders and cling tight to him.

"Sorry," Richard says, releasing her skirt to fall about her legs. "In two days time we'll be properly married, and I can see then."

He starts to move away from her and she grasps his lapels. "We...don't have to wait."

"Of course not. But we should." The softness of the kiss he bestows on her lips is belied by the roguish glint in his eyes, crinkled at the corners. "I will have you know that once we are married, I fully intend to drag you upstairs for that sort of rendezvous during dinner parties."

"Not if I drag you first."

Laughing, Mary embraces him again. And the girl in the black dress looking back at her from the mirror is no longer sad.
The Bride

Chapter Summary

The wedding day has finally arrived, but before Mary can walk down the aisle, unexpected members of the family make sure she's fully ready to enter her new life—and leave theirs.

"That dress is very becoming on you," Mary tells Anna, her gaze flickering from the inspection of her own image in the full-length mirror as the maid does up the eyelet closures at the back of her gown.

"Your ladyship is the only one meant to receive compliments today."

"Hmm, good point." As Mary's eyes swing back to the front reflection clad in ivory, they meet the twinkling blue pair over her shoulder.

"Thank you, Lady Mary," says Anna. "It's a lovely dress."

It was one of her old ones, and not even very old at that. Mary wore it only a handful of times since it made its debut at Agnes Belcher's wedding last October, and it doesn't fit her at all now. In spite of Mama's protestations that it might again after the baby, she gave it to Anna—along with most of her other old clothes, her trousseau more than sufficient to clothe her stylishly for the time being.

Anyway, Richard has promised to take her to the fashion houses of Paris on their honeymoon; she's determined to have one Poiret gown, at least.

Anna's figure is shorter and not so well underpinned as Mary's in the royal blue day dress, of course. Nor does her dumpy little black straw boater lend quite the finishing flair as the peacock plumed picture hat Mary wore with it, but she hadn't quite the generosity to part with her hats as well as her dresses. After all, Richard has a scarf to match that hat. They'll make quite the preening pair, indeed; a smirk twitches the corners of her mouth as she envisions them promenading arm and arm about Cadogan Square.

Any guilt she might have felt at not being more generous with her millinery was assuaged in the gift she made Anna of the cameo brooch pinned to her bodice.

"Well, Paris is the fashion capital of the world," Mary says. "You should look your best in case there's a handsome young curator showing you the Venus de Milo."

"I thought the point of Paris was to entice me to come back to be your ladies' maid in London, m'lady?"

"That doesn't mean you can't have a bit of fun there first."

Anna purses her lips as she adjusts something at the back of Mary's gown, but thankfully says nothing about the results of her bit of premarital fun.
Of which, Mary thinks with an exhalation of relief as she returns her attention to her reflection, there is no evidence in the clever Lucy Duff Gordon creation. Even if the dressmaker had not turned out to be the miracle worker at corsetry Diana Manners professed her to be, the construction of the dress is enough to conceal any new figure features that would belie her appearance as a blushing bride. Framed by an embroidered square neckline, a blousy long-sleeved lace bodice accommodates her fuller bosom, but appears only to be a softly romantic detail not designed for that purpose. Fitted at the narrower part of her waist, a more structured band of heavy silk drapes most becomingly over the length of the skirt, intricate chenille embroidery drawing the eye away from the hint of a bulge at her middle.

"Paris may be the fashion capital," Anna says, moving around to inspect Mary from all angles, "but I don't think your ladyship could have found a more perfect wedding gown there."

"You think I look the part? The press baron's bride, whose photographs will grace the pages of every paper in London, Yorkshire, and Edinburgh?"

A gentle smile is Anna's only acknowledgment of Mary's sudden rush of uncertainty, along with a press of her fingers as she brushes past. "Let's see it with the veil, shall we?"

"En français?"

Since Anna agreed to accompany her to Paris, Mary took it upon herself to teach her maid enough French to get by on her own in the hotel and around the city, as a honeymoon is certain to leave her frequently without occupation. An impromptu lesson as Mary manoeuvres her cumbersome cathedral-length train to the dressing table bench and Anna carefully arranges the pearl orange blossom headpiece in her coif provides a welcome distraction from pre-wedding jitters. In the spirit of the day and of her maid's support she ignores the urge to critique Anna's pronunciation too harshly, though the broad northern tones corrupt the language in a manner that offend even English ears on behalf of the French; these lessons have given her a new appreciation for Richard's ongoing battle against Gwen's accent, which as yet prohibits her from answering his office telephones.

Soon another, more grating accent assaults Mary's ears.

"Knock knock!" Grandmamma calls out; she does actually rap on the door--after she has already stepped through it.

Mary turns to see her grandmother covering her eyes, more for dramatic effect than to actually shield her from potential immodesty as she peeps one blue eye between splayed fingers. "Are you decent?"

"Would it stop you if I wasn't?"

"Ha!" Grandmamma lowers her hand and comes fully into the bedroom. "Nope! Who do you think you get your lack of inhibition from, honey?"

What an appalling notion, Mary thinks, but smiles at her grandmother in the mirror as she takes Anna's place behind her bench to squeeze her shoulders.

"You are positively radiant, my darling girl." Mary's thanks dies on her tongue as Grandmamma interrupts her to add with a wink, "That pregnant glow comes in handy. Now," she goes on, seeming despite her voluminous furs to glide across the room to the door, which still stands ajar; she sticks her head out, glancing into the hall as if on the lookout, "has your mama been in to see you yet?"
"Then I better talk fast." The door clicks shut as Grandmamma leans back into it; then, as if it were made of rubber, she springs off, flopping onto the nearby sofa. "I guess she hasn't given you that traditional mother-daughter chat about what to expect on your wedding night? I mean, you already know what to expect."

"Begging your ladyship's pardon," says Anna, with a little curtsy, "if you won't require anything else, I ought to see whether Miss O'Brien needs help with Lady Edith and Lady Sybil."

"Ruby could use a hand," says Grandmamma. "Lordy but hers are full with those girls."

"Mama will be along soon and Sybil would appreciate your assistance, I'm sure," Mary says, hoping to spare Anna the fate of Ruby's children.

Yesterday at the rehearsal, Ginevra and Virginia threw their flower petals at each other all the way down the aisle, which made Mary suspect asking them to be bridesmaids was not the most well-advised decision she ever made. Though that seems to be a theme with this wedding. At least Richard's nephews made up for their dinner shenanigans by taking their page boy duties as seriously as their uncle takes his newspaper business.

When Anna has left them, Grandmamma says, "Cora's been living with your Victorian Granny and Papa so long she probably thinks the upside to your little scandal is that she's spared talking to you about the birds and the bees."

"As it so happens," Mary replies, "she told me how exciting lovemaking is. Which influenced my decision to try it."

She ought to know better than to try and shut an American up with a shocking speech; Grandmamma is silent for a moment, but apparently only because she is impressed, and not repentant.

"But has Cora also told you that sex can be even more exciting during pregnancy? That it's perfectly safe, and that you may want it more often than usual?"

Mary does not inform her grandmother that in fact Richard told her this--at least the part about it being safe. Concerned about the threatened miscarriage--or perhaps more anxious about a sexless honeymoon--he asked his physician, much to Mary's chagrin--though perhaps more to the doctor's. Richard really has no shame.

Thank heaven she is spared the shame of admitting any part of this to Grandmamma, who is more interested in imparting wisdom rather than in hearing how informed Mary is.

"I call it God's little gift to mothers," she continues, getting up from the sofa. "After you have that baby, you never want to make love again. But before the stork lands?" She shudders. "Wow-ee! It's just the most terrific fun. Enjoy Paris, dear."

As abruptly as she entered the room she exits it, but pokes her head and hand back through the door to pucker her lips and blow a kiss.
The winter chill touches Mary's skin through her filmy veil as she leans close to the window, not quite pressing her forehead to it—*that would be childish*—in the hope of catching a clear glimpse of this moment. London passes in a blur as the limousine carries them across town from Grantham House to St Paul's, the buildings, pedestrians, and other automobiles and omnibuses slipping by before her eyes can really focus on any of them, as if she is in a dream.

*A dream come true,* she thinks with a wry twitch of her lips. That's what she ought to feel, what other, starry-eyed brides being driven to the church to be given in marriage to the men they love would feel. But she is not any other woman; she never dreamed of her wedding day, nor of the man she would marry. Richard is not the man of her dreams, but he is *hers,* and she wants this day to be as real in her mind as if every instant of it were captured in black and white, sharp photographs and strong text beneath bold headlines.

Luckily for her, much of it will be.

Turning from the window, she sees Papa in plain relief beside her, his brow furrowed as he peers out the opposite side of the car.

"This isn't what *you* always imagined my wedding day would be," she says, *his* thoughts unveiled even by his natural English reserve. "A car instead of a horse-drawn carriage, the streets filled with strangers going about their daily business instead of your tenants and villagers taking a holiday. And not a scrap of bunting to be seen."

She meant only to tease, but Papa's reply is weighted down. "I've had that wedding already, haven't I? In another century."

Sighing, he leans back against the leather upholstered seat as much as his top hat will allow; not all the shadows on his face, Mary notices, are cast by the brim. Always before his plump features preserved a certain youthfulness. When did the creases at the corners of his eyes become so deeply etched? When did the hair at his temples turn fully grey? Papa's years are not so much more advanced than Richard's, yet his vibrancy and restless energy lag far behind.

Uncle Harold joked about daughters making a man old before his time. Was Papa like this before her picture appeared in the *Sketch* last autumn? Or were these changes wrought more recently, by her greater scandal?

How much has she missed with her gaze trained to examine her own visage in the mirror?

When Papa speaks again, however, he seems equally unaware of her. "The world has changed so much since that day. Our little world at Downton seems a different one entirely since I read that newspaper headline last April. In a way I've felt as though I were clinging to a bit of driftwood in the middle of the Atlantic as I watched you rowed away to stranger shores."

He looks at her then, and she is almost startled by the brightness of his eyes as they catch the rays of early afternoon sun that slant through the window behind her. Oddly, though the veil obscures her face, she has an impression that Papa sees her more clearly than he ever has been before.

"It isn't strange to you, is it, Mary? You've found a safe haven."
Safe haven? Can she have heard correctly? Has the veil obstructed her ears, too? She stares straight ahead at the vacant seat across from her.

"I thought you were of the opinion that Richard ruined me."

She feels the velvety kid of Papa's grey glove cover one hand, gently uncurling her fingers which bunch her dress in her lap.

"My darling Mary," he says, "you were everything a lady ought to be at that ghastly dinner party with the Carlisles."

At that, she smiles; Richard whispered to her at the rehearsal that his mother paid Mary a similar compliment after she left with her family: *I was relieved to find her so ladylike. It's been my nightmare that you'd bring home that Manners girl whose shenanigans always feature so prominently in your newspapers.*

The light press of Papa's fingers on her hand draws her eyes back to his face. Her heart catches, pressing against her ribcage at the shimmer in his eyes, which she cannot now attribute to the glare of the sun as the car slips into the shadow of an office building.

"If you think that anything or anyone could tarnish you in my eyes," he says, "then my sin is the greatest of all those committed these last months. You are wholly as perfect to me now as you were the first moment I held you in my arms."

"Oh, Papa." Mary's voice breaks and she leans into him, tucking her head into the crook of his neck as his arms go around her, one light hand cradling her head.

"My God, I was petrified of dropping you, of hurting you," he chokes out, and then draws back. "That's exactly what I feared I did do, watching paralysed as you stepped out from the safety of Downton into this new world in London. You'll discover what I mean soon."

His face goes very red, and behind her veil Mary's does, too--ridiculously, in light of how unflappable she remained throughout Grandmamma's earlier crude speech.

"While I cannot pretend I don't wish you'd acted differently, or that I don't sincerely hope your sisters won't emulate your courtship," Papa says, "I do admire the courage with which you have faced these changes in circumstance. And above all I hope the bridges between our two worlds haven't been burnt."

Emotion swells in Mary's throat and burns in her eyes, but a glance out the window reveals them to be rounding the corner into St Paul's Church Yard. She blinks back and swallows down the tears; she will not walk down the aisle with puffy eyes or speak her vows with a voice hoarse from weeping.

Smiling, she turns teasing again. "Richard has great plans for building a country house, you know. We shan't always be separated by two hundred miles."

"Indeed," says Papa, stiffly, and Mary's smirk deepens. So much for bridging the gap. She does not say so aloud, however, distracted by the squeak of the limousine's brakes as the car slows to a stop in front of the cathedral.
To her dismay, the scene around her moves slowly but no more clearly than it did throughout the drive. The dream-like haze persists as the chauffeur opens the car door and Papa slides out, turning back to hand Mary down as she contends with bouquet and train. Wrapping her arm around Papa’s, she peers up at the dome of St Paul’s, feeling for a moment that she’s got her bearings.

Then, the dazzling light of a camera flashbulb renders it impossible to see anything at all.

~*~

When they rehearsed this, Mary thought the three minute procession down the cathedral aisle would never end. Now, she wonders if the musicians are rushing the tempo of the trumpet voluntary. Don’t blink, or you’ll miss it, Mama told her. The temporary blindness induced by the photographers having passed, Mary does her best to follow the advice as she makes her bridal walk. Just three minutes out of her entire life...

Pipe organ and trumpet echo through pillared archways, the strains dancing with the sunlight that beams through the glass of the dome, and seem to take a physical form that carries her down the black and white tile behind the clergy without her having to consider her steps. Worry kept her up half the night—that Isodora will step on her veil as she did when they practiced the processional, or that in her own impatience to reach Richard she will trip over her hem or the heavy embroidered satin train and humiliate herself in front of everyone who is anyone in London society. She holds to Papa’s arm and enjoys the dashing figure Richard makes from behind in his dark morning coat and dove grey pinstriped trousers. Even so, her pulse flutters quicker beneath the lace cuffs of her sleeves with every step she draws nearer to him. What will his reaction be to her wedding gown?

That she looks beautiful is no question. She has seen her own reflection, everyone at the house told her so, and even above the resonant organ and trumpet duet she hears the murmurs of the wedding guests attesting to this fact—though of course she does not turn her head left or right to see their reactions, but keeps her gaze trained straight ahead, to the backs of her bridegroom and his brother at the front of the nave. She sighs to see George properly attired; the apprehension when he wore a day suit to dinner heightened to alarm when she heard Richard’s father mention his intent to wear a kilt to the ceremony. Whether Mark meant it in jest or in earnest remains to be seen.

One point of protocol, however, George does break. Looking back over his shoulder, the sharp lines of a laughing schoolboy scamp soften as he stares at her for a moment. Then, dimpling, he turns around again and grasps Richard affectionately on the shoulder, leaning in to whisper. Mary reads his lips clearly: Just wait till you see her, Richie.

In profile, she sees Richard’s cheek flex with his own broad grin, and her heart leaps with anticipation. For an instant she thinks he may steal a glimpse of her, but he plays the part of a proper bridegroom to perfection. Mary’s gaze strays to her right, and she very nearly stumbles at the sight of a man’s knobbly bare knees peeking out from beneath green and red tartan; averting her eyes, she sees Jean Carlisle’s hat at her husband’s shoulder: a relic from the previous century complete with a stuffed grey swallow bobbing above the brim.

The organ swells and slows, and the trumpet trills to the fanfare’s finish at the precise moment Mary reaches the altar, and the wait—for her and for Richard—is over.

He turns, looking her over with the blue eyes that sought her across a crowded ball room not even a
year ago, never fooled for a moment by the black dress, not once taking no for an answer.

Not that she ever wanted to give him any but yes.

As the opening chords of the hymn blast from the organ, Richard leans in close, his breath warm against her cheek. "This man wants to kiss a girl in white."

Mary lifts an eyebrow. "I didn't think it made a difference to you what colour I wore."
The Wedding Party

Mary and Richard celebrate their marriage in high style, in the places where their relationship first began, in public with their nearest and (not so) dearest and, of course, in private.

Richard kisses her in white as the limousine turns out of St Paul's Church Yard to carry them to the Ritz Hotel for their wedding breakfast. Frankly, Mary expected him to do it sooner, to lean down as they marched arm in arm out of the cathedral and claim her lips in front of the guests throwing rice and the photographers flashing pictures for the evening papers, and she breaks the kiss to tell him so.

"Do you really think after the Sketch debacle there's a photographer in this city who'd take a picture of me demonstrating less than proper behaviour?" he asks, incredulous.

She pauses to marvel at his selective memory, which seems to have forgotten how his competitors pounced on the story of him punching Evelyn Napier in his own club, but foregoes reminding him of humiliating episode on his wedding day.

"Maybe there's one as ruthless as you who'd use it as blackmail."

"With a diabolical mind like that, I'm glad you're my partner in crime and not one of my competitors."

"That's exactly why I expected you to flaunt the fact with a publicity stunt."

"Mmm. I find I'm not in much of a mood for anything of a public nature."

Richard reaches to draw the shade across the front seat, separating them from the driver, then returns to her, swivelling on the seat to more or less face her as his arms go about her waist, beneath the drape of her veil. He tilts her head to kiss her again, but she leans against the hand at her back.

"This from the man who insisted on a society wedding at St Paul's and the Ritz."

Brushing his lips over her temple, he says, "I underestimated how badly I'd want you alone. We could always go directly to our suite. Skip the reception."

It's difficult to resist the temptation presented by his mouth against her cheekbone, but she deadpans, "Wouldn't that dovetail tidily with our previous afternoon tryst."

Richard's low sound of agreement rumbles through her breast as his arms tighten around her, his thigh hard against her as he draws her almost into his lap. Mary tilts her head back to accommodate his lips' path to the sensitive place beneath her ear, but bites her own lip against a moan, summoning the presence of mind to continue.
"However, I'm afraid that is simply out of the question. I wouldn't dream of missing out on all our friends and acquaintances and even a few enemies queuing up for the express purpose of telling me how lovely I look."

"I wouldn't dream of denying you that." Richard is not in the least dissuaded from nuzzling her ear and the curve of her jaw. "Then again, I can compliment you on bits of your wedding ensemble none of them shall have the privilege of seeing. More than a fair-trade, wouldn't you agree?"

"Heavens, no."

Richard huffs and raises his head to meet her eye. "You're terribly high maintenance, you know."

"You knew it, too, when you agreed to maintain me."

"Then let me maintain you."

Mary replies by grasping the knot of his cravat and pulling him toward her, but this time it is Richard who withdraws after the barest touch of their lips and she who sighs in frustration. His gaze fixes just over her shoulder, something outside having caught his eye. Turning to see what, she notices that their route to the Ritz has taken them down Fleet Street, and the limousine decelerates as it approaches the Daily Telegram office. Bunting festoons the brownstone façade, and nearly every window in the four-storey building is open despite the cold, the newspaper employees hanging out, waving, and tossing handfuls of confetti down at the passing car.

Richard leans across Mary to roll down the window, and she finds herself unexpectedly choked when she asks, "You did this for me?"

He shrugs. "If the Queen of Downton Village gets this sort of reception, why not the Queen of London?"

Her lips cannot form words about what this means to her, so she kisses him instead—to wolf whistles and catcalls of the Telegram staff from above. Laughing, she and Richard draw apart, and she waves out the window. Confetti showers down on them, some swirling inside the window onto her skirt. She plucks a bit between her fingers and inspects it.

"It appears your staff have made confetti from newspapers."

"The Mail, I should hope."

~*~

In the receiving line, Mary rues her choice to receive the public compliments of dozens over Richard's private attention, as the faces of sixty distinguished guests melt into a single indistinct form with whom she has same impersonal conversation, like a scratched gramophone record: Your gown is simply lovely, Lady Mary. Lucky devil, Carlisle. Honeymooning in Paris? But Monte's so much warmer this time of year. Residing in Knightsbridge? What about a country house?

Richard's cheek brushes against her headpiece as he leans close, the rasp of his voice drawing her out of her stupor. "How unfortunate I didn't think to have all this printed up in a special edition, so we
don't have to keep repeating ours."

His hand at the small of her back guides her through the French doors to their wedding breakfast, where she notices the sweet dull throb of harp strings that must have underscored the reception chatter. Vowing not miss anything else, Mary darts her gaze about the room as they make their way to the head table, as if to photograph it all in her mind: the nosegays adorning the backs of chairs, the arrangements of lilies, orchids, and roses that grace tabletops and tower on pedestals flanking the doorways and windows; the statue of Neptune consorting with a Nereid before a Grecian mural reflected in mirrored wall opposite; the rare brilliant February sunlight which pours in through the arched windows spanning the length of the room and makes every gilded surface, from the furniture to the gold leaf mouldings to the statue, glow.

As their guests file in and fill their places, however, the landscape shifts, as though in a dream, a vague and golden place, and the meal passes in the same blur as the reception. It seems to Mary that she's scarcely taken her seat when she lays her dessert fork across an empty cake plate, feeling giddy from too much sweet food and not enough substance. A tinkle of silver against glass sings out and the harpist abruptly silences his instrument, hands splayed across the strings, as the Duke of Rutland, the highest ranking attendee, stands to make a toast.

"Since my daughter Diana is such jolly friends with both the bride and groom," he says, "I've agreed to abdicate my duty and let her say a few words of her own."

Mary's lips freeze in a smile. Surely she can't have heard correctly? She sits transfixed as the Duke resumes his seat while Lady Rutland, champion of propriety in all other young ladies, beams her approval as her own daughter vacates hers.

"Just when I thought there could be no more scandal attached to this marriage," Jean mutters.

"My sentiments exactly." Granny sips her champagne.

"Actually they're not my words." Diana clutches a scrap of paper to her bosom, which quivers along with the towering plumes of her lampshade-shaped hat with the earnest wagging of her head as she speaks. "We are, after all, a nation of poets, and while I dabble in poetry--"

Dear Lord, Mary prays silently, though she knows she hasn't a great deal of credit with God as a pure spotless bride, please don't let Diana read one of her poems. Richard takes her hand beneath the table, squeezing it in reassurance, though she feels the tension in his fingers as he braces for gossip page fodder.

"--who could better express how mad Richard and Mary are for each other than Elizabeth Barrett Browning?"

"I can think of a few poets," Richard whispers, while Mary sighs in relief. She couldn't care less how appropriate Diana's reading is for them, so long as it's suitable for the audience. Not that Diana's flair for the dramatic isn't as likely to push the boundaries of good taste.

"This is from Sonnets From the Portuguese," Diana says, and brings the paper up almost to her nose, her wide glassy eyes narrowing to focus. She clears her throat, but instead of beginning looks back over her shoulder, startling the harpist. "Would you mind awfully, darling? Only I think the poem will be so much more touching with musical accompaniment, don't you?"

The harpist obliges, and Diana arches up on the balls of her feet, swaying slightly in time with the
strumming, and recites:

"If thou must love me, let it be for nought
Except for love's sake only. Do not say
'I love her for her smile--her look--her way
Of speaking gently,--for a trick of thought
That falls in well with mine, and certes brought
A sense of pleasant ease on such a day'--
For these things in themselves, Beloved, may
Be changed, or change for thee...
But love me for love's sake, that evermore
Thou mayst love on, through love's eternity."

When she finishes, tears pool in her luminous eyes. Crumpling the paper, she uses it like a hanky, then she raises her glass and warbles, "To Sir Richard and Lady Mary Carlisle, through love's eternity!"

As sixty champagne flutes chime, and the sunlight which beams in through the wall of windows, reflecting off the mirrored wall and the glasses, shimmers before Mary's eyes. She hates to think Diana could affect her, but when she sees Richard's father blow his nose into a checked handkerchief, eyes bright blue and red-rimmed above it, she must dab the corners of her own.

"Sentimental fool." Jean shakes her head at Mark. "It was hardly Robbie Burns."

"Is that your opinion, darling?" Mary asks her new husband. "Obviously you don't love me for gentle smiles or an agreeable nature, so tell me. Is your love like a red, red rose, newly sprung in June?"

Richard snorts into his champagne, and she goes on, tracing the edge of her glass with her forefinger, "I am deeply curious, though, which poem you think suits us better. I thought you only read newspapers."

"I did go to school," he replies. "But I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you. I'm not drunk enough to recite poetry."

Across the table, George says, "I'm stone cold sober, but that never stopped me. There once was a Scotsman called Dick--"

"Whose brother abandoned this limerick," Aileen interrupts.

The harp goes silent again as Mark stands for the customary toast from the groom's father. Richard leans toward Mary and whispers, "I promise, my taste in poetry is much more sophisticated than George's."

"I believe tradition demands that I thank Lord and Lady Grantham for hosting this beautiful wedding," Mark says, resplendent in the joy he wears as unabashedly as his kilt, "but more importantly, I must thank them for raising such a beautiful daughter--Lady Mary, my son's perfect match."
Touched by the sentiment, yet also amused knowing her family will not take it as quite the compliment Mark intended, Mary smiles slyly at Richard and nudges his knee beneath the table. "I'm afraid you'll have to prove it."

~*~

Applause ripples through the ballroom, muting the echoed vibrato of the string ensemble, when the first waltz of the evening ends. As Richard leads her off the dance floor, Mary can almost believe the clapping is as much for her as the musicians. Queen of London, Richard called her, and she feels even more like it than before as she glimpses herself in the mirrored wall. Glass beadwork and metallic embroidery make her ivory silk ballgown glisten nearly as brightly under the brilliant electric lights as the diamond hair combs, teardrop earrings, and bib style necklace. They were Richard's wedding gift, and he clasped the necklace about her throat himself, his fingers so warm as they lingered against her skin, pressing against her pulse.

"Still want to kiss a girl in white?" she asked as his eyes raked over her in their suite, and he did, till she was breathless. When he drew back he said, "A good deal more than kiss."

There wasn't time, though; thanks to her napping away the few hours before the ball, they were already fashionably late for their own party. When she asked why he didn't wake her, he replied with a shrug that he knew a wedding was a lot for any bride, much less a pregnant one, and didn't want to disrupt her new habit of a rest before tea.

"It gave me a chance to catch up on today's papers," he added.

"I suppose you'll catch up on the evening's when I turn in early tonight?" she retorted, genuinely cross, while he merely smirked.

As he does now. He, too, watches their reflection, her hand in her long ivory gloves curved elegantly over his, the crowd parting to avoid the sweep of her train over the checkerboard marble floor. Mary's expression matches his, her annoyance about the nap and the newspapers ebbing, and Richard's dimples deepen as her eyes meet his in the mirror rather than gaze up at her groom like a typical adoring bride.

"Another triumph for Lucile," says Frida, approaching them, champagne in hand. "And you should know I had nothing to do with that jewellery, Mary, except to tell Richard you were made to drip with diamonds. You cut such a graceful figure on the dance floor. But it's your Argentine tango I want to see."

"Not at this party," Mary says. "Granny would have apoplexy."

"So would my mother," Richard adds.

"Then come to the Cave after. If you're not too tired." Frida twitches her eyebrows significantly over her champagne.

"We're not." Mary's irritation returns. "Before we were married, we engaged in illicit activities when we were meant to be resting," she ranted to Richard over a cup of tea to revive her when she awoke, groggy, from her long nap. "Now they're not illicit, and we rest. Is the romance gone already?"
"You're the one who claims not to be romantic," was his only reply as he reached for a cucumber sandwich.

"Excellent!" cries Frida. "Just see to it you don't wear yourselves out before the real party gets started, ja?"

She follows this by securing Richard for a waltz later--without brandishing her infamous pistol, thankfully. He assures her that they'll pace themselves after the obligatory sets with family and distinguished guests, and after Mary dances with the Richard's father, from whom he inherited his dancing skills, and the Duke of Rutland, whose paternity of Diana could never be proved through his, she does mean to sit one out. No sooner has she spied a chair and sent Richard to get her a glass of punch, Cousin Matthew intercepts her and begs the honour of a waltz.

Mary knows she cannot refuse it even without catching Mama's bug-eyed look as Mark Carlisle leads her with an old-fashioned gallantry onto the dance floor. Smirking, Richard steps toward the now unescorted Lavinia with the clear intention of asking Matthew's fiancée for a waltz she cannot refuse. But the vexingly stylish young woman pretends not to see him and pivots away with a wave at an acquaintance, leaving Richard to Diana, who knocks back the punch he brought Mary and then spins him away.

"Your day seems to have gone off without a hitch," Cousin Matthew observes as they fall into step with the Strauss tune.

"Apart from the obvious one of getting hitched, as Uncle Harold has said half a dozen times today. That I've heard."

Matthews' gaze drifts beyond her, and he chuckles. "The Americans do seem to have livened the affair."

The turning places Mary in view of Uncle Harold working his American charm on shy Aileen, who looks at once flattered and flustered in the evening gown Ruby lent her. She dances with her head turned slightly to keep an eye on George, dapper in a set of Richard's tails and apparently finding Harold's wife a more willing recipient of foreign charm than his own.

"You must be thanking your lucky stars all the American blood is on Mama's side of the family," Mary remarks to Matthew. "You can have a strictly English wedding."

"Does that mean Sir Richard's plotting to turn down his invitation?"

Mary tries to school her flush into submission, but her concentration all goes to not stumbling, and keeping a steady voice. "My. You make him sound positively diabolical."

At once she regrets giving Matthew the opportunity to gain the righteous upper hand by reminding her that her new husband once blackmailed Lavinia. To her surprise, he glances away, embarrassed.

"Cousin Mary, Lavinia and I wish to put the past behind us. I regret the part I played in your troubles, though I hope that now everything is settled between you and Sir Richard you can understand my reasons for it."

"Oh Matthew. Understanding why was never the problem. It was that you did it at all."
He gapes, though no sound emits from his mouth a puff of breath as if stricken. A hand taps his shoulder, and she looks up to see Richard.

"Hope you don't mind me cutting in, Crawley, but I find myself pining for my wife."

Without waiting for a response, Richard takes Mary firmly in his arms and waltzes her away.

"My knight in shining armour. How can I repay you for rescuing me from that ogre?"

"I can think of a few ways." He steals a bold kiss, his eyes darkening with the suggestion of what he intends later. "Though in fact I rescued Matthew from you. He looked utterly intimidated."

"If only I had that power over you."

Richard's grip tightens around her hand, though his thumb strokes feather light over her skin. "I think you underestimate the hold you have on me," he says, his voice husky. He clears his throat. "But if one of us had too much power over the other, we wouldn't make such a good team, would we?"

~*~

"What's this?" drawls a familiar masculine voice, and Mary looks up from her conversation with Granny and Edith, a smile blooming at Evelyn Napier's languid approach. "Lady Mary sitting out a dance? That's a sight I never thought to see."

Beside her, Edith bristles in her chair; she was just grousing at Mary's complaints of her feet being sore--"It must be so insufferable being the belle of your own wedding ball."

Oblivious to the sisters' conflict, Evelyn continues, "Although I expect it's been rather a long day for you."

"Just pacing myself," Mary parrots Richard's words to Frida, her face flushing and her heart quickening with the fear that he may refer to her pregnancy. He's heard the rumours, surely? Thanks to Diana--whom she spies flirting shamelessly with Uncle Harold--there is likely no wedding guest left untold. She shakes off her suspicion; Evelyn is far too nice for these games.

"We're taking the party to the Cave of the Golden Calf shortly. You should come along."

"I'm not sure the Cave's really my sort of place."

"Mine, either," says Edith, and it's all Mary can do not to roll her eyes at this bid for Evelyn's attention.

"You better get used to it, kiddo!" Uncle Harold, appearing suddenly, snatches Edith's hands from her lap and yanks her out of her chair. "It's all ragtime in the States!"

He moves as though to take Edith out for a dance, but then pivots back and extends his hand to the bemused Evelyn. "Harold Levinson, by the way. Mary's uncle. And your go-to guy if you're thinking of purchasing a yacht."
"I cannot abide another yacht sales pitch," Granny mutters, and pushes up with her cane to go find Aunt Rosamund. Mary doesn't think she can, either, but thankfully Uncle Harold, with a guffaw, twirls Edith away without a further mention of his beloved boats. Evelyn remains, though, taking the chair Edith vacated.

"How do you think she'll fare in America?" Mary asks, watching the polka.

"I heard Lady Edith was going." Evelyn grimaces. "Definitely not my sort of place."

"I expect I'll find out whether it's mine, as Richard's very keen on going."

"Most likely you'll have a smashing time, if the Cave agrees with you. As it seems to."

From any other man of her set, she might take such a statement as a backhanded compliment, but Evelyn is nothing if not sincere—even if he isn't a especially exciting conversationalist. Mary finds her attention drifting to the dance floor, where Sybil laughs up at something Richard is telling her as they dance.

"That may have been more down to my escort."

"Well then you're in luck, to have secured him for all such future entertainments." Something taut in his voice draws her gaze to him again, but she must have imagined the regret, for his smile at her is genuine. "I'm glad for you, Mary. May we all find partners who make us so happy."

She thanks him; the words seem grossly inadequate to express what it means to have a friend who can see what her own family cannot, Papa's question of whether Richard's wedding plans make her happy still lingering painfully close to the surface. "And Evelyn--I'm so sorry you were caught in the middle of our...drama."

"It was my own fault really. That's what happens to chaps who decide to stick their noble noses in the business of ladies who have things well in hand."

"As Lady Mary always has things. Especially me."

They both look up at Richard's deep rasping tones. Mary smiles to see him standing with his left hand in his trouser pocket at first, then withdrawing as Evelyn stands to clasp his right in a greeting warm enough to melt away his self-consciousness. How neatly Evelyn sweeps away the past, what a contrast with Cousin Matthew. The Honourable, indeed.

"How do you like racing, Carlisle? Only it would be splendid if you and Lady Mary could join my father and me at Ascot in June."

Mary and Richard exchange glances. Evelyn definitely doesn't know about the baby, then; by June, she'll be great with child.

"Any excuse to wear a spectacular new hat," comes Richard's noncommittal reply, "though we hope you'll dine with us before that."

"Gladly. But with regards to spectacular hats, are you referring to yourself or to Lady Mary?"

"I don't know which of us is more eager to be set loose in Paris' fashion district," Mary says.
Evelyn smiles. "Well-suited, indeed."

She stands, and brushes her hand over Richard's lapel, adjusting his buttonhole where some dance partner or other knocked it askew. "In every sense."

~*~

The Cave is exactly as Mary remembers it, and she enters it on Richard's arm as confidently as she moved through the Ritz ballroom, leaving the goggling up at the neon phallic cow to Aileen. Descending the stairs into the basement-level nightclub, she whispers to George whether he's quite sure the place is entirely decent. Laughing too loudly, he replies that he's sure it's entirely not—but someone has to keep an eye on Mark. Jean refused to accompany their party, deeming it a lair of vice without even having heard Granny's similar description; when Mark argued that as this was the last time a son of his would marry and he did not intend to miss a moment of his terrific party, Grandmamma claimed him for her personal escort.

George proves as poor a chaperone as Aunt Rosamund, however; as they all one-step on the cramped dance floor in front of the stage, Mary overhears Grandmamma shout to Mark, who must bend to hear her over the rollicking piano and snare drum rag: "You can carry off that kilt because you have such marvellous calves! How do you do it, at our age?"

"Bicycling to work!" comes his candid reply, so much like Richard's when she asked during their afternoon tryst how he kept fit without the benefit of country sports. "Every day for forty years!"

"If I were Jean, I'd make it a bicycle built for two! Say!" Grandmamma breaks from her partner's arms and marches up to the edge of the stage, where she yells up to one of the band members. "Do you fellas know Daisy Bell?"

"The English invented that song, luv!" he answers and, abruptly, the music changes to a swinging broken waltz. Grandmamma she sings along with gusto, Mark joining in a duet.

"I thought we brought the party here for a change from waltzes," Mary complains. Richard chuckles, but not, it seem from his rapt attention on his father, at her remark.

"Think that'll be us in twenty years? Dancing at our child's wedding and talking about how attractive we still are?"

"I hope you mean to each other, and not to some elderly ginger widow with a crush on you."

"This ginger would dance with Richie in a kilt in twenty years," Ruby interjects as she and Uncle Harold dance by. "Or Georgie!"

Now Mary laughs as Richard scowls at Ruby for using the nickname he tolerates only from his immediate family. After she met his parents Mary teased that she might adopt it, and he was not amused.

Pressing herself tight against him, the petals of his buttonhole velvety at her neckline, she murmurs in his ear. "I hardly think it's proper to talk about dancing at our child's wedding when we've yet to finish dancing at our own."
"You're right." Richard holds her tighter, drawing their twined fingers against his chest as he tilts his head to kiss her. Just as their lips touch he draws back, a frown tugging at the lines of his face. "Why are we dancing to this song? It won't be a stylish marriage, I can't afford a carriage? We drove here in a bloody Silver Ghost!"

"Ironic, sweetheart!" Grandmamma calls.

"But Richard is right," Frida says. She steps up onto the stage, where the band stops playing, mid-song, to look quizzically at the nightclub owner. "Will you gentlemen be dears and give us a tango for the bride and groom?"

After a brief shuffling of musicians and instruments that results in a quartet of piano, violin, bass, and accordion. The undulating ragtime gives way to the more percussive tango, and the other couples clear the dance floor to make way for the guests of honour.

If she were the sentimental type, Mary would know whether the tune was the one to which Richard and she danced last September, but it was Richard she learned by heart that night, not the music. Even now, it is not the driving beat of the piano which moves her across the parquet, but the rhythm of his steps, the smooth motion of his hips skimming hers with each turn that stirs her more than the soulful wails of the violin. Her earlier snippy remark about the romance having gone out of their relationship with their marriage, half-joking though it was, seems more like whinging than wit. In fact the opposite is true. The dance is better now because they know each other better, and are more confident. Next time, and the time after that, their expertise will be all the greater.

As before, he twirls her with a final flourish, holding her against him for some time after the music stops. But tonight, when he says it's time he got her home, he means with him.

~*~

When Richard opens the door to their suite at the Ritz, his gesture for her to step through gracious but not gallant, she thanks him. He looks at her a little askance, his forehead crinkling between his eyebrows in a way she finds especially endearing with his hair, dishevelled from a night of dancing, falling over his forehead.

"I was afraid you were going to give in to some dreadfully common urge to carry me across the threshold," she explains, laying her handbag on the hall table as the clunk of the bolt rolling over in the door is followed by the flick of the light switch.

"Only because I'm not sure I'm quite sober enough to do so without dropping you."

She quirks an eyebrow at him in the mirror as he steps behind her to help her out of her wrap. "Does that mean you're drunk enough to recite poetry now?"

"Perhaps just drunk enough to call you Mrs Carlisle." Richard lets the cape fall to the floor, his hands warming her just as effectively as they cover her shoulders, caressing her bare shoulders and collarbones, though his breath makes her shiver when he stoops to press hot kisses to her neck.

"If you do, I shall be forced to call you Mr Carlisle. And I know how precious you are about your
title. Which reminds me…” She leans back against his chest, and his hands slide down her arms, fitting into the grooves of her hipbones through the silk of her skirt, drawing her more firmly against him. "I've been thinking about when you're granted a peerage. What will you be called? Not Lord Morningside, surely, that's far too middle class. I suppose you could always be Lord Newspapers."

One hand strays from her hip to cover her breast. "I'm thinking more along the lines of Lord I Can't Wait A Moment Longer to Consummate Our Marriage."

"We already did that."

During the ceremony he caught her eye, a dimple showing in his cheek as the archbishop came to the part about marriage being ordained for the procreation of children and for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication.

He still hasn't seen the newly emerged sign of her pregnancy, she realises. His fingers curl inward over her breast, squeezing as he kisses his way up her neck and along her jaw until she turns her head for him to claim her lips, just as they kissed in the nursery two nights ago when he felt the swell of life beneath her dress. She covers his hand on her middle with her own, breaking the kiss as she threads their fingers together and pulls him through the open doorway into the bedroom.

Despite the unfamiliar surroundings of the Louis XVI décor, Mary almost feels transported back to that day in her own room at Downton. Undressing seems to go much quicker, though; or perhaps it's an illusion wrought by experience, the fear of being caught obviously not a factor this time. Funny Richard was not in a greater hurry then; she likes his eagerness now, even though this is not a new part of their relationship.

"Would you look at that," he murmurs, the hard look of desire washing from his features as his gaze drops from her breasts to her belly. He stretches out one hand, but stops just shy of touching it, instead tracing the air above the dark brown line that runs up from the low-slung waist of her drawers to her navel.

"Yes, I look rather too fond of cake," she says, suddenly self-conscious. Yet impatient, too. "Oh for heaven's sake, Richard, we won't break."

Again she grabs his hand, pressing his palm to her slightly rounded abdomen. He lets out his breath, a slight smile playing at the corners of his mouth as he scuffs his thumb over it, and suddenly drops to his knees in front of her, pressing his lips to the skin beneath which their child grows. His voice rumbles through her, murmuring, though she cannot make out his words.

She starts to ask if he's talking to the baby, but checks her speech and the laugh. Not only because she decides it's sweet, but because suddenly his fingers hook over the waistband of her drawers and tug them down. The lacy undergarment flutters to the floor, pooling at her feet, and as she steps out of them he grips the sides of her hips and crouches lower, his fine hair tickling her thighs as he nudges her legs further apart. His fingertips press into her bottom as he kisses way up the insides of her knees and thighs until she sucks in her stomach with a sharp hiss and fists his hair in her hands lest her knees buckle under his attentions.

A flush burns over her at the unexpected—and previously unimagined—intimacy of the act, though perhaps more so—she can't deny it—with the pleasure of it. Richard touched her here before, a hand slipped between their hips, his thumb readying her for their joining, and again after he was spent, evoking the ebbs and peaks of sensation in her not unlike those she perceived him to experience as he moved within her. But she never imagined lovemaking might include anything like this, that she might feel more naked before him than in their prior encounter.
She bites her bottom lip against the cry that forms in her throat, twists his hair around her fingers as she struggles not to buck her hips in response as she did when it was the heel of his hand, his pelvis, rubbing against her, unsure how much is acceptable to express in such a situation as this, afraid of being too wanton. But Richard's hands on her bottom draw her in closer against him, his lips and tongue more intent upon their work of coaxing a reaction from her, and Mary can hold back no longer, moving and moaning in most unladylike fashion--which seems to be the purpose for his ministrations--until the wave peaks and breaks and she collapses, panting, over his shoulder.

"Oh my...Richard..." she splutters when she has caught her breath somewhat. But it hitches again as his breath and the scratch of stubble tickle the valley between her breasts.

"Enjoyed that, did you?"

He chuckles low when she nods into the curve where his neck meets his shoulder, her arms tightening about him as his mouth closes over the tip of her breast and teases her nipple until it hardens. Though he already gave her satisfaction, desire mounts in her again, awareness of his arousal through his trousers as she clings to him stirring the remembered sensation of what it is to lie beneath the weight of him, to be filled by him. She scratches his scalp as he kisses her breasts, and he groans low, the rumble of it passing from his throat into her belly. She means to ask him if he wants to go to the bed, but bed is the only word she hears herself utter huskily. Fortunately, Richard makes sense of her incoherence and, also fortunately, his hands on her bottom scoop her up, lifting her into his arms, because her legs, she realises, still tremble too much to walk. She wraps them awkwardly around him and catches a glimpse of his equally awkward shuffle in the dressing table mirror, and thinks how absurd this looks for two people as close in height as they.

"I thought you were too drunk to carry me," she manages to say as Richard deposits her on the bed.

He makes no reply as he sheds the remainder of his clothing--trousers, underpants, and socks--and unlike last time, Mary refuses to give in to the virginal instinct to glance away from his nudity and finds her own desires further aroused by the hard masculinity of his body. When he joins her in bed she lies back on the pillows as he stretches his lean frame over her and aligns their hips, the muscles of his chest and arms flexed as he holds himself over her.

Tilting his head as he does when he kisses her, he holds his lips a breath from hers, and says, softly, "By just exchange, one for another given. There never was a better bargain driven."

"Was that a rhyming couplet?" Mary asks, then he covers her mouth with his, swallowing her gasp as he presses into her.

Their joining is not as uncomfortable as the first time; nevertheless she appreciates how still he remains, how softly he kisses her as he gives her a moment to reacquaint herself with being filled so completely by him.

"My god, I love you," he says against her lips, then lifts his head to peer hazily into her eyes. "Enough to quote poetry."

Mary's abdomen quivers with her laugh, and Richard groans against an involuntary movement inside her. She rocks up into him, urging him on as he previously encouraged her.

"Go on then," she says, wrapping her legs around him to draw him back after he withdraws.
His hips meet hers again, his breathing ragged in the crook of her neck. "It's just struck me that particular poem would be rather odd for this context, as it's spoken by the woman to the man."

"Now you're just making excuses. Change the pronouns."

"If I'm drunk enough for poetry recitations, don't you think I might be too drunk for grammar?"

"I thought you said you were in love enough, not drunk enough." She arches an eyebrow and her hips, tightening around him, and he thrusts hard, letting his weight rest on her as he slips his arms beneath her.

"If I can think about grammar during sex, then clearly I'm not doing it properly."

"And you do mean to do things properly."

He does exactly that, making love to her wordlessly, though not silently, and Mary knows that if he were to speak, she would be insensible to it; indeed, she is hardly aware of what they were talking about, or how much time has passed since they last spoke, nor does she care. All that matters is that in this moment, Richard is in her, loving her with the same unbreakable focus with which he built his newspaper empire, and she cannot tell as he presses into her as she rises up to meet him, their mouths locked in a kiss and their limbs entwined, where he ends and she begins, whether the heart the pounds against her breast is her own or his.

Afterward, though her joints tremor from being wrapped so tightly around him, she does not let him go--though he does not try to. Instead, he murmurs into the hollows of her collarbones:

"*My true love hath my heart, and I have hers...  
Her heart in me keeps her and me in one...  
She loves my heart, for once it was her own,  
I cherish hers because in me it bides.*"

"So what you're saying," Mary says, after a moment, one hand sliding out of his hair down over his sharp cheekbone to cup the equally hard line of his jaw, drawing his face up to look him in the eye, "is that you love me because you love yourself."

He rolls his hips, sending another shockwave through her that makes her eyelids flutter closed; when she opens them again, he doesn't even try to look ashamed, his mouth pulling into a cocky half-grin.

"I did say from the very beginning that we're the same."

Hooking her leg tighter around his backside, she digs her heel into the small of his back and he collapses on top of her again, groaning as he burrows his face in her hair.

"I agree with your poem," she says. "There never was a better bargain driven."
Epilogue: A Girl in White

Chapter Summary

Mary and Richard welcome the newest Carlisle into the world, and so do her family—true Crawley fashion.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to each and every one of you who has read, whether you've never commented or have reviewed every chapter, and especially to my darling ju_dou.

August, 1913

"You look terrible," Mary says when the spare room door of their London home opens with a rattle of the knob and Richard staggers through it.

This remark seems to come unexpectedly to him, and he stops short in the doorway, blinking at her in the bed, before he finally raises his hands to smooth his mussed hair and tighten the knot of his necktie, which hangs loose his unbuttoned collar. Even across the room in the dim light of the bedside lamps she can make out the shadow of a day's growth over his chin as he scuffs his hand over it. The waft of stale smoke accompanies him further into the room, hanging thick when he pushes the door closed.

"You look wonderful," he says, his voice even deeper than usual, more hoarse—as it becomes when he's had rather too much to drink. He blinks again, then rubs his eyes, struggling to focus on her though she reclines motionless, propped up on pillows.

"You say it as if I don't always."

"Don't be silly. Only I thought…after giving birth…"

"I might look a little more dishevelled?" she prompts. "Like you? Was the waiting so horrid, then?"

"Interminable." Richard leans back against the door, ruffling the hair he just tidied by raking his hand through it, pinching the ends between his fingers and tugging.

His worry is a touching although, admittedly, Mary's emotions are at the moment a little wrought. "But surely Dr Travers and the nurse kept you abreast of the situation, and you knew there was no reason to worry?"

"I've never been shut up with your father for so long. It was like after-dinner port that went on for seventeen hours."
"I'm sorry giving birth was such a trial for you. If only Mama had been free to squeeze your hand and offer you soppy smiles."

"Sybil fulfilled that function admirably," Richard says, oblivious to Mary's wry tone. But she must smile at the image of her sweet little sister encouraging a chain-smoking expectant father. "Though I think she was frustrated not to be in the delivery room. It seems she's received quite the detailed education on childbirth from Mrs Crawley."

"I'll bet Papa is thrilled about what that will do for her prospects when she comes out next year."

"Almost his words exactly." As Richard's chuckle fades, so seems the mental fog that's shrouded him since he came in. "Listen to me, going on about my trials when you're the one who just had a baby." His brows and the corners of his eyes tug downward in concern. "Was it very bad?"

"Not nearly as bad as I imagined it might be. Which was exactly what I hoped when I set such impossibly low expectations for the experience."

An approach with which Richard vehemently disagreed. "If I had an attitude like that, I'd still be standing on the corner in Morningside peddling newspapers instead of presiding over a publishing empire."

To which she replied, "When you take it upon yourself to bear your own children, you can do so with your that mindset. Until then, I'll think about it my way." Which was to imagine the worst, screaming and blinding pain, perhaps falling into a swoon for good measure.

"I'm a little tired," she goes on, noting his deepening frown, "more than a little sore…"

An attempt to push herself a little more upright on her pillows ends in a grimace which brings Richard at once to her side to clutch her hand. And very untidy, she thinks but does say, self-conscious of the state of things beneath the pristine fresh starched sheets draped over her lower body.

"But Dr Travers gave me something jolly for the pain, and I feel reasonably like myself, all things considered. Despite your mother's dire predictions with regard to the narrowness of my hips."

Richard snorts. "When I phoned to let them know you were in labour she said she'd pray for a tiny baby or miraculous expansion."

"Did you phone again to let her know my hips were a marvel?"

"That's not the sort of thing one talks of to one's mother." A sheepish grin tilts his mouth. "I forgot to call them, actually."

Mary shrugs. "Doubtless Jean would have scolded you for phoning at two in the morning for any reason other than my demise."

"Bugger..." He passes his free hand over his eyes, thumb and forefinger massaging the temple. "I even didn't think of the time when I rang Miss Fields."

"I daresay a pay rise will make up for it."

"I daresay," he agrees without irony, and Mary laughs--until her abdominal muscles seize in pain.
"I thought Travers gave you something," Richard says roughly, sobered by concern.

Mary notices her white-knuckled grip on his hand and the half-moons carved by her nails in his skin, and relaxes it. Poor Mama's hand must be black and blue. "Just don't make me laugh again. It's out of character anyway."

He lifts her hand to his lips and kisses the back, then each knuckle in turn. "I'm afraid I might do something even more unlike myself and cry when I see the baby."

He glances about the room, denuded of anything that might have been in the way or ruined during the delivery, as if realizing for the first time the most important part of the scene is missing.

"Where is the baby?"

"Taking the utmost care with her toilet before meeting her Papa, of course."

Richard's mouth gapes for what feels like a full minute before he manages to croak, "Her?"

Mary holds her breath as she nods; for all his bold proclamations of a modern value of the feminine sex, now that a daughter exists as more than as a hypothetical, she can't help but fear she will see a flicker of disappointment across his sculpted features, especially now that his inhibitions are lowered by lord only knows how much drink.

She doesn't see anything on his face, however. At that moment both their heads turn at Mama's entrance, beatific as she carries the white bundle.

"Well it's about time," Richard says, his long strides carrying him quickly across the room. "Taking after her Mama already, I see, primping and making fashionably late entrances to every occasion?"

"She really is like Mary. She was such a pretty baby," Mama effuses as Richard takes the baby from her without hesitation, accustomed to holding his brother's children. "Though this one's done what I never thought possible, and is even more beautiful."

"I always say second editions aren't worth doing if they don't improve upon the first." Richard pulls aside the fold of the lace-edged blanket to peer down at the little face cradled in the crook of his arm.

"A year ago I'd scarcely met you," says Mary, "and already there's a new lady in your life. Exactly as I feared it would be, should it be a girl."

"My darling," Mama croons, but scarcely spares a glance before for Mary returning her attention to her new granddaughter. She sighs as Richard holds up the baby's fist curled around his pinky finger, grinning inanely.

"Oh, I just can't bear to take my eyes off her, but I'll give you three a moment alone." She starts to go, but pauses to give Richard's arm a squeeze and whisper, "Thank you."

When the door clicks quietly shut, Mary starts to remark on her mother's apparent amnesia with regard to the timing of the baby's conception, but at the last moment decides against it. Sarcasm requires too much effort, and Richard likely wouldn't hear her, anyway, so mesmerised is he by his daughter. Their daughter.

It's so strange to think of herself as a mother, even though the nurse put the baby on Mary's chest.
immediately after she drew her first breath and let out her first discontent cry. (There will be no saving *that* nightgown.) Mary shed a few tears, too--of relief and frayed nerves and most of all *awe* that a newborn knew instinctively where to root to find her mother's breast.

Richard, on the other hand, seems to come by fatherhood much more naturally. He carries the baby back to the bedside, never taking his eyes off her as he lowers himself into the chair. She seemed so small as Mary held her, but now looks even daintier stretched along Richard's forearm, her head of downy black fuzz resting in his big palm while the other hand pulls back the blanket so he can get a better look at her.

"She's so tiny," he says, softly.

"Not quite six pounds, and nineteen inches long."

"And perfect."

Nodding, Mary leans over as far as she comfortably can to see the clean newborn skin, warm and pink from her first bath, unclothed except for the napkin pinned around her. She watches Richard count the fingers and toes, trace the furry curves of her ears and shoulders--exactly as she did, when her daughter was placed in her arms and she found that instinct overcame the fear that she would have no idea what to do with an infant.

"She's like a little rosebud," he murmurs.

Mary quite agrees, but Richard is being saccharine enough for the both of them, so she says, "A briar rose, considering how prickly her parents are. We're *not* calling her Rose," she adds, hastily, as the thought occurs.

"Certainly not." This more characteristic statement is undermined by what follows, accompanied by a dazed grin. "That's far too ordinary a name for our little princess."

"Says a man called Richard to his wife Mary."

He looks up, thoughtful. "Although that does give me an idea."

~*~

**September, 1913**

Six weeks later, Richard carries the baby through the French doors of the drawing room, where Mary's family assemble before commencing to church for the Christening.

"Here's our little princess," he says, shifting her in his arms so they can admire her in her trailing confection of silk and lace, plump cheeks drooping in sleep above the bow of her bonnet, short puffed sleeves revealing dimpled elbows and wrists. "All dressed up with somewhere very important to go."

Predictably, Mama and Sybil leap up from their seats in a duet of coos and clucks and, on Mama's part, the most appalling stream of baby-babble which sets Mary's teeth on edge as she enters behind
Richard. But it also makes her grateful that at as mushy as her husband is over his baby, the phrase *pwetty pwetty widdle pwincess* has never fallen from his lips.

Though she's tempted not to give him any credit at all for that as he fails to look the least bit disapproving when Mama takes her granddaughter from him and says, "Widdle pwincess, indeed, oh, yes you *are*. My wuvwy wuvwy Sweeping Beauty."

"Careful, Cora," Aunt Rosamund says, cringing, "if you keep talking to her like that she's liable to think she's a housemaid."

"Is that really such a step down from princess of a *tabloid* empire?" Edith says.

"How beastly!" cries Sybil. "Couldn't you have stayed in America?"

"I wanted to, but for some reason everyone insisted I be here for family unity. As if we've ever had that."

"You're just jealous no one asked *you* to be godmother."

"Girls," Mama half-heartedly rebukes, and Papa is no better--though his annoyance as he clears his throat and lays aside the morning *Telegram* is not directed at his younger two daughters. "Far be it from me to interfere with another man's decisions with regard to his children," he says, approaching Richard, "but I simply must ask--do you *really* intend to go through with this?"

"Robert!" The baby's brown eyes pop wide open, startled by Mama's sudden harshness, though Mary is just relieved she didn't say *Wobert*. The gooey adoration melts from her eyes as they leave her granddaughter to narrow on her husband. "You promised you wouldn't say a word."

Richard meets Papa's glower with a bland smile. "I can only presume you refer to my lack of religious belief, and the apparent hypocrisy of--"

"Oh no, Richard," Granny says from her chair, "we'd all far rather you were a hypocrite than a complete heathen."

"Indeed," says Papa. "No, I refer to--"

"Our choice of godparents?" Richard again interrupts. He holds out his palms in a placating gesture. "I know Frida Uhl seems an unconventional choice, but as a father of three daughters, surely you can appreciate the value of a madwoman with a pistol when the inevitable unwanted suitors come to call."

"If only we'd known Mrs Uhl when we chose Mary's godmother," Granny mutters, and Rosamund and Edith snigger.

"It was Frida or Diana Manners," Mary says.

"I'm not talking about the godparents," Papa says through tight lips. "I do *not* approve of this Uhl woman, but as you've asked Sybil and Evelyn Napier, I'm not awfully concerned about the likelihood of granddaughter being raised in a nightclub should anything unfortunate befall you and Mary."
"How can you say anything so dreadful, on today of all days?" Mama asks; whether she the refers to the nightclub or an unfortunate event, Mary cannot say.

"My quibble is with the child's name," Papa blurts out, having lost all patience. "Do you truly intend to call her Aurora?"

"What's the matter with Aurora?" Sybil asks. "I think it's a simply lovely name, and suits our little princess perfectly."

She gives Richard an approving nod, then resumes her admiration of the baby, a bracelet of silver beads gleaming as she flails a chubby fist.

"There's nothing the matter with the name itself," Papa says, "it's the fact that it's an obvious dig at me."

"It could be a complete coincidence," Mama says. "Everything isn't always about you, Robert."

"At least we know Mary comes by it honestly," comes Edith's unhelpful contribution to the discussion.

"A coincidence that he overheard me remark that Mary had more suitors than the Princess Aurora?" Papa retorts.

"When was this?" Granny asks.

"Last October," Mary answers. "When Evelyn and the Turkish gentleman came to hunt."

"Oh, that ghastly weekend!" Mama says with a shudder.

"Indeed," Papa agrees, though his steady gaze on Richard indicates he is of the opinion that the truly ghastly part was not that a guest had died at his home, but that a new life had been illicitly made there.

Richard smirks--guilty as charged--and Papa's face reddens so that Mary's heart lodges in her throat. What if the score was not fully settled on New Year's Eve? Will Richard provide fuel tomorrow's gossip pages by attending his daughter's Christening with a bloodied lip or blackened eye?

"Ah yes," he says in a voice as smooth as silk. "I suppose we have our answer to which suitor Mary accepted."

"Yes!" Mama interjects as Papa splutters and blusters, stepping between the two men, brandishing the baby almost as a shield. "Yes, we do, right here in this beautiful heirloom christening gown. It doesn't matter how or when she came into her lives. Only that she did. This is her day."

"Quite," Sybil says, chin lifted. "And it shouldn't be spoilt by the fragile male ego." She looks from Papa to Richard, adding, "Either one."

Richard's features fold into a rare look of annoyance at the sister-in-law who can ordinarily do no wrong in his eyes. Granny chuckles smugly to herself and remarks that she supposes he'll think again about his suffragist publications which Sybil reads when she stays with them in town.

Rolling her eyes, Mary says, "Mama and Sybil are right. It's Aurora's day, and it certainly won't do
to make her late for her own Christening."

The men don their hats in the front hall, where Nanny awaits with the pram for the brief walk through Cadogan Square to church. Richard takes charge of pushing it, of course, an the proud and doting new father the neighbours have got used to seeing in recent weeks. They pass a few along the way who nod their approval or pause to admire the baby--and Mary's outfit, to her great pleasure: a jaunty yellow hat with a sweeping blue plume and, over a white dress that tapers to her ankles, a blousy fawn-coloured jacket with a printed collar in jewelled tones she bought in Paris, which is both the height of fashion and a disguise for the lingering baby weight.

The attention to herself and her daughter makes her take her husband's arm and look up at him, admiring the yellow carnation in his buttonhole which complements her ensemble, and the way the shade cast by the brim of his top hat sets off his strong features. She gives the crook of his elbow a little squeeze, and he looks down at her, eyes crinkling at the corners with his smile. Dimples and charm, she thinks, and she glances back over her shoulder at Papa.

"You're not alone in your disapproval of the baby's name, you know," she says. "Richard's mother doesn't like it, either."

This is not strictly true. Over the phone she spluttered over Aurora Antonia, neither of which appeared in the Bible or on any Carlisle or Crawley family tree, but George told Richard that she was fairly giddy as she everyone in the neighbourhood and in his store and in the family's church about the newest Carlisle, Aurora Antonia Jean. "It's as if she's forgotten she already has a granddaughter called Jeannie," George said.

"Does Richard's mother like anything?" Granny mutters from further back.

Giggling, Sybil scurries up to Mary and whispers, "Pot, meet kettle?"

"Quite," Mary says, but no more; difficult as her mother-in-law is, Mary wishes Richard were able to share this day with his family. George can't afford to leave the store after the time away for the wedding, and Jean's been ill for most of the summer and Mark, understandably, doesn't want to leave her.

When she speaks again, it is to tease Papa. "Would you feel a little better if she were Aurora Roberta Jean instead?"

"For heaven's sake, my ego isn't that fragile."

Afterward, when the baby irrevocably bears the name Aurora Antonia Jean Carlisle, at least until the day she marries--which Richard, not entirely joking, swears will never come, as no man could deserve her, and what could the heiress of a newspaper empire need a husband for anyway?--Mary watches as photographer instructs Mama and Papa how to pose for a portrait with their first grandchild.

Granny sidles up beside her. "This takes me back to your Christening, Mary dear."

The normally crackling blue eyes gentle for once, she regards her own son as though she really has been transported twenty-two years back in time. As Mama adjusts Aurora's bonnet so that some of the black curls show beneath the lacy edge and checks that the voluminous train of the gown drapes smoothly over his sleeve, Papa's eyes are all for the baby herself.
"I distinctly remember him calling you his little Snow White."

At the photographer's beckoning, Granny moves off, and Richard takes her place at Mary's side. She doesn't realise she is crying until he takes his handkerchief from his jacket pocket and presses it into her hand.

Dabbing the corners of her eyes, she leans into his embrace and murmurs, "Only because I'm happier than I ever knew I could be."

The End

Works inspired by this one: A Lady In Paris by mrstater, Last Rose Of Summer by mrstater

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!