Footman in Training

by imdirty

Summary

Thomas finds himself with not one, but two suitors, and his relationships with both men make him reflect on what he really wants and needs. Diverges from season 5 plus my headcannon (where Downton has enough money for more staff :) ) resulting in an alternative ending (no season 6). Rated M for male/male shenanigans. Feedback much appreciated

Notes

There is male/male smut during this tale, so if that isn't your thing you may want to cover your eyes and read through your fingers :)

Thank you for coming, please enjoy!

Did you come here explicitly for the smut? It's all good, I feel you. I think there's something suggestive in every chapter, but the mature scenes are in chapters 3, 7, 12, 18, 19, 20, 23, 25, 27, 28, 29, 31

And if you do indeed like smut, here is a link to *NSFW* art for this story; one of a Thomas/David/Eric threesome that doesn't exist in this story but does in my heart (care of nonnydrawls on tumblr), and another of Thomas/David (care of alpacha on tumblr):

http://footmanintraining.tumblr.com/post/144370174518/thomas-barrow-and-my-ocs-3-3-3
Chapter 1

The day already felt long by nine o'clock in the morning. Thomas Barrow awoke six hours prior to help pack the cars for Lord and Lady Grantham's trip to London. The payoff for such an early rise would be a few days of a lighter load of work for all. He gazed out a hazy window by the kitchen while sucking down his third coffee of the morning. A pack of housemaids flitted by, leaving giggles wafting in the air. Few things exhausted Thomas like the seemingly unending giggles of housemaids.

Thomas filled his cup once again and grabbed a biscuit. He could still hear the maids from the servants hall.

"What are they chattering on about?" Thomas asked Miss Baxter, interrupting her conversation with Mr. Molesely.

"A few new staff arrived this morning," Miss Baxter said, not looking away from her conversation to answer him.

"And why is that worthy of gossip?"

"Because young women are keen to receive a new crop of young men," Mr. Molesely answered for Miss Baxter.

Miss Baxter giggled and met Thomas' eyes. "They're having a bit of fun, don't let that bother you."

"I've a headache and they want to neglect their duties to talk about some new hallboys and footmen. That bothers me."

Miss Baxter and Mr. Molesely returned to one another. Thomas took the hint and moved on to his own duties ensuring the dining room was properly prepared for luncheon.

Once he confirmed the place settings were exact, Thomas returned to the kitchen to carry the ham to the dining room when Mr. Carson saddled up beside him.

"Mr. Barrow, I need you to assist with training one of the new footmen."

Thomas unconsciously wrinkled his nose. "Surely one of the footmen can do that."

"Yes, but they are occupied training as well. I want a one to one ratio so that each new staff member is completely up to speed on the rules of the house before his Lordship and her Ladyship return. We're lucky to have so many starting at once."

Two young men seemed to appear out of thin air next to Mr. Carson. "Mr. Barrow, this is David Price. He's a second footman. Ensure the Lord and Lady do not perceive David is new to the house when they arrive." Mr. Carson departed with the other of the two young men.

"Right, well, so much for a lighter load of work," Thomas said smiling, as though this new footman was aware of Thomas's inner monologue.

"I'm sure an under-butler has far better things to do than train a second footman," Price said with caution.

"At least you're a perceptive chap. Follow me, watch what I do, stay a few steps behind when I
walk. I can't have you tripping me or slowing me down." Thomas hadn't even looked at the man and was already halfway to the stairs before finishing his statement.

"Of course, Mr. Barrow."

By the stairs, two kitchen maids crossed Thomas and Price's path, giggling as they went. Thomas gritted his teeth and quickened his pace. Time away from downstairs would do him good this afternoon.

"Something must be funny today," Price observed as he fell in line with Thomas's shadow.

"Girls are like that," Thomas replied.

"So I've heard," Price said as they arrived at the dining room.

"Put this in the center of the serving table by the tapestry," Thomas directed, handing the platter to Price. He took the opportunity to look at the man for the first time. He was certainly young, as one would expect of a new second footman. Slightly shorter than Thomas, broad in the shoulders but narrow in the waist. Quite narrow, Thomas noticed. Price's hair was between blonde and brunette, a little closer on the sides and a little longer on the top than was customary at Downton, but combed neatly away from his face with pomade. As Thomas found himself being as distracted as those irritating maids, Price returned to his side.

"What now, Mr. Barrow?"

"Now we blend into the walls and await the family."

"Should I stay by you?"

"I should say so, how else am I to train you?"

"Right, of course." Price's eyebrows knitted together briefly and he stood next to Thomas, hands by his sides.

The family entered and Thomas carried a carafe of wine to each glass. Price waited in his spot but watched Thomas carefully. Thomas glanced at Price. Midday light from the tall windows fell nicely on the planes of Price's face. Perhaps this assignment wouldn't be so bad, Thomas thought, pouring another glass.
It had been many years since Thomas was a second footman, and explaining the duties to Price brought back memories, some even pleasant. Cleaning dishes used to put Thomas in a trance-like state, escaping reality for an hour in water that crept from scorching hot to cold. Bringing meals to the children of the house allowed him some moments with people who never judged him and were always happy to see him. Clearing tables for the servants gave him an excuse to get up early from meals that often became awkward for a man, back then not much more than a boy, who was never very good making chums.

Price approached dish duty with gusto, a task he was commonly responsible for as a hallboy at his prior employer. The house was significantly smaller and less grand than Downton, but the staff took their jobs just as seriously. Given the small staff, Price realized there was no chance to move up in rank, and was lucky to have impressed Mr. Carson at his interview and found himself a rank higher at Downton. Price did not offer this information to Thomas. Thomas seemed to enjoy teaching Price, and every house has their own methodology, so it was best to start from the beginning anyhow, he thought.

Though not a bad day, it was a long one, and Thomas was already yawning by nine when the servants gathered for supper.

Mr. Molesley sat by Thomas with a thud. "Please look engaged in conversation with me, I need a break from my trainee."

Thomas smiled, "It must be pretty bad if you prefer conversation with me over, well, anyone else."

"You don't know the half of it," Mr. Molesley whispered. "He worked with sheep before he came to Downton. Sheep. I hate to question Mr. Carson's interviewing skills, but we're certainly starting from scratch with this one. What did your man do before coming here?"

Thomas swallowed a spoonful of stew and shrugged. "I've no idea."

"You didn't ask?"

"Didn't think to, I suppose. Doesn't much matter, does it? Whatever it was must have been halfway decent, he picks things up quickly. Unlike…"

"His name's Sean."

"Sean, the shepherd."

Mr. Molesley sighed and focused on his bread. Why would Mr. Carson assign Thomas the better employee? It hardly seemed fair.

Price helped other staff clear and clean up the servants' supper, then found Thomas. "Is there anything else you need from me before I turn in?"

"Not tonight, David."

"May I ask you a question before I head to the dorms."

Thomas stood a little straighter. "What is it?"
“Did Mr. Carson mean what he said?”

“Said what?”

Price shifted his weight from foot to foot. "That the Lord and Lady must not realize that I am new to the staff. Surely they know what everyone looks like? I can follow all instructions but I have no idea how to do that."

Perhaps I gave my trainee too much credit, Thomas thought. "It was hyperbole. He only meant that your skills should be good enough that you don't stand out as new. They likely won't pay much attention to you, or what you do, as long as you do it properly."

Price felt hot. The day had gone so well he felt comfortable asking, and now his mentor was looking down on him, waiting for him to say something. He wasn't sure what to say next.

"Goodnight, David," Thomas said, a hint to the young man to head to his dorm.

"Yes, goodnight, Mr. Barrow. Thank you, Mr. Barrow," Price said while backing away.

Miss Baxter smiled across the hall. "What was that, then?"

"Me being disappointed, Miss Baxter."

"Be kind, give him more than twelve hours to impress you."

"I am always kind," Thomas said, feigning shock.

"Ahh, well, then keep that in mind as David is working hard as he can to get into your good graces."

Thomas tipped his head to Miss Baxter and headed off for his own room. He felt a little pleasure that someone in the house cared about his graces. Even if he wasn't the most nuanced of someones.

As Thomas approached his room, he saw Price standing at the far end of the hallway with another young man, talking quite close together. The two whispered and laughed, nodding before parting ways. Thomas slipped through his door to avoid Price catching sight of him. The little feeling of pleasure was replaced by a much bigger feeling of disappointment, mostly in himself. Remember that he only cares about your opinion when it comes to his employment, Thomas told himself. Don't start opening yourself to others here, especially low-ranking young men who wouldn't consider your friendship under any other circumstances. Thomas lit a lantern by his bed, then quickly extinguished it. Straight to sleep, he thought. Otherwise you'll stew more than your supper.
The new staff had their first chance to handle guests before Lord and Lady Grantham returned from their trip. Lady Edith had invited several journalists from her magazine to visit Downton as a thanks for all of their hard work. From the guests' arrival, Thomas could feel the eyes of the tallest of the men, Eric Weatherbee, on him. Eric was slim but athletic, with masculine features softened by thick lashes over his brown eyes. At first he thought Eric was taking him in as part of the grand surroundings, many people these days were unfamiliar with the role of servants or had been to such an estate. However, when Eric's hand lingered as he took pheasant from Thomas's tray at dinner, and their eyes met a little longer than was normal practice, Thomas was certain Eric's gaze was more than curiosity.

Thomas filled Eric's glass with just a little more wine than the others each time he went around the dining table.

When Thomas returned to his place in line with the other servants, he kept his eyes away from Price. Price had snuck into one of Thomas's dreams the night before. Thomas was tired of repeating the same behavior, falling for someone who had no interest being his friend let alone more. He knew nothing of this Price. Just a new pretty face. Why waste sleep on that?

Though Eric's wine glasses were the most full, there had still been plenty of wine shared among the group, and the atmosphere became warmer and livelier at dessert. Even Lady Mary seemed to soften and enjoy flirting coyly with the journalist seated next to her. Lady Edith suggested dancing, and several servants were off to prepare the hall and gramophone. When the ladies, guests, and servants made their way to the hall for dancing, Eric fell back to walk in step with Thomas.

"Excuse me, may I ask a favor?"

"Please tell me, how can I be of service?" Thomas replied, looking to his other side to see who might be in range of hearing.

"When I went to my room to unpack earlier, I saw there was a room with a bath attached. I hoped perhaps you could come by my room this evening and make sure I'm operating it properly."

Thomas looked up and into Eric's eyes, two mischievous pools of chocolate. "Yes, I've heard plumbing can vary greatly from bath to bath. I would be happy to help."

Both men fell out of step with each other, small smiles on both faces.

Thomas made sure he waited until all the servants' dormitory doors were closed for the night before heading to Eric's room. Flirtation and sneaking at Downton was not foreign to Thomas, but it had decreased in frequency the older he got.

Eric was at the door within seconds of Thomas's knock. Just as quickly as Eric had answered the door, his hands were already busy, flying up to cup Thomas's jaw. He pulled Thomas's face up to his, but Thomas grabbed Eric at the wrists before their lips could meet.

"First, let's get you ready for your bath."

Eric cheeks were already flushed, and Thomas wondered what kind of thoughts Eric had while he waited the hours for Thomas's arrival. This was what he loved about these adventures; occupying another man's thoughts and desires, and controlling what he would allow the man to play out in reality.
Thomas undressed Eric like a valet might. He removed and hung his jacket carefully, undid Eric's cuff links and placed them in the tray on the vanity. Eric watched in the full length mirror as Thomas undid Eric's tie, then each button down his shirt, and slipped it from his shoulders. Eric was long and lean, earning his body hiking mountains and deserts for his stories, peddling a bicycle down city and village streets across the globe. Thomas hadn't ventured much further than the borders of the village since the war, yet here was a man, well traveled, who wanted nothing more than to spend this evening with Thomas.

Thomas left Eric in his trousers and led him to the bathroom, leaving him by the door to fill the tub. Thomas took off his own jacket, then faced Eric, locking eyes with him as he rolled up his sleeves.

"Wait, what about your shirt? And my trousers? And your trousers?"

"I have to do everything? Take off your trousers, then come here."

Eric unbuckled his belt, still keeping Thomas's gaze, and slid off his trousers, underwear, and socks all in one move. He kicked the pile of clothes to the side and stood before Thomas. Thomas checked Eric head to toe and back again. Carved from marble, Thomas thought. Especially where it counted.

Thomas turned off the water and gestured for Eric to get in.

"But what about you?"

Thomas didn't move, and so Eric reluctantly slid into the bath, resting his head on its porcelain ridge. Thomas pulled a stool up next to the tub and sat down. The steam from the water loosened Eric's hair. Thomas wet his hand and then smoothed Eric's hair away from his eyes. Thomas's hand then slid down further, fingers trailing Eric's neck, collarbone, and chest. He rested his palm on Eric's stomach and met his eyes again.

Eric struggled to read Thomas. Thomas's face was near expressionless. Except for what seemed like a small smile at the corner of his eyes.

"You're not coming in here with me, are you?"

Thomas answered by letting his hand continue down Eric's stomach, across a hip, down a thigh, and then up between them.

Eric let his eyes close and sighed with relief. Thomas couldn't help but smile as Eric gripped the sides of the bath, somehow getting even harder than he had been while standing before Thomas.

Eric opened his eyes as his head lolled to the side. He watched Thomas at work; crisp white shirt and vest, hair somehow unphased by the same steamy bath, head held high. Eric knew he'd play out this scene of the servant caring for his needs in his private bath over, and over, and over on lonely nights.

"Please don't let the night end here," Eric breathed. Thomas made his pace faster, and Eric finished quickly, still feeling the waves of his orgasm as Thomas stood, wiped his hands, and began rolling down his sleeves.

"Please!" Eric called, leaning over the side of the tub.

Thomas slipped his jacket back on and then slid himself out the doorway, down the hall, and back to the dormitory. Before turning the knob on his door, he noticed a shape in the hallway. Price, too,
was returning to his room. Thomas stood still so as not to be noticed and waited for Price to disappear inside his room.

Once Thomas was under his sheets, he couldn't help picturing the long, taut body of the journalist under his hand. After he found his way to release, visions of Price found their way to the front of his mind, just as they had in his dream. Though Thomas admitted, if Price was the kind of young man who snuck out of his room within just the first week of employment, maybe there was some fun to be had after all.
Chapter 4

The kitchen was aglow with spring sunlight reflecting off copper pots and kettles. The servants worked together to clean and polish all the dishware and silver before Lord and Lady Grantham returned to Downton. Thomas stood over a pile of silver, his body warm from the sun. His jacket was replaced with an apron, his sleeves covered with black cloth to protect him from the polish.

Eric had tried desperately to garner some acknowledgement from Thomas during breakfast, but Thomas served him the same as every other person at the table. Thomas wanted to leave him longing. Would he write? A new naughty penpal could be a nice. His body became even warmer as he thought about the night before.

“You look sunny as this day, Thomas,” Mrs. Patmore observed. “To what do we owe this rare good mood?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Patmore, you know I love a backhanded compliment.”

“Seems to be about the only kind of compliment you get around here,” Mr. Molesely chimed in.

Thomas enjoyed the banter. Even as the butt of a joke, it still made him feel he belonged to this motley group.

“Can I help?” Price asked, returning from picking up flowers from the gardener. Mrs. Patmore took the flowers from Price and directed him to Thomas.

“I think you can help Smiley with the silver, there’s enough to keep ten men busy for the rest of the day.”

Price hung his jacket, donned an apron, and rolled up his sleeves. “Smiley?” he asked, picking up a rag and standing on the opposite side of the kitchen island from Thomas.

“They just like to have a go at me,” Thomas said, sliding a wooden crate of knives across the island to Price.

“Your feelings don’t look too hurt,” Price said, smiling himself.

“And while we’re asking, what are you so happy for? A good evening perhaps?”

Price shrugged, still smiling. His eyes briefly met Thomas’s.

He was like an oblivious, happy golden puppy, Thomas thought.

“What do footman do these days to entertain themselves after hours?” Thomas asked Price.

Price squirted thick gray liquid onto a rag and began polishing the knives. “Hmm… play cards, read books, write letters? I can’t imagine it’s much different than what an under butler does.”

“Maybe not this under butler,” Molesley commented.

Thomas pointed a fork at him. “Watch yourself there.”

The men continued to work on the silver while the kitchen staff washed the dishware, and the hallboys and maids dried and returned things to their rightful homes.
Thomas watched Price out of the corner of his eye. Price chewed his bottom lip as he worked, his evergreen-colored eyes focused on his task. Thomas found his eyes resting on Price’s forearms, the muscles dancing as he polished the knives.

“Am I doing it wrong?” Price asked, noticing Thomas watching.

“No, you’re doing just fine.”

“I’m just not sure what to think when you’re watching me.”

There was a brief silence.

“I’m responsible for training you,” Thomas said steadily. “It’s my job to watch what you’re doing.”

Price looked up. “Of course, Mr. Barrow. I just don’t want to disappoint you.”

And with that comment, Price’s grip slipped, and his index finger caught the edge of a knife. He grabbed the injured finger with the opposite hand and scooped it to his chest, but there was already blood down his hand, his arm, and onto the island. Silverware and dishes clanged as several of the staff rushed to his side.

“I’ll help him, I’ll help him,” Thomas said, pushing through the others. “I was a medic, unless you all forgot.” He held Price’s arm above his head and led him to the small room off the servants’ hall where the staff polished shoes. “First aid kit, please!” Thomas called to no one in particular.

A hallboy brought the kit to Thomas. Thomas and Price sat knee to knee, Price’s injured hand resting in Thomas’ gloved hand.

“I’m getting blood on your glove.”

“I have spares,” Thomas said, though his tone wasn’t as reassuring as the words. “You cut yourself pretty deep, David. Not sure how useful this hand will be when his Lordship and her Ladyship return tomorrow.”

Price sucked air through his teeth as Thomas pinched the wound closed.

“You need a couple sutures. This will hurt a bit but won’t last long. Squeeze your other hand into a fist to help distract from the pain.”

Thomas wiped Price’s finger with iodine and prepared a needle and thread.

“You were a medic?”

“That’s how I got this,” Thomas said, nodding to his hand. “It’s a tad worse than yours. I suppose you were too young to serve.”

Price laughed. “No, I wasn’t too young. I served. Maybe you assumed I’m young because I’m a second footman at the age of twenty eight.”

Thomas held the tip of the needle by Price’s wound. “I based my assumption on appearance, not position,” he lied.

Price squeezed his fist while trying not to whimper as Thomas made six slow, small, careful stitches into Price’s skin. “I really am sorry I bled on you,” Price admitted between gritted teeth, “but more sorry if I let you down. This job is important to me. Bad enough to be second footman
when I should be further in my career. Worse if you recommend they make me hallboy.”

“And why would I do that?” Thomas asked, tying off the final stitch. He wiped Price’s finger again and examined his work.

“Not that you would, that’s not how I meant it.” Price met Thomas’s eyes. “I don’t want to ruin this opportunity.”

“Mr. Carson is the one you have to impress. Though I could muck things up for you if I were so inclined.”

“Oh, but you wouldn’t do that.” Price leaned closer to Thomas and turned Thomas’s gloved hand over, frowning at the blood. “I really am sorry about that.”

Thomas became acutely aware that his knees were against Price’s, their hands together, their faces mere inches away. Price was even more attractive up close; high cheekbones and a strong jaw, fine nose, lips like two pale pink petals.

Thomas swallowed. “No need to apologize, I’ll get another when I’m done cleaning up here.”

Price ran his thumb over Thomas’s glove. “Can I see it? Your hand?”

Thomas opened his mouth to respond, but Price pulled his hand away and looked over Thomas’ shoulder at the doorway.

“So this was the cause for commotion,” Mrs. Hughes said, taking in the first aid kit strewn on the counter, bloodied men, and sewed-up finger.

“I’ll be more careful in future,” Price said, a golden puppy again, smiling up at Mrs. Hughes.

“Well no more knives for you today, that’s for certain. Thank you, Mr. Barrow, for patching him up.”

“Welcome, Mrs. Hughes. May I leave you to help with the gauze while I go clean myself up?”

Mrs. Hughes clicked her tongue as Thomas left without awaiting response. “I know you’re supposed to be learning from him, David, but perhaps you could impart some wisdom when it comes to manners.”

Thomas headed straight up the stairs to his room. He shut and locked the door and stared into his mirror. Price’s blood was on more than the glove. Though the apron Thomas wore saved most of his shirt, there were drops on his collar and chest. He wet a washcloth and dabbed at the drops. He took a closer look at the glove and sighed at the blood soaked into the raw edges of fabric.

Thomas sat on the edge of his small bed, pulled off the glove and tossed it in the corner. He rubbed the back of his hand the same way Price had a few moments go. He examined his scars; scars he’d spent hours staring at over the years. Was Price morbidly curious? Was he trying to bond over having also served in the war?

A knock on the door brought Thomas out of his head. “Yes?”

Miss Baxter opened Thomas’s door and peeked her head in. “Do you need me to sew another glove for you?”

“Why not, I’d appreciate it if you could save me the trouble.”
Miss Baxter noticed the discarded glove on the floor. “He sure got you good.”

Thomas fetched a clean glove, put it on and stretched his fingers. “Indeed he did, Miss Baxter.”
Peeping Thomas

The servants gathered for breakfast early, anticipating Lord and Lady Grantham’s arrival late morning. Mr. Molesley joined Thomas in his usual spot at the table. “How’s the shepherd working out?” Thomas asked, spooning porridge into his mouth quickly.

“Well all his digits are still intact, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Thomas looked down the table at Price. From a distance, he couldn’t even see the stitches he’d made in Price’s finger the day before. He hoped that would be the case when it came time to serve the family.

“David,” Mr. Carson called down the table. All heads turned to Mr. Carson, not just that of the second footman. “The footman who winds the clocks has a halfday today. Are you familiar with that duty?”

“Yes sir, Mr. Carson. My father is a watchmaker, so I’m quite familiar with time pieces.”

“Excellent, David. In that case, why don’t we make that your task moving forward.”

Price eagerly accepted the duty and the conversation among the servants resumed.

“You know, Mr. Barrow’s father was a clockmaker,” Miss Baxter informed Price.

Price finished swallowing a spoonful of porridge and looked at Thomas. “Interesting. The more I get to know, the more we seem to have in common.”

Mr. Molesley raised an eyebrow. “Really, Mr. Barrow?”

Thomas pointed his spoon at Mr. Molesley. “Didn’t I warn you yesterday?”

A bell rang on the wall. Anna finished her last two bites and jumped from the table. Another bell chimed, then another, and the room was full of the sound of chairs scraping the floor.

The day was unusually warm for spring, especially at Downton where the air was almost always cool and freely moving. “Stop to drink water if you must, we don’t need any of you fainting today,” Mr. Carson had told the newer staff.

After breakfast was served to the family and the dining room cleared and cleaned, Thomas went outside for a cigarette. He found a shaded spot and leaned against the cool brick of a wall. The courtyard was busy with activity of the outdoor staff; a group Thomas didn’t mix with much, especially since he became under butler. The door to the house opened and Price came out, collecting firewood for the stove per Mrs. Patmore’s direction. Arms loaded with wood, he stopped when he noticed Thomas.

“So this is where you disappear to,” the golden puppy playfully observed.

“Not anymore now that you’ve found me,” Thomas replied, bringing the mostly-burned cigarette to his lips.

“I thought of taking up smoking so that I’d have an excuse for a break. I don’t have the lungs for it, though.”

“Speaking of burning things, why don’t you get that wood inside before Mrs. Patmore decides to
throw you on the fire.” Thomas stamped out his cigarette and held the door for Price.

“So your father was a clockmaker?” Price asked as Thomas followed him to the kitchen. Thomas helped hand logs from Price’s arms to Daisy’s hands as she fed the oven.

“He was, and I learned a great deal from him. The clocks were my responsibility here for many years.”

“You’ve been here a long time, haven’t you?”

“Seems forever,” Daisy volunteered.

Thomas kept his grip on the next piece of wood as Daisy tried to take it. She wrinkled her nose and pulled it from his hand with force.

“Save your energy, Daisy. Don’t want you to pass out having to work over a hot oven on a day like this,” Thomas said, smirking.

Mrs. Patmore hit Thomas on the arm with a kitchen towel. “Stop distracting her, we have a lot to do today. Out of my kitchen ‘til I call you back.”

Price left with Thomas. “I can’t tell if people here like you or not,” he laughed.

“Oh, it’s ‘not’ David, be certain of that.”

“Lord and Lady Grantham are arriving!” Mr. Carson’s voice boomed across the whole downstairs. Price followed Thomas up the winding servant’s stairs, through the halls and rooms to the front door, and out onto the hot gravel drive. He followed Mr. Carson’s direction for where to stand. Head up, shoulders back, hands by your sides, he repeated to himself silently. The younger family joined the servants outside to receive the Lord and Lady. Price resisted the urge to look at the family while everyone waited for the cars to pull up. The ladies and Mr. Branson were always picture perfect, and Price felt compelled to gaze at them as though they were framed on the wall.

Car tires crunched down the driveway, circling round before stopping in front of the gathered group. Price presumed the first person out with cane in hand was Mr. Bates, who who learned earlier was married to Anna. Getting things straight in this house was proving a challenge. There had been just a few people to get to know in his old house, and the staff didn’t change much in the years he served.

Mr. Bates opened the car door for Lady Grantham. Price couldn’t resist smiling broadly when her eyes met his as she passed the line of servants. She stopped in front of Miss Baxter. “Baxter, how I missed you.” Price was surprised by her Ladyship’s American accent.

“How was the lady’s maid they arranged for you, your Ladyship?” Miss Baxter asked.

“Practically a train wreck. I don’t care who insists I use their woman next time, I’m bringing you.”

“And these must be our new men.” His Lordship’s entire person seemed to smile, not just his mouth, Price thought. Mr. Carson introduced Price and the other new footman, Sean Moore, to the Lord and Lady. “Welcome!” Lord Grantham said simply, but with more warmth than Price had felt from his former employer in all the time he worked there.

The staff followed into the house after the family. Moore (The Shepherd, Price had heard Thomas call him more than once) whispered to Price, “Didn’t expect his Lordship to be so kind with a daughter like Ice Queen Mary.”
Price shushed him. “Don’t say things like that.”

Moore was young, tall, and slender, with deep set dark blue eyes and silvery blonde hair. His cousin had known Mr. Carson’s cousin and begged a favor to give Moore a chance at Downton. Moore hadn’t done extremely well at any of his former employers, and his cousin told Carson he thought it was due to a lack of good leadership. “He needs direction,” the cousin pleaded. Softer of heart than he would ever care to admit, Mr. Carson agreed to take on the lad, who had most recently worked on a farm. Mr. Carson expected a humble young man, but Moore seemed anything but. Upon meeting, Moore bared every one of his teeth while smiling and even tried to joke. “Well I’m not pairing him with Thomas,” Mr. Carson had told Mrs. Hughes. “Those two giant heads together wouldn’t be able to fit through a doorway.”

Price felt like he bonded with Moore during their first week at Downton, and was beginning to consider Moore a friend, but sometimes Moore’s obvious lapses in judgement made Price uncomfortable.

Thomas watched Price and Moore whispering. Moore was on the edge of handsome, Thomas thought, but wreaked of immaturity and unearned self confidence, and little was as unattractive as that to him.

Also whispering were, per usual, the maids downstairs. Perhaps the heat was getting to Thomas, but he wanted to know what the maids were chattering on about today. He stopped one of the newer maids, an especially young, short girl who seemed to shrink even smaller when Thomas stood in her way.

“I shouldn’t say,” the maid frowned, trying to scoot around Thomas with her basket full of laundry.

“You’d walk away from the under butler at your last employer? Because I promise, this will truly be your last employer if you keep walking.”

The maid looked down the empty hallway in hope of rescue, and then up at Thomas, his cool gray eyes narrowed while her brown eyes were wide as saucers.

“Well?”

“I heard that - and I don’t know for sure, but - well, some of the male staff were going to go to the pond after lights out tonight.”

“For what?”

The maid’s basket felt extremely heavy. “Oh, well, to swim. It’s so hot, you know?”

“Which male staff?”

“That I don’t know. I’m sorry, I don’t.”

Thomas looked away from her, thinking.

“Anything else, sir?”

Thomas waved the maid away. He thought of Price and Moore laughing as they snuck out to the pond, wading in the water, carefree young friends at a new house on a new adventure. His mood was stormy until mail was delivered in the afternoon.

“One for you,” Mr. Carson said, handing Thomas a small envelope the color of a robin’s egg. The
staff was seated throughout the servant’s hall enjoying a short reprieve before dinner preparation began. The return address was from someone named “Erin,” and Thomas realized quickly upon opening the letter that this was Eric’s pen name. He must have mailed the letter before he left the village, Thomas thought. Maybe he even wrote it while still at Downton.

Thomas pushed his chair against the wall so no one could walk behind him and unfolded the small piece of lined paper.

_Thomas,

You have left me wanting, though I’m sure you know that. I will have to shower exclusively from now on because the bath will make me think of you. I already invented a dozen excuses to come back, but would you have me? Was your hope to lure me back, or push me away? I pray it wasn’t the latter. I’m traveling for a month, but then I may find myself at Downton again, one way or another. Though a brief encounter (embarrassingly brief? I hope not) I’ve become quite taken by you. Are your lips as expert as your hands? What does that ivory skin of yours taste like? What would that raven hair feel like running through my fingers?

Please write to me.

Hopelessly yours,

E._

Thomas folded the letter delicately and tucked it into his inner jacket pocket. He took it out a few more times that afternoon, and knew he’d certainly take it out again when alone in his bed. The little note distracted him from envying the budding friendship between Price and Moore, until supper when the two were talking at the end of the table. The friendship stung for a few reasons, not least of which was the moment Thomas and Price had over Price’s injury, or what Thomas had perhaps mistaken as a moment.

Thomas reasoned with himself that if Price was his responsibility, he should know his whereabouts in the evening, and so if Price snuck out to take a dip in the pond, Thomas would follow. There was a hill overlooking the water and Thomas would perch there.

After lights out, Thomas sat with his back against his dormitory door, listening for opening and closing of other doors. Eventually, quite late, he heard the soft click of knobs turning and latches catching, then murmuring, and finally soft steps down the hall towards the stairs. He waited for fifteen minutes, then left, dressed in his darkest suit to avoid attracting attention.

It wasn’t explicitly against the rules for Thomas to leave at night given his status above the other servants, but it wasn’t encouraged, especially given his reputation among those same servants. The other men, though, were breaking house rules. Thomas felt empowered, even energized, that he could so easily get Price or Moore or whoever else was out gallivanting in trouble. But that wasn’t his goal - not exactly. Just the confirmation of what they were doing and the ability to play the card if required (or desired), that was all.

Thomas found a spot on the hill with a clear view of the pond. The spring moon was so bright and low that he could easily tell who was who in the water. Along with Price and Moore were six other members of staff; another footman, two hallboys, two men from the grounds, and a man from the stables. Clothing was folded on the grass and the group was all submerged to their waists or higher. Thomas stepped closer to a tree and sat down. He removed his hat and rested his arms on his knees.

Being an outsider was nothing new for Thomas, but watching the group of men laugh, wrestle and
tease made his chest burn. There was never a point in his life that he would have been invited to this secret outing, and as an older, senior member of staff with his history, there never would be. Price might have been old enough to serve in the war, but he wasn’t so old that it was awkward for him to play in the pond with the others.

Price took a break from paddling to wade closer to the pond’s edge. The water was just below his hip bones, and he watched with his hands on his hips while the others frolicked. His cream-colored skin looked an iridescent blue from moonlight reflecting on water. He brushed his wet hair from his forehead and laughed at something one of the other men said.

Thomas hadn’t expected Price’s body to be as muscled as Eric’s, though Price’s forearms had hinted at a toned body beneath the layers of livery. Despite the muscle there was still something soft about Price, perhaps his tapered waist and long neck. Thomas’s chest began to burn for other reasons, and then so did other areas of his body. His lips parted and he breathed a little harder as Price, deciding to head back early, and walked onto the grass to fetch his clothes. Price rubbed his hair with a towel, his back to his friends in the water, and full front to Thomas. Feelings of guilt may have crept into Thomas’s thoughts if he wasn’t trying so hard to commit the view to memory. Price bent down to gather his clothes and Thomas climbed to his feet, disappearing from the hill before he could be noticed.

Thomas sprinted back to the house and to his room, undressing to his undershirt and underwear quickly. He lit his lamp and soaked a washcloth with water from his pitcher to wipe his face, breathing steadily to calm his rapid heartbeat. He wondered, why would a man so concerned with keeping his job and moving up in rank so blatantly break the rules? He then caught his reflection in the mirror and thought of how he behaved years ago as a footman who wanted to be valet. Maybe they were something alike, as Price said earlier that day.

A soft rap on the door brought his heart back to pounding. He paused for a beat, then turned the knob.

“T’im sorry to bother you,” Price whispered, his hair still damp.

Thomas rubbed his eye as though he’d been sleeping. “Is something the matter?”

“I snuck out to swim. I shouldn’t have, but I did, and I feel awful about it. I’d rather you hear from me. I don’t think we were quiet enough and I worried someone would snitch before I could snitch on myself.”

“So you’re not sorry you did it, just sorry you might get caught?”

Price chewed his bottom lip and looked into Thomas’s eyes. “I am sorry. How do I fix this?”

“Nothing’s broke, David,” Thomas sighed. “Far as I’m concerned, you were in your room the entire night. But don’t make me cover for you again.”

“Or what?” Price joked, smiling timidly.

Thomas pictured Price emerging from the water. “Well I’d have to come up with some sort of punishment.”

Price’s smile faded. “I don’t mean to be cheeky.”

“Yes you do. Off with you before I change my mind,” Thomas ordered, closing the door. He put out his lamp and got into bed, annoyed only that he was too exhausted to put thoughts of Price or Eric to good use.
After finishing winding the clocks for the morning, Price decided to walk slowly back to the servants hall. He took a tour through Downton’s main hall, his hands clasped behind his back. He stopped under massive paintings, and bent to look at works of art on tables that were themselves works of great craftsmanship. A small painting on a table caught his eye, and he bent down closer for a better look. He was so preoccupied with the brush strokes that he didn’t hear Lord Grantham come up behind him.

“That’s a favorite of mine,” Lord Grantham noted, bending down to look.

Price popped up and straightened his jacket.

Lord Grantham chuckled. “No shame in stopping to take in a beautiful painting. Are you fond of art?”

“Very, m’Lord. I studied a great deal in my younger days, when I had more free time. I’m still getting used to living around pieces I studied in books.” Price instantly regretted sharing such a personal detail, but it seemed to impress Lord Grantham.

“Interesting… Price, is it?”

“It is. David Price.”

“David. What is it that you like about this painting.”

Price’s shoulders relaxed and he looked down at the detailed canvas surrounded by gilded frame. “I don’t know this painter, and this style is different from many I’ve studied, but it’s more that I’m drawn to the imagery. I dislike paintings that glamorize the battlefield. I prefer ones that feel authentic.”

“And you’re able to measure the authenticity of a battlefield?”

Price continued examining the painting. “Yes, your Lordship. I served in the war.”

Lord Grantham’s eyebrows raised slightly. “I fear I’ve misjudged you. I wouldn’t think you were old enough.”

“I hear that a lot, your Lordship,” Price said with a smile.

“I served in the Boer War, myself, so I’m sympathetic to your experiences. And Downton was a convalescent home after the war, which is when I acquired this painting.”

Price pictured beds full of wounded soldiers spread throughout the rooms of Downton and it gave him a chill. He engaged in the conversation, but it was his least favorite topic. Too many scars still in his head and his heart. Lord Grantham, sensing the change in Price’s mood, sought to change the conversation.

“How are you enjoying Downton so far?”

“I’m enjoying it very much, thank you, m’Lord.”

Mr. Carson entered the room and stopped still when he saw Price speaking to Lord Grantham. “Is David bothering you, my Lord?”
“Oh, Carson, not in the slightest. I’m the one who stopped him to chat. Better be on your way before I get you in trouble, David.”

“He seems like a good young man, Carson,” Lord Grantham reassured Carson once Price was out of hearing range.

“I agree, but I wonder if I haven’t done him a disservice by putting him under Barrow’s tutelage.”

“Well he seems to be doing fine. How is the other new footman?”

Carson sighed. “That one I’m not so sure about. Overconfident may be a generous way to describe him.”

Lord Grantham shook his head, “Honestly, I’m impressed to hear at least one of the new hires is up to your standards.”

“I didn’t say that, my Lord. But so far, he’s close.”

---

Lord Grantham wasn’t the only member of the family to grow fond of Price. Over the following weeks, both Tom Branson and Lady Edith noticed how good Price was to the children. Price became friendly with the children’s nanny and volunteered to come along with the food whenever they had picnics, and the children ran to him when he entered a room. Moore had wondered in a hushed voice to Price why Lady Edith was so very fond of her ward, and Price told him the topic of the children was not up for discussion if he wanted to remain friends.

Thomas added the family’s fondness of Price to the growing list of things that began to frustrate him about the footman. To distance himself, he focused on his exchanges with Eric. For each letter Thomas sent, three or four came back, and all were saucier than the last. In Eric’s first letter he said he would come again after a month, and a month had nearly passed. Thomas was beginning to wonder if there would be action behind all of Eric’s talk.

“I’m going into the village to post a letter, I’ll be back before the dressing gong,” Thomas announced one late May afternoon after the servants’ tea.

“I’ll go with you, I promised Mrs. Patmore I’d fetch butcher’s twine,” Price offered.

Thomas couldn’t think of an excuse not to let him come and nodded.

Price was relieved. He’d felt put off by Thomas over the past few weeks, and this was a chance to get back in Thomas’s good graces.

About an hour later, Price left his jacket in his room, donned his hat, and stopped by Thomas’s room for their walk. “It’s lovely outside, I hear. Or do you already know that from sneaking a smoke?”

Thomas shut his door and walked ahead of Price. “Come on, we need to make it before the post office closes.”

Price had gotten to know the walk to the village well. Someone always seemed to need something - butcher’s twine, different color thread, boot polish, replacement for an ingredient that suddenly went missing - and Price, both quick and trustworthy, was often asked to run the errand. He usually walked alone and enjoyed the solitude. It was a nice break from the bustling servants hall.
“Who will be the lucky recipient of your letter?” Price inquired as the two men passed a farm. A line of geese crossed their path.

“I don’t see how that’s your concern.”

“I’m not trying to pry, I’m just making conversation.”

Thomas puffed out his lips before answering. “It’s to my cousin.”

“I don’t believe anything you say when you do that thing with your lips first.”

“When I do what?”

Price mimicked Thomas’s face. “Like this. This thing with your lips. You do it when you seem upset or annoyed or maybe inventing a story to put off a curious footman.”

Thomas laughed despite himself. “I don’t do that.”

“You always do this,” Price said, still making a face at Thomas. Thomas shoved him lightly.

“So tell me. I won’t tell anyone. It’s not a cousin. Who is it?”

“A friend.”

“A friend who writes to you often.”

Thomas put his hands in his pockets.

“You receive all sorts of colorful little envelopes. If you didn’t want someone to notice you shouldn’t read them out in the open.”

“Why are you so cheeky today?”

Price was quiet for a moment, then answered honestly. “I want to be your friend.”

“You have plenty of friends. Everyone is your friend. The entire Crawley family loves you, every generation.”

“I’m glad to have friends in the staff, and it means a lot that you think the family likes me. But you’re wrong. I’m most interested in your friendship.”

Thomas lit a cigarette and ignored Price.

“Truly, I mean it. I know it was that silly night that I snuck out that put you off of me. I haven’t done it since.”

The men reached the post office. Price opened the door for Thomas. There was a line and the two had to wait their turn. Thomas retrieved an envelope from his pocket and held it by his side. Price plucked the envelope from Thomas’s fingers and read the name.

“Erin. Just Erin? No last name?”

Thomas ripped the letter back from Price. “You mind your business,” he hissed.

The clerk called for the next person in line and Thomas handed over the letter and payment, then left the post office without waiting for Price.
Price jogged after him. “Wait for me, please. I still have to run my errand.” Thomas kept walking. “Don’t show up back there without me, Mr. Carson will wonder what happened,” Price called.

Thomas huffed and lit another cigarette while he waited by the dirt road that would lead them back to Downton.

Price caught up with Thomas after his errand. They walked in silence until they reached an empty field, and Thomas exhaled his cigarette while saying, “You have that loathsome farmhand for a friend. Spend your energy on him.”

Price tried to tease again. “If I’m to have you as a friend, must I have no others? Clearly you have at least one.”

Thomas stopped and faced Price. “I’d never entertain a friendship with someone who doesn’t respect my privacy.”

Price put his hands up. “You’re right. Erin is your business. I won’t ask again.”

Thomas stared at Price for a moment, then continued walking in silence.

At supper, Mr. Carson announced to the staff that the entire family would be traveling in a week’s time and everyone would need to prepare and plan accordingly. Thomas’s first thought was Eric, who had included a way to reach him by telephone in one of his letters that week. Thomas waited for late evening and slipped into Mr. Carson’s office. Eric wasn’t in, but Thomas left a message regarding the best night to stay in the village and hoped Eric would understand.

A letter arrived four days later that confirmed the night Eric would be in town, and where he would stay. Thomas smiled and ran his tongue over his teeth as he read. He could feel Price watching him from across the room. Moore hit Price on the arm to call his attention back to their card game.

“Your turn, let’s go.”

“Mr. Barrow, did you want to join us in a game?” Price asked. Moore didn’t attempt to hide his displeasure at Price’s invitation.

“Oh no, you enjoy your yourselves. I have a letter to write,” Thomas said, smiling, and headed to his room.
New chapter brings new warnings. In summary: SMUT SMUUUT. P.S. I did some Googling to validate the historical accuracy of Eric saying, "get off," because I'd hate to distract you, the reader, with an anachronism :) 
(There were a few minutes after I edited the chapter that half of it was missing. All fixed. Hope that didn't throw anyone off)

New chapter and reminder of the warning - mature content ahoy!

Two days remained before the family headed off for a week to the wedding of a second cousin of Lord Grantham's. Mr. Carson lamented privately to Mrs. Hughes that the family invited guests for the evening when the staff should be focused on preparing for the trip. The Crawleys were entertaining a baron, baroness, and their two sons who were visiting as part of their trip through the countryside. The elder of the sons was an avid archer, and Lord Grantham arranged for a proper setup for his practice by the garden while both families had lunch. The staff enjoyed watching the man give archery lessons (or attempt to) to Mr. Branson, and then even Lady Edith tried her hand.

"That looks like fun," Price commented to Thomas as he restocked a tray with finger sandwiches. They stood under a linen canopy outfitted with everything the staff would need to serve lunch outdoors.

Thomas looked on as Mr. Branson finally succeeded at hitting the bullseye. The small crowd clapped as he pumped his fist. "Maybe you can join in their leisure activities when they adopt you like they adopted him."

"I wouldn't complain," Price said, brushing off Thomas's dig. He adjusted his vest and carried his tray to the family.

Lord Grantham checked the time on his pocket watch and realized the watch had stopped. "No amount of winding seems to make this hunk of junk want to work," he said, shaking his head.

"I could take a look at it for you, m'Lord," Price offered quietly as Lord Grantham selected a sandwich.

"You know about art as well as mechanics. Quite the Renaissance man."

Price held the tray steady so the baron's son could take a sandwich. "If you give it to Mr. Bates tonight, I can try my best before you leave on your trip."

Lord Grantham nodded. "I will, thank you, David."

"What was that about?" Thomas asked when Price was back under the canopy.

"I thought we were respecting each other's privacy?"

Thomas stepped closer to Price. "Do not forget your position here."
Moore interrupted the two, a tray of empty glasses in his hand. "I need more champagne."

"Then get more champagne, why are you bothering me?" Thomas snapped.

"Mr. Barrow, we're out of it out here and I don't have a key to get more from inside."

Thomas pushed the pitcher he was holding into Moore's hand and headed to the house.

"What's up his backside?" Moore asked Price. "Or who?" he added with a snicker.

"Sean, stop it. We're working."

"No one can hear us."

Price clicked his tongue, a habit he picked up from Mrs. Hughes.

"Why do you keep after him, anyway?" Moore pushed.

Price pretended to busy himself with the dessert trays.

"Seriously, David. You hear what everyone says about him. You've got a good thing here, and he's
certainly no good thing."

Exasperated, Price waited for the family to cheer again to ensure no one would hear him. "Don't
throw stones. They'd say the same if they knew about us."

"Aye, watch it!" Moore whispered.

"You! You're always doing this."

Moore whispered, "You and me, we're just having fun. He's different."

"Just leave me for the rest of the day, will you?"

Moore smoothed his hair and cleared his throat. "Alright, have it your way."

Thomas returned with champagne. He popped the cork and poured the effervescent liquid into the
glasses Moore had lined on a table. He noticed the agitation on both footmen's faces.

"My my, was there a quarrel while I was fetching the champagne?"

Moore placed full glasses on his tray and carried them to the family. Price took a tray of
champagne as well and followed. Thomas realized he was making the face Price had teased him
about before and relaxed his mouth, but he couldn't help being quite entertained by the obvious
spat.

--

On the morning the family was scheduled to leave, there was still tension between Price and
Moore. Daisy noticed Price's pouting as he waited for a dish of eggs to bring up for breakfast. "Mr.
Barrow isn't bothering you, is he?" she prodded.

"I didn't mean to look glum," he said, summoning a smile. Daisy handed him the eggs and watched
him leave.
"He's especially pretty when he pouts," she said to Mrs. Patmore.

"Men don't like to be called 'pretty', Daisy," Mrs. Patmore sighed while taking a heavy pan from the oven.

"Oh but he is," Daisy replied, glowing. "Those emerald eyes. And his eyebrows, they're so expressive."

"Go ahead and compliment him on his eyebrows, I bet men get a kick out of that, too."

Daisy shook her head and prepared the next dish due to be brought upstairs. "I don't think he's my type, but I can still admire him."

"What are we admiring?" a kitchen maid asked Daisy.

"David," she whispered.

The maid nodded. "I like his eyebrows."

Daisy gave Mrs. Patmore a satisfied smile.

Moore arrived to collect the next dish and turned quickly to bring it upstairs.

"He's not so bad either," the maid said to Daisy.

Moore stopped in the doorway and looked back at them. Daisy and the maid returned to their work, avoiding his eyes. But he kept them on the maid until she looked up from under her bonnet. Price returned in time to see them exchange glances.

--

The servants who would stay behind escorted the family and others outside as they departed. Lord Grantham approached Price and put his hand on his shoulder. "Bates brought me the watch this morning, David. It's working like a charm. You have my gratitude."

Price wanted to celebrate the way Mr. Branson had when he hit the target, but managed an appropriate, "You're welcome, m'lord," instead.

The family, along with Mr. Bates, Miss Baxter, Mr. Molesley, Anna, and a few other staff, climbed into cars and waved their goodbyes. On the way back in the house, Thomas stopped Mr. Carson.

"Mr. Carson, with the family away, I was hoping I could take the night off."

"I don't see why not. When will you be back?"

"Bright and early."

"Fine then, Mr. Barrow."

Price overheard the request, and his celebratory mood was cut short wondering if Thomas was going to see his admirer. He then remembered Moore's moment with the kitchen maid during breakfast and felt gloomier still.
"Buck up," Thomas told him when they passed each other later in the stairwell. "Maybe the family will bring you along next time. Come to think of it, Lady Edith's single, you could try and maneuver a 'Tom Branson'. Maybe try wooing her with your watchmaking skills."

Price looked to make sure no one was nearby. "Mr. Barrow, my only crime was trying to be your friend. You don't have to be so unkind." He began to descend the stairs, then turned back to Thomas, who was now steps above him. "Send my regards to 'Erin' this evening."

Thomas smiled like a Cheshire cat. "You cheeky little bastard."

Price turned and continued down the stairwell. Thomas's comment and smile made his heart quicken, and he had a moment of realization. It wasn't friendship he wanted from Thomas.

--

Thomas didn't require the address Eric provided to locate the inn. There were only so many places to stay in the village. There was a small but lively piano bar in the lounge and the liquor had clearly been pouring since early in the evening. Thomas took a pause to watch the performance and calm his nerves before going to Eric. He decided some whisky would ensure his nerves were effectively calmed and ordered a shot of the drink before heading to Eric's room.

He found the room and put his knuckles to the door, but waited to knock. This evening was built up in his mind and he would be crushed to leave disappointed. He finally summoned the nerve to rap on the door. Three times, like Eric had asked.

"It's open," the familiar voice called.

The room was lit by just the light from the busy street outside coming through the thin curtains, as well as one candle on the dresser. Thomas didn't see Eric at first on the opposite side of the room, leaning against the wall, wearing only his undershirt and trousers. He took two steps toward Thomas as Thomas closed and locked the door.

"I wondered if I had built you up in my mind," Eric breathed, "but my god, you're even more beautiful than I remembered."

"How can you tell from over there?" Thomas asked, placing his hat on the dresser and his jacket across the back of a chair.

Eric lit a small lamp. He pulled his shirt over his head in one smooth motion, then removed his trousers, leaving just his underwear.

"Not leaving any time to get reintroduced?" Thomas asked.

Eric dropped to his knees, then his hands, and slowly crawled the distance of the room to Thomas. He kneeled and sat back on his heels.

"Let me reintroduce myself, then. I'm Eric Weatherbee, and I'm here to return the favor from the last time we met."

Thomas began to take off his vest, but Eric stopped him. He unbuckled Thomas's belt and unbuttoned his trousers.

"Well you're restless, aren't you?"
"I've been imagining what's under here for over a month. I'm not waiting any longer."

"Don't I have a say in any of this?" Thomas reached down and ran the back of his fingers over Eric's cheek.

Eric closed his eyes at the touch. "Of course," he said, opening his eyes. "What do you say?"

Thomas combed his fingertips through Eric's hair, then cupped his face in both hands. "Kiss me first."

Thomas helped Eric to his feet. Eric rubbed his lips together, wetting them with his tongue. He let the tip of his nose touch Thomas's.

"Anything for you," Eric whispered. He looked in Thomas's eyes, then at his lips, then breathed in deeply through his nose as their lips met for the first time. They kissed slowly at first, Eric's tongue sliding delicately across Thomas's. Thomas thought his heart might escape his ribcage as Eric probed deeper and with more force, but still slowly and deliberately. Eric pulled back and put his nose to Thomas's again. "Whisky?"

Thomas laughed. "I hope that's not a problem."

"Not at all. You're delicious." Eric kissed Thomas again, a low moan escaping as Thomas licked his tongue in response. "Tell me what to do."

"You can get back on your knees."

Eric obliged.

"And I can undress for you this time."

Thomas could tell Eric was already impossibly hard through his underwear. Eric placed his hand on his own crotch, but Thomas put out a finger. "Ah ah ah. You can wait. It's my turn."

Eric clasped his hands in his lap. "Yes, sir."

Thomas removed his vest, then his dress shirt. "That undershirt does you justice," Eric commented, enjoying how it hugged Thomas's torso.

"Glad you approve," Thomas said, pulling it off. Eric's cock flexed obviously beneath the tight cloth of his underwear.

"Sorry," he smiled. "I like a man with chest hair."

"Mmm, what else do you like?"

"I'd like to see the rest of those clothes come off."

Thomas took everything off to his underwear.

"What about that?" Eric asked, pointing to Thomas's glove.

Thomas looked at his hand. "That stays on."


Thomas held his arms open. "By all means."
Eric pinched the waist of Thomas's underwear between his fingers, then, surprising Thomas, gently bit the tip of Thomas's cock through the cloth. Thomas pushed himself against Eric's mouth. Eric relieved Thomas of his underwear and kissed him from base to tip and back down. The sound of Eric's kisses made Thomas harder still.

"Can I take mine off?" Eric asked.

"Not yet," Thomas breathed, pushing Eric's loose, wavy hair away from his face. Eric leaned his head back and sucked one of Thomas's fingers into his mouth, then pulled back and sucked in a second. "You're such a tease," Thomas whined.

"Says the man who invented the practice," Eric replied. He grabbed the base of Thomas's cock and filled his mouth so quickly that Thomas almost lost his balance. Eric held Thomas's hip steady with his other hand and fell into a rhythm that made Thomas's heart pound.

Thomas pumped his hips to match Eric's pace, and just as he fell into the same rhythm, Eric swallowed all of him. He let Thomas slide out of his mouth, then back in, all the way, pulling Thomas towards him to make sure he took it all. Thomas had another man's mouth around him before, but not like this. He realized that he was moaning. Perhaps a little too loudly. He looked down to find Eric's eyes on him.

"You look good with me inside you," Thomas panted.

Eric stroked Thomas with his hand and kissed his stomach. "Let's try something else just to be sure." He motioned for Thomas to lay on the bed, which Thomas did without hesitation. Eric pulled off his underwear and hopped onto the mattress between Thomas's legs. "Have to make sure you're good and wet first," his whispered, licking Thomas like candy.

"Yes, make plenty sure of that," Thomas sighed.

Eric climbed Thomas's body and straddled him, positioning himself so that Thomas could steady his cock to slide inside. Eric lowered his weight onto Thomas. Thomas bit his lower lip to stifle a howl, instead grunting and gasping as Eric came to rest on his hips.

"So how do I look with you in me now?" Eric asked. Thomas started to answer, but the words were caught in his throat as Eric began circling his hips slowly side to side. "Can I touch myself now?"

"I can do that," Thomas said, wrapping his hand around Eric.

Eric pulled off of Thomas and placed himself by Thomas's lips. "How about a quick lick?"

Thomas let Eric slide between his lips just a few times before flicking his tongue across the tip. "Back to work."

Eric slid himself back onto Thomas. He lowered his body onto Thomas's so that they could kiss, then nuzzled his face into the crook of Thomas's neck and kissed a spot that made Thomas shudder. He revisited the same spot with his tongue, and then kissed up Thomas's neck to his earlobe. "Will you get on top?" Eric requested.

Thomas and Eric rolled together, and Thomas propped himself up on his forearms. "Like this?"

Eric smiled. "Now I can see you better."

"You like the look of me?" Thomas asked, returning a large, warm smile.
"Especially when you look as happy as I am," Eric said, stroking Thomas's cheekbone with his thumb. They looked into each other's eyes for a moment before Eric wrapped his thighs around Thomas's hips and pulled him deep inside. Thomas let himself fall onto Eric, tucking his arms under Eric's upper back, holding Eric's shoulders as he pumped himself in and out. Eric reached one arm up and wrapped a hand around a bar of the metal headboard.

Thomas kissed Eric's bicep and then his lips. "Don't forget about yourself," Thomas whispered between pants and moans. Eric slipped his hand between their bodies to stroke himself. "I don't think I can last much longer," Thomas admitted.

"We have the whole night. This can be round one," Eric said. "But do me one favor."

"What's that?"

"Look at me when you get off."

Thomas pushed back to his knees, resting his hands on his thighs as he rocked in and out of Eric. Eric pulled his own knees up to his sides and continued to stroke himself. The sight below him was more than Thomas could bare. He felt the warm beginnings of an orgasm in his stomach, then his thighs, and then finally pulsing through his groin as he rode in and out of Eric with building momentum. When the buzzing electrical pleasure of his orgasm subsided, he slipped out and crawled between Eric's legs, taking him into his mouth so Eric could ride his own wave to release. Eric smiled and gasped, entangling his fingers in Thomas's hair as he came. Thomas swallowed and kissed his way back up Eric's body, then laid his head on the pillow next to Eric's. They both laughed as their breathing came to rest.

Eric played with Thomas's chest hair and kissed his cheek. "I have something for you. But you have to promise me, truly promise, you'll keep it secret."

Thomas put his hand over Eric's. "I can do my best."

"Really," Eric began seriously. "Do you have somewhere you can hide things?"

Thomas furrowed his brow. "Something I have to keep more hidden than sultry letters?"

Eric rolled off the bed and over to his suitcase. He produced a stiff piece of paper and returned, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"I had a very trusted photographer friend arrange this for me," he explained, and turned the paper over, revealing a gelatin print of himself in a photography studio, nude and aroused.

Thomas took the picture carefully from Eric. "This photographer, is he more than a friend?"

Eric laughed, "Oh god, no. The photographer is a 'she.' And she likes other 'shes'."

"There's a whole world of people like us out there," Eric said. "You just have to know where to find them."

"And I can have this?" Thomas studied the image.

"If you promise like I asked."

"I'd tell you anything to keep this," Thomas teased. "It's incredible."
"Come to London sometime and I can arrange one of you for me."

Eric was being playful, but the idea made Thomas anxious. He patted Eric's leg and handed him the picture. "Maybe clean up and fetch us some drinks from downstairs?"

"Oh I see, I'm the servant now?"

Thomas took the picture back and settled into the bed. "Yes, Mr. Weatherbee. Go get me some more whisky while I become acquainted with this picture."

"I hope you do become acquainted with it while we're apart," Eric said. He wiped himself clean with a towel and began to get dressed.

"You're actually going to get me a drink?"

Eric kissed the back of Thomas's hand and headed for the door. "I'll serve you all night if you'd like," he said, opening the door and disappearing into the dimly lit hallway.

Thomas sat on the edge of the bed, holding the glossy picture to the light. He let himself fantasize about being the type of person who could live a life in London, knowing other people like himself so well he could request a studio session like Eric's. At least for tonight, he was that kind of person.
Thomas left Eric’s hotel room before first light, arriving at the back door of Downton just as a sliver of sun peeked over the hills. He had barely slept, preferring instead to watch the steady rise and fall of Eric’s chest while he dreamed. Thomas tried to explain that it would be nearly impossible for him to find an excuse to spend a night in London, at least not any time soon. Eric said he would wait as long as it took, but he was sure Thomas could invent something.

Thomas wasn’t a bit tired, feeling practically euphoric, other than the little voice in his head that reminded him Eric would only ever be an affair. He subverted the voice, for the moment, and allowed himself to feel happy.

At breakfast, Thomas surveyed the table over his coffee cup and noticed someone missing.

“Where’s David this morning?” he asked Mr. Carson.

“He took a piece of toast and said he wasn’t feeling very hungry. I believe he’s out in the courtyard. Though I don’t want to see him milling around the kitchen in an hour. The house may be empty of most of the Crawleys but we still have jobs to do.”

Thomas spun his coffee cup around with a finger, trying not to let curiosity get the best of him. But it always did, and he quickly finished his porridge and headed to the courtyard.

It took Thomas a minute to locate Price, hidden in a far corner by a pile of pallets. He sat on an upturned milk crate, petting a stable cat. Thomas lit a cigarette and approached Price.

“Not feeling well this morning?”

Price looked up from the calico cat by his feet. “Not especially, thank you for asking.”

“Those things bite, you know,” Thomas advised, motioning to the cat with his cigarette.

“They say the same thing about you, and yet I keep coming back for more.” Price smiled, then returned his eyes to the cat, who was rubbing her body back and forth across his shins.

Thomas laughed.

“What’s funny?”

“Just that you compare me to a cat, and I always think you resemble a puppy.”

Price laughed as well, petting the cat’s ear. “A dog? What about me is canine?”

Thomas leaned his shoulder against the courtyard wall. “For example, when I was sewing your finger? Mrs. Hughes came in and you gave her these big, simple puppy eyes.” Thomas demonstrated. “‘Sorry I bled everywhere, don’t hit me with a newspaper.’ It’s a little act you put on. Happy little puppy. Then you turn around sneak out at night like a bad dog.”

Price shook his head. “Then there’s you. Like a cat, going out at night to hunt.”

“I wish I did have a rolled up newspaper right now,” Thomas said, pushing another milkcrate next to Price with his foot. He sat down, and the cat came to him for a rub.

“You look perfectly healthy,” Thomas observed. “So, why are you out here?”
Price was quiet for a moment. “I got a telegram from my brother this morning. My father is ill.”

“How ill?” Thomas asked, taking a drag.

“Gravely.” Price snapped his fingers and the cat came back to him.

“Are you going to go see him?”

Price looked at the house. “I don’t see how I could get to London on my half day.”

“Not what I mean. The family’s gone. Tell Mrs. Hughes the trouble and she’ll soften up old Carson. There’s plenty of people here to keep things running til you’re back.”

“Moody like a cat, too. Are you truly being nice, or are you scheming to claw me when I turn my back?”

“Surely I haven’t been that bad to you?”

“No, you haven’t. But I’ve heard you can be.”

Thomas flicked his cigarette. “You should spend less time listening to what others say about me.”

Price nodded. “I agree. But when you do treat me poorly, it’s hard to ignore the chatter.”

“I suppose that’s fair.”

The cat grew bored of the men’s company and headed off to the fields in search of mice. They both watched the cat patter out of the courtyard and disappear into the grass.

“You know what I want to ask you.”

Thomas shrugged. “Don’t think I do.”

“How was your night?”

Thomas rolled his eyes. “You don’t let up.”

Price batted his eyelashes. “No no, I’m so innocent as you say.”

Thomas lit another cigarette. He took a long drag, contemplating what to say next. “David, you know I can’t answer your questions. Fine if you want to be my friend, but accept that there are parts of my life I will not share.”

Thomas’s acceptance of his friendship moved Price. He looked away.

“What?”

“What if… what if… I understood.”

“How do you mean?”

Price’s voice was hushed even though no members of the staff were anywhere near them to hear. “Would you feel more comfortable sharing with me… if you knew I understood those parts you’re uncomfortable sharing?”

Thomas shook the ash from his cigarette, still staring at the grass in the distance. “Sometimes we say things we can’t take back. You should be careful not to say one of those things now, not when
Price was quiet for a length, and then sniffled.

Thomas looked back from the grass and patted Price’s knee. “Go see Mrs. Hughes.”

Price wiped his eye with the heel of his hand. “You’re right. Of course you’re right. Ignore me.”

“You said nothing.” Thomas nodded. “And if you ever have something to say with a clearer head,
then maybe we can talk.”

Price laughed, taking Thomas aback. “God am I stupid,” he said more to himself than Thomas.
“I’ll go find Mrs. Hughes now. Thank you. Truly.”

“You’re not stupid,” Thomas said. “Maybe just a little too softhearted for your own good.”

“There’s worse things to be, I suppose.”

“Like an ornery tomcat?”

Price stood and brushed off his trousers. “Eh, you just have to know the right way to deal with
those critters,” he said, and headed in to find Mrs. Hughes.

**

Price returned to Downton the same day as the family. Downstairs was chaotic, and Price fell into
the tempo of the activity quickly upon his return. Mrs. Hughes asked Price if he was capable of
handling the busy day, but Price thanked her and told her he welcomed the distraction. There were
pale blue circles under his eyes and his hands shook slightly, but he didn’t miss a beat.

Most of the staff told him they were sorry to hear his father was unwell, which made it all the more
obvious to him that Moore had not. While Price was away, the staff was allowed to head into
Ripon to see a picture. Moore sat next to the kitchen maid, and took advantage of the dark theater
to rest his knee against hers, and then his hand. He had also rearranged his usual seat at the
servants’ table to sit next to her, Price noticed his first meal back.

“So dear old dad isn’t doing so hot?” Moore finally said across the table during tea.

“No. He isn’t.”

“Pity. What’ll happen to his shop?”

Price sipped his tea and swallowed his frustration. “I haven’t thought about it. I imagine it will go
to my brother.”

“Your brother? But he’s younger than you.”

The hallboys and house maids seated by them started listening to the conversation.

“Well, he’s trained in the business. He’s taking care of it now that my father is ill. It seems like a
natural choice.”

Moore smirked. “And you’ll just let your brother get your inheritance without so much as a peep?”

More heads turned to the two men, including Thomas’s.
“I’m not worrying about that right now. My father is still alive.”

“Yes but not for long. And then you’re high and dry.”

Price placed his cup on its saucer. “What’s your game, Sean? What do you want me to say?”

“I don’t know. Be a man, maybe? For once?”

Finally, Mr. Carson was aware of the activity at the end of the table. “What is going on down there? Sean, David just returned from a very difficult trip. Why are you badgering him?”

Moore looked at his kitchen maid, then at Moore. “Just turns my stomach to eat with such a pitiful little crybaby.”

Price couldn’t hide his pained expression. He excused himself from the table and went to his room.

“Sean, that’s enough,” Mr. Carson puffed. “Go occupy yourself somewhere else until we prepare for dinner. And don’t go near David.”

The mood was too dark, and the staff cleaned up their tea. About ten minutes later a door slammed so hard in the men’s dormitory that the staff could hear it downstairs. Mr. Carson moved to the stairs, but Thomas stopped him. “I can go,” he said. Mr. Carson gladly handed over the task of having to investigate the problem.

Both Price and Moore’s doors were closed. The hall was quiet, but as Thomas approached Price’s door he heard muffled crying. He entered without knocking and shut the door quietly behind himself. Price was seated on the floor with his back against the wall, face in the crook of his left arm. He gasped and sobbed, and didn’t hear Thomas approach him. Thomas crouched next to Price and put his hand on the younger man’s arm. Price yanked his arm away, then, realizing it was Thomas, balled his hands into fists.

“As if I wasn’t embarrassed enough. Why are you here?”

“We could hear a door slam from downstairs.”

Price punched his fists together.

“David, what happened?” Thomas sat against the wall next to him.

“He just says such hateful things, and I’m in no place to hear them.”

“What did he say?”

Price felt overcome again and covered his face. “You won’t want me to say.”

“I think we’re past that at this point. What was more hateful than what he said during tea?”

Price looked at the door.

“No one can hear you.”

“He was rubbing Ellie in my face. That kitchen maid. I know he fancies her. But…”

“Yes?”

Price looked into Thomas’s eyes. “I thought he fancied me. I know he did.”
Thomas’s pulse quickened at the candor of Price’s words. “How do you know that?”

Price seemed to choke on a sob, then looked at the floor. “I asked him - I asked, how can you be with her when you clearly like being with someone like me?”

Thomas searched Price’s eyes. “What did he say?”

“He said-” Price stopped, caught his breath, and spoke more clearly. “He said, ‘When my eyes were closed, it didn’t matter whose lips are on me. But my eyes are open now, and I don’t want your lips anywhere near mine’.”

Thomas frowned and balled his own fist before putting his hand on Price’s back. “He won’t have the last word.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve known my fair share of men like him. I’ll take care of him, don’t worry.”

Price wiped his nose on his handkerchief. “You mean hurt him?”

“Not physically. But yes. I will hurt him, and he deserves it. No loss for this house, everyone’ll be glad to see the back of him.”

There was a knock on the door, and Mrs. Hughes entered.

“I think David should have the night off,” Thomas said.

“Oh, I agree, Mr. Barrow. I thought that before the incident at tea even happened. David, take a bath, read a book, and get some rest. Things will be clearer in the morning.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hughes,” Price said, climbing to his feet with Thomas’s help.

“What do we do about Sean?” Mrs. Hughes wondered to Thomas as they returned to their duties.

“I’m sure Mr. Carson will come up with something,” Thomas said with a tight-lipped smile.

“Hmm. I know that smile, Mr. Barrow. Do let Mr. Carson handle it, won’t you?”

Thomas smiled again, with teeth. “Oh, absolutely. I’d never interfere.”

Mrs. Hughes shook her head. “Pardon me if I’m incredulous,” she said as she went off to find Mr. Carson.

Thomas watched the kitchen maid through the kitchen window, considering at least half a dozen ways to properly interfere.
Chapter 9

With Eric’s initial thirst for Thomas quenched, his letters strayed from the sultry and became more personal. He asked about Thomas’s family life, his work, and his interests. He sent a novel written by a friend and asked Thomas to read it so they could discuss it in their letters. He also encouraged Thomas to read Lady Edith’s magazine, especially his articles. Articles that transported the average reader to remote parts of the world they would never get to visit beyond the black and white text of the page. Eric’s writing made Thomas long to travel with Eric, even if it was just to set up campsites and make meals for Eric and his travel companions. Any part of that world would be better than bowing and scraping at Downton, Thomas thought.

Miss Baxter asked Thomas about his pen pal, to which he replied, “Not you, too. David nags me enough about it.” But she explained she was glad to see Thomas was building friendships, both with Price in the house, and whoever this mystery person was outside of it.

Price had found a new seat at the servant’s table closer to Anna, who was beginning to view the footman like a younger brother. She noticed the eyes Daisy was often making at him, but he shrugged it off, saying he was too focused on his career at Downton to look for love there. Anna joked, asking if that was a dig at her. Price’s cheeks reddened, which made Anna giggle in the way that always reminded Price of his late mother.

Despite Price’s best attempts to avoid Moore, Moore still managed to find ways to insult or otherwise upset him. Mrs. Hughes invited Price into her sitting room to discuss it, offering him some tea and a tin of biscuits, which he managed to consume the entirety of during their conversation.

“I don’t understand why Mr. Carson puts up with it,” Price admitted to Mrs. Hughes.

“David, if insubordination alone were enough to dismiss a member of staff, Mr. Barrow wouldn’t have lasted through his first night at Downton. The bottom line is that Sean does his work well and keeps his inappropriate behavior downstairs. There have been no dismissible offenses.”

Price sipped the last drop of his tea and played with the top of the biscuit tin. “I’d rather he not get dismissed. I just wish he’d be nicer. We were fast friends before he turned on me.”

Mrs. Hughes refilled Price’s tea cup. “Unfortunately, I don’t see that tiger changing his stripes. On another note, how is your father doing?”

“Not well. Not well at all.” Price put the top back on the empty tin. “I don’t think he’ll see autumn.”

Mrs. Hughes sighed and poured a cup of tea for herself. “I’m very sorry. How is your relationship with him?”

“Complicated, but I don’t blame him for it.”

“Why is that?”

“I was well trained in watchmaking when I was young, and the plan was for me to take over the business. It’s been named ‘Price and Son’ since I was a small boy. Before my brother was even born,” Price laughed. “But then I went off to the war. The first time I came back, I was alright. The second time, I could hardly focus. The last time, I was…” Price considered whether he was ready to open up that part of his life to someone in the house.
“You can tell me, David. Lord knows this house felt the black cloud of war.”

“I came back shell shocked. I got horrible headaches doing such detailed work. I thought that was bad enough, but then my hands started shaking. All the time. No doctor could help. But how could they when it was all in my head?” Price shook his head. “Anyway, my brother was old enough then to start helping, which was at least a blessing for my father.”

Mrs. Hughes shook her head as well. “Poor lad. But how did you go from shell shock to footman?”

“I wasn’t good for much else, so I started reading. All kinds of things. And then visiting museums and libraries to get out of the house. I made friends with a librarian, and she made it her mission to find me gainful employment. Eventually she heard of an opening for a hallboy in a house that was friendly to war veterans. I was there all my time before Downton.”

“Well, I suppose we’re lucky you met that librarian and found your way in service. You fit in well here, David.”

Price looked at his feet.

“I mean it. Men like you are few and far between. That’s why it’s so important to me that you are happy here. Don’t let Sean bring you down. You have a long career here if you want it.”

“Does Mr. Carson feel that way, too?”

“I don’t know if he’d ever admit it, but I’ve never heard him complain about you, and that certainly says something.”

“I’ll continue to keep my distance. A long career here would be my dream.” Price thanked Mrs. Hughes for the tea and her time, and headed for the door.

“One last thing, David.”

“Yes, Mrs. Hughes?” Price asked, his hand on the doorknob.

Mrs. Hughes stood and approached him. “While you’re working on making new friendships, do be careful who you choose. Sean isn’t the only person here who could interfere with your success.”

Price assumed Mrs. Hughes referred to Thomas. “I appreciate your advice. So far, everyone else seems to have my best interests at heart.”

Mrs. Hughes nodded, letting Price excuse himself from her sitting room. Just as soon as Price was out of the door, Thomas came around the corner. He motioned to the door out to the courtyard, and Price followed. Thomas’s cigarette was already lit and hanging from his lip before they were outside.

Once outside and away from other staff, Thomas said quietly, “I’ve decided how we deal with your former friend.”

Price pursed his lips and took a deep breath. “I’ve been thinking about that. I don’t want to get him in trouble. I’d be no better than he is.”

Thomas pointed his cigarette at Price. “You think you’ll be the last? A man like that, he’ll play with another heart, and another, acting cock of the walk around here. He’s probably already burning his bridge with Emmie.”
“Ellie.”

“The maid, whatever her name is. He hurt you, David.”

“That doesn’t mean I should get him fired. I can’t go around destroying the lives of everyone who hurts me. And he’s young. He may change, and I’d have ruined his career. Why shouldn’t he have a future?”

Thomas’s eyes were wide. “There are people who act out because they are bullied, and then there are the true bullies. He’s been here long enough where I can tell the difference.”

Price was silent.

“Think about it, was he ever really kind to you? Or, was he using you for what was good for him at the time?”

The truth of Thomas’s question stung. “But still. I don’t want it to be my fault.”

“And it doesn’t have to be. Just promise to stay out of the mix and nothing will be your fault.”

Price nodded reluctantly.

“I need one question answered first, and then I won’t bring the subject up again. How friendly would you say you are with the nanny?”

“Rebecca? Why?”

“You said you don’t want to be involved, so don’t ask. Just answer.”

“We’re very friendly.”

Thomas finished his cigarette and adjusted his vest and jacket. “Alright, then. That was all I needed.”

Price felt the weight of Thomas’s request, and wanted to protest, but the thought of Moore out on his ear was too enticing.

**

Price was in the middle of getting ready for bed when his door swung open. He grabbed for his shirt, as he was down to his trousers.

Moore entered and shut the door. “Did I interrupt anything?”

“What are you doing in here?” Price asked, pulling his undershirt hastily over his head. “I take it Ellie’s tired of your nonsense?”

“David, you know I don’t mean half of what I say.” Moore sat at the foot of Price’s bed and kicked off his shoes.

“You meant every word. Put your shoes on and get out.” Price leaned against the wall opposite Moore and crossed his arms.

“I was just getting comfortable.” Moore scooted up Price’s bed and laid his head on the pillow. “Why don’t we kiss and make up?”
“You’re nauseating. Out,” Price ordered, pointing at the door.

Moore propped himself up on his elbows. “What? Is there someone else? Ooh, maybe the ol’ under butler? I bet he’d love to get under *your* bu-.”

“Sean, enough. I won’t ask again.”

Moore rolled onto his side. “I see you talking with him. Maybe you’re not so eager to be with me because you’ve been with him”

“I have not.”

“But you want to.”

Price chewed his lip.

“You don’t deny it.” Moore patted the spot on the bed next to him. “Well, I’m feeling generous. I’ll let you pleasure me and you can close your eyes and pretend I’m him.”

Price walked to the door and opened it. “Get out.”

“David-”

“Get out!”

Moore rolled off the bed, picked up his shoes, and walked slowly to Price. He stood nearly chest to chest, or what would be chest to chest if he wasn’t so much taller. Moore looked down his nose and into Price’s narrowed green eyes. “If you won’t give me what I want, you’d best be careful, because I’m not above taking it.”

Price’s eyes widened, taken aback by Moore’s warning. “Well that’s a new low, even for you.”

“You don’t know me, then,” Moore smirked, and left the other footman standing in the doorway.

Once Price was able to collect his thoughts, he scribbled on a scrap of paper and slid it under Thomas’s door. Thomas was engrossed in Eric’s friend’s novel, and when he finally saw there was a piece of paper on his floor, there was no sign of anyone in the hallway. Thomas held the scrap to his lamp so he could read the hastily-written message.

*If you’re going to take action, please do so quickly.*

Thomas lit a match and burned the little strip of paper, deciding he would put his plan into action the next day.

**

Thomas returned from errands in the village before luncheon, and took a detour around the grounds in search of the children’s nanny, Rebecca. He found Rebecca with the children by the pond. She sat on a bench laughing with the children while they kicked a ball.

“Good afternoon!” Thomas greeted her, a bag of goods in hand. The woman was about his age, with fine blonde eyelashes over pale blue eyes that had a perpetual smile at the corners.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Barrow. Enjoying the warm weather?”

“I am. May I join you for a moment?”
Rebecca slid over so Thomas could sit. “Might I ask you a question?”

“Of course,” she said, her eyes glancing away from the children briefly to meet Thomas’s.

“You’re quite good friends with David.”

Rebecca brightened. “I am. Lovely young man, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he is. And I’m sure he’s told you of his troubles lately.”

“His poor father. Such a terrible thing.”

“Yes, that, of course. But, has he told you of his trouble with the other footman?”

Rebecca sighed. “Sean. What a cruel soul. Turning on him for no reason, and at such a bad time.”

Thomas put his arm across the back of the bench and leaned toward her. “The thing is, Sean will be here forever unless he slips up on the job. As bad a person as he is, he’s not a bad worker. Which means we have to give Mr. Carson reason to send him out the door.”

Rebecca fixed her eyes on Thomas’s. She didn’t know him well, but knew he had been supportive when Price was down. “I’m not sure what that has to do with me.”

“I am going to ask you a favor, and if you decline, please keep to yourself that I ever asked in the first place. Remember, this is for David.”

“I’m listening.”

“I need you to bring one of the children to Mr. Carson and say that Sean threatened to hit them.”

Rebecca couldn’t stifle her laugh. “I could never do that. And the children wouldn’t go along with it.”

“They’re children. Say you’re playing a game. They’ll play along.”

Seeing Thomas was quite serious, Rebecca became serious as well. “I don’t know if I could go along with this plan, even for David.”

“David is suffering,” Thomas implored her. “And according to a note he left me last night, Sean is getting worse.”

“So one of the children says Sean threatened to hit them. Is that really enough to get someone fired?”

“If there’s one thing Mr. Carson holds dear, it’s the safety of the children in this house.”

“I can’t believe I’m considering this. But David is a special person, and to tell you the truth, I’ve never liked how Sean treats him.”

“So you’ll do it?”

Rebecca rubbed her fingers together and then folded her hands in her lap. “There’s something else. I can’t believe I’m going to say this either.”

“Go on.”
“Master George fell down earlier today, as young children do. He has a bruise. I could… I could say Sean did it.”

Thomas grinned ear to ear, then tried to straighten his face. “Nanny, I know we’ve never talked much, but you may now be my favorite person in the house.”

“It’s not for you,” she shook her head, but her eyes still had their smile. “I get bored sometimes. Now I can help David and enjoy a little drama.”

“My goodness. I see why David is your friend. But don’t tell him the details. He wants to stay out of it.”

Rebecca stood and joined the children. “I better go before I change my mind.”

“And we never spoke today.”

“I never saw you.”

**

The staff began gathering in the hall outside Mr. Carson’s office. There was quite the commotion going on inside.

“Who’s in there?” Molesley whispered to Miss Baxter.

“Sean,” she whispered back.

“What happened?” a house maid asked.

“I saw the nanny go in, too,” Daisy whispered.

“The nanny and Sean?” Mr. Bates asked.

“Not like that,” Anna said. “The nanny had Master George with her.”

“What’s Master George doing with Sean?” Mrs. Patmore asked.

All chattering stopped when Mrs. Hughes came around the corner. “Whatever is going on is none of anyone’s concern. Back to work!”

The staff disbanded like little mice, and Mrs. Hughes let herself into Mr. Carson’s office.

“Please tell me, what’s going on in here?”

“Nanny Rebecca, can you please tell Mrs. Hughes what you told me? I don’t think I have the stomach to repeat it.”

Rebecca stood with George’s hand in hers. Moore glared at her through red, watery eyes. She took a breath before speaking. “Sean has always been impatient with the children, but today… he hit Master George.”

Mrs. Hughes gasped loudly, and the staff began to assemble once again outside the door. Price jogged down the stairs, oblivious to the activity in Mr. Carson’s office. When he saw the group gathered, he had an inkling who was inside.

“It’s Sean,” Miss Baxter confirmed for him.
Inside the office, Moore protested. “I would never!”

“Why would Nanny Rebecca have any reason to make up such a story? And where did Master George’s bruise come from if not you?”

“I don’t know!” Moore’s voice was high and strained. “I bet it was David!”

“David would never hit a child,” Mr. Carson countered.

“He put her up to this! They’re friends. He wants me out of here, he told her to say all this.”

“Sean hit me,” George told Mr. Carson.

Moore put his hands on his head and paced in a small circle. “This is David’s doing!”

“David knows nothing of this,” Rebecca told Mr. Carson.

“They conspired!”

Mrs. Hughes opened the door, sighed when she saw the staff, and called Price inside. Moore, with messy hair and tearful eyes, pointed at Price. “Confess you put her up to this.”

“I don’t know what ‘this’ is. I don’t know what’s going on,” he said, which was mostly true.

“David, did you ask Nanny Rebecca to report Sean for hitting Master George?”

Price looked at Moore. “You hit Master George?”

Moore crossed the length of the room in three long strides and pushed Price up against the wall with one arm, winding the other up to punch him. Mr. Carson pulled Moore off of Price and stood between the two men.

“Nanny Rebecca, please get Master George upstairs. He’s had enough shock for one day.”

Rebecca shuffled George out the door. Thomas arrived in the hall just as they headed for the stairs. George waved to him and smiled. “Sean hit me,” he told him. The rest of the staff gasped just as Mrs. Hughes had. Thomas and Rebecca exchanged a quick glance as she ascended the staircase.

“He’s not what you think he is,” Moore told Mr. Carson. “He’s not a perfect bloody cherub. He’s a sinful, perverted little beggar. Ask him what he gets up to when the lights are out.”

“That is enough,” Mr. Carson said through his teeth. “David, go out and call a car around. Sean, your things will be packed and you will go off with your last week of pay and enough for a train ticket. I don’t care where you go. Wherever it is, you will not get a reference from this house.”

“Please! I didn’t do it! David is behind this, I know he is.”

“Tell me, why would David go to all of this trouble? Just because you have been rude to him?”

Moore looked at Price while answering Mr. Carson. “Because he’s in love with me, but I put him off.”

Mr. Carson closed his eyes. “I won’t hear another word. David, go as I asked. And ask Mr. Molesley to pack Sean’s belongings. If they’re not ready when the car is here, we can send them later.”
Mrs. Hughes followed David out of the office. “I want you all to go busy yourselves somewhere else,” Mrs. Hughes told the staff. “We will give an announcement at supper.”

There was the matter of seeing Moore out of the house, telling the family, and then finally telling the staff at supper. When the day was over and Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes could sit together, Mr. Carson could not stop a tear from staining his cheek. “I blame myself,” Mr. Carson said. “I allowed that monster to come into this house.”

“No now, Mr. Carson,” Mrs. Hughes said calmly, putting her hand over his. “I was only just saying how he had done nothing worthy of dismissal. This all came quite out of the blue, at least for me. But he’s gone now, and the children are safe once again. Hasn’t Lady Mary already told you you’re not to blame?”

Mr. Carson wiped his cheek. “Yes, but who knows how she truly feels.”

“I don’t think she’s one to be shy with an opinion.”

Upstairs in the dormitory, Price stopped Thomas as he walked from the bathroom to his bedroom. Thomas’s hair was wet and combed, his face cleanly shaved, and a towel tossed over his shoulder.

“Glad one of us is clean,” Price said. “I feel dirty.”

“You had nothing to do with this, remember?”

“No, I just - I’m embarrassed how glad I am he’s gone.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you. What was your last straw?”

“He threatened me, and I knew he would have made good on his threat,” Price answered. A strand of Thomas’s hair slipped onto his forehead, and Price tucked it back with a careful finger.

Price’s touch flustered Thomas. It took him a moment to form a response. “Well, I’m glad you left me the note. I’d hate it if something had happened to you.”

“I have nothing to worry about now, thanks to you.”

A door opened and Mr. Molesley entered the hallway, a towel over his shoulder as well. “Oh, were you waiting your turn?” he asked Price.

“No, he was just going to bed,” Thomas answered, and brushed past both men to his room.

Thomas locked his door, hung up his towel, and pulled his suitcase out from under the bed. He opened the top and carefully slid the picture of Eric out from between the leather and the fabric lining. He sat on his bed, slipped his hand into his pants, and stared at the picture. But as hard as he focused on Eric, he couldn’t get Price’s touch out of his mind.
The Crawley family gathered in the library to discuss the events from the day before. Thomas, Molesley, and Price brought in tea and were then excused from the room by Lord Grantham. The family’s faces all looked very downcast, and Price’s relief over Moore’s dismissal was replaced by guilt for the pain the incident caused the family.

“How could someone so vile find employment at Downton? Aren’t references thoroughly checked?” the Dowager Countess asked. She was too exasperated to hold her tea cup without shaking.

Lord Grantham paced about the room. “I cannot deny I am extremely disappointed, but prior employers may not have been forthcoming with information that could cast a shadow on their family.”

“That’s very true,” Lady Grantham interjected from her seat on the sofa. “Who knows what kind of information was shared with Carson.”

Lord Grantham served himself a cup of tea and sat in a high backed chair. “I think we ought to hold off on hiring another man until we’ve all recovered from this nightmare.”

“I quite agree. In the meantime, Spratt can come up to the house if we need a hand,” Lady Grantham said. “The staff downstairs must be so devastated.”

“The staff?” Lady Mary said with disdain. “Poor them indeed. It wasn’t their child he mistreated.”

“We don’t know how he treated anyone downstairs. I highly doubt this is his first offense,” Lady Edith said.

“I would bet money you’re right,” Mr. Branson said. “Living and working alongside such a louse - I’m sure morale could use some lifting after that.”

“I’ll ask Mrs. Hughes to plan an outing for the staff,” Lady Grantham offered. “Nothing extravagant, just something to lighten the mood. While they’re busy, it will give us some private time as a family”

Lady Mary rolled her eyes and set them on the Dowager. “Surely you can’t agree that the staff’s morale is a priority in all of this?”

“I know you are hurting, my dear, but there is no sense taking it out on everyone downstairs. I say let them have their outing. Why not tomorrow night? You can all come to the Dower house for dinner.”

“Can your staff handle all of us for the evening?” Lord Grantham asked.

“They will have to, won’t they?” the Dowager replied.
Thomas let himself in the room and replaced the teapot with a new, full one.

“Barrow, can you please send Mrs. Hughes up?” Lady Grantham asked.

“Certainly, your Ladyship,” he replied. He scanned the rest of the faces in the room as he closed the door behind himself.

“Quite the mood up there,” Thomas said to Price as he set the empty teapot by the kitchen sink.

“And it’s my fault,” Price said, his voice cracking.

Thomas sighed. “Follow me outside, David.”

“I can’t believe I set this off,” Price said, petting the little cat, who had started to come out whenever Price was in the courtyard.

Thomas wiped ash from his sleeve. It was slightly windy, making a smoke break a little challenging. “It was only a matter of time before he did something just as heinous. Really, this was a preventive measure.”

Before Price could respond, the kitchen maid, Ellie, came outside with a bucket of scraps for compost.

“And what do you think of Sean’s sudden departure?” Thomas called to her. Ellie finished emptying the bucket into a wooden compost bin and walked to the two men.

“Can I have one of those?” she asked, nodding at Thomas’s cigarette.

He opened his case and removed one for her, lighting it from his own. “You can try, the wind’s been getting the better of mine.”

Ellie took a long drag and grinned as though she had just finished her favorite pudding. “To answer your question, I couldn’t be happier he’s gone. I’m sorry for the pain he caused the boy, but children recover quickly, don’t they? Saved me from having to report him myself.”

“What’d he do to you?” Thomas asked, turning his head from the wind to take a drag.

Ellie looked from Thomas to Price and back. “I suppose it’s more what he didn’t do, or I wouldn’t let him. Foolish little devil, something was going to get him in the end.”

“My exact thoughts, young lady,” Thomas said, relighting Ellie’s cigarette for her.

“What’s going on out here?” Mrs. Patmore called from the door. “I have a luncheon to prepare and I need all hands. And you better wash those hands first, Ellie, I don’t need scraps and cigarettes in my kitchen.”

“Let me help, too, Mrs. Patmore,” Price said, following Ellie inside.

Price looked forward to the chance to help in the kitchen. He loved service at Downton, but doing something with his hands always felt so satisfying. Mrs. Patmore handed him bunches of herbs and onions to chop.

Thomas milled about the kitchen, not nearly as eager to help. A goose was roasting in the oven, and the smell reminded him of holiday dinners as a boy. His mother had been a cook, and a holiday dinner was always fit for an upperclass family, despite the humble flat they lived in. He stood next to Price and watched him chop, then picked and ate a piece of basil from the pile of herbs.
“You could help if you’re going to stand there. It’ll at least keep your hands too busy to graze,” Mrs. Patmore said.

“Quick announcement, everyone,” Mrs. Hughes said as she strode into the kitchen. All hands came to rest. “Lady Grantham is giving us all the night off tomorrow. It so happens there is a musical performance in the village. You’re of course welcome to stay in, but all are invited. We will leave at six sharp.”

All faces were smiling as work resumed. “Oh, I love music,” Daisy said.

“Me, too,” Price added.

“Do ya?” Daisy asked, her eyes going soft.

“Look what you started,” Thomas said to David quietly.

“I haven’t seen the flowers for luncheon,” Mrs. Patmore noticed. “David, can you hand the onions off to Ellie and head down to the gardener?”

“I can chop an onion, y’know,” Thomas said. He took Price’s apron and knife as Price headed off on his mission.

“How would I know when all you do in this kitchen is chitchat or steal a bite?”

Price found the gardener by the greenhouse. Summer flowers were abundant, with bunches of them already gathered for his choosing. “There’s a concert in the village tomorrow night,” Price told the gardener. The gardener, Lee, was about Price’s age, but all his time in the sun made him look older. Price chatted with Lee whenever he was sent to pick up flowers, and Lee was always especially curious what the kitchen staff was up to. It made sense to Price as bringing flowers in the kitchen was about the only interaction Lee would get with inside staff.

“Is the staff going?”

“I think most everyone. Maybe you could all join, too.”

“I would have to ask permission,” Lee said. He was a short man with thinning blonde hair, small brown eyes, and a kind smile. Mrs. Patmore always nudged Daisy when Lee set his smile on her, but Daisy wasn’t one to pick up on a hint.

“Do ask. It would be nice for all of the staff to be in the same place for once.”

“Was it like that at your old employer?”

Price picked up three large bouquets, and Lee added a fourth to the pile in Price’s arms. “Well it was a much more modest home. Two in the stable, two in the garden, six in the house, so we all knew each other better. These smell lovely, by the way.”

“Thank the bees, they’ve been extra busy this summer.”

“I’ll thank the first bee I see,” Price said, turning back toward the house. “Have a good day, hope to see you tomorrow night.”

…..

Everyone was dressed in their best as they gathered in the servant’s hall five minutes before six. Price thought Thomas looked especially sharp in a black suit he’d never seen Thomas wear before.
Daisy smiled at Price and adjusted her hat. “Is it on straight?” she asked him.

Price tipped it slightly. “Now it is.”

Daisy smiled up at him. “Thank you, David.”

Mrs. Hughes and Mr. Carson arrived in the hall. “We’re just waiting on the outside staff and we’ll all head down together.”

“Outside staff?” Thomas scoffed. “Since when do we go on outings together?”

“Everyone who works here deserves a night off and some music,” Price replied.

“David’s right,” Mrs. Hughes said.

Thomas shook his head at Price. “Yes, good ol’ David, everyone’s chum, from gardner to Grantham.”

“Not a bad reputation to have,” Mr. Carson noted.

There was a knock on the back door. The outside staff had assembled, all dressed in their best as well. The group walked to the village together. The air was much more still than the day before, though there was enough of a breeze to carry the smell of honeysuckle from the fields.

“Enjoy the warm air and the honeysuckle, it will soon be autumn,” Mr. Bates said to Anna.

“But I love autumn. Cool air, the smell of apple, the crunch of fallen leaves,” Anna replied, taking Mr. Bates’s arm.

Price walked alongside the couple. “I usually love autumn, but I’m not looking forward to it this year. I have a feeling I’ll have a funeral to attend with the changing season.”

“Way to bring down the mood,” Thomas said, coming up behind Price.

“David can share his feelings with us any time,” Mr. Bates defended.

“Feelings? Who has time for those?” Thomas said.

Price smiled. “Life would probably be easier if I hadn’t any.”

“Now don’t say that,” Anna said, putting her other arm through Price’s. “It’s what we all love about you.”

“I’ll get a cavity if I’m around this sweetness much longer,” Thomas said, and walked ahead by himself.

Price patted Anna’s arm. “I’m going to walk with the gardener for a few minutes. Hold me a seat if you get there first?”

“Of course we will,” Mr. Bates said.

Price stood by the side of the road and waited for Lee to come by. “Glad you got permission to come,” Price told Lee as they walked.

“Glad you suggested it. So tell me, does Daisy ever speak of me?”
Price pulled a leaf from a bush as they passed and twirled it in his fingers by its stem. “Hmm, I’m not sure. But I’m a man, if she had something to say it’s more likely she’d say it to a woman.”

“You’re right, but maybe you could keep an ear out for me?”

“Sit next to her at the concert.”

Lee chuckled, suddenly bashful. “Oh I could never. They’ll expect us to sit at least a row back, anyway.”

“That’s absurd.”

“It’s just reality.”

“Times are changing. Upstairs is looser with downstairs, inside should be looser with outside. You should start tonight.” Price let the leaf fall from his hand and plucked one from another bush.

“What did these bushes ever do to you?” Lee teased.

“I forgot plants are your people. Is this like if you came into the house and pulled another servant’s hair?”

Lee laughed. “You are an odd duck, David, but I think that’s what I like about you.”

The staff arrived at the concert early, which was Mrs. Hughes’s plan. She wanted to ensure they could all find a spot together, and that they wouldn’t miss a single note. A chamber orchestra warmed up on stage while a group of singers hummed in the corner. The hall itself was constructed floor to ceiling of lacquered, golden maple. Sound carried well, but the hall was used for many other things - balls, socials, fundraisers, meat raffles, the list went on and on. Price read through postings of events to come that were pinned to a cork board by the door.

“I’ve never been here. It’s a lovely venue,” Price said to Miss Baxter.

“I always check to see if something’s happening here on my half day,” Miss Baxter told him.

“And now so shall I.”

As more concert goers filled the hall, the staff found seats together. Price looked at Lee and motioned his head to Daisy. He joined Anna and watched proudly as Lee asked Daisy if he could sit by her.

Anna saw him looking. “Why are you smiling?”

“Oh, nothing at all.”

Price waved Thomas over, as the chair on his other side was still empty. Seating was packed close in anticipation of the large audience. Thomas shuffled past others in the row and sat next to Price. Price’s left thigh touched Anna’s, and to his delight, his right now touched Thomas. He bit his bottom lip to avoid smiling and ran a hand over his hair to make sure it was still in place.

The singers joined the orchestra on stage, followed by the conductor. The crowd took their seats and the room fell quiet.

“We’re like sardines in here,” Thomas whispered.

“Shh, they’re starting,” David whispered back.
The conductor introduced himself and the orchestra, and then walked through the evening’s program. Six pieces would be followed by an intermission, another six pieces, and then refreshments would be served.

Price settled into his seat. He took a deep breath and exhaled as the singers voices rose together, joined then by the instruments. The music reverberated off the wood of the room, and through Price’s chest. As the music swelled, so did his emotions. He felt his guilt over the ordeal with Moore, his heartache over his ailing father, and the seemingly unrequited feelings that were growing for Thomas. He held his breath, hoping it would prevent tears from falling.

Thomas tapped the knuckle of his index finger against Price’s leg. “You alright?” he whispered.

“This damned beautiful music. Stirs all kinds of things up,” Price exhaled.

“That’s why I prefer to have no feelings,” Thomas said, grinning reassuringly.

Price relaxed and folded his hands in his lap. “I’ll try that later. But for now, I’ll let the music move me.”

During intermission, Price found Lee and Daisy. “What do you think of the performance so far?” Price asked.

“Quite moving, I must say,” Lee said. Daisy nodded and smiled at Lee.

“What’s going on with those two?” Anna asked Price when everyone returned to their seats.

“A love connection, I’m hoping,” Price replied with a grin.

“A love connection for whom?” Thomas asked.

Price looked over at Lee and Daisy. Thomas looked in their direction and then back to Price. “I can hardly believe it. You schemed the outside staff coming so you could get Daisy out of your hair and onto him.”

Price crossed his arms and leaned against the back of his chair. “Not true, Mr. Barrow. It was out of the goodness of my heart that I encouraged the outside staff to join us.”

Thomas began to retort, but the conductor raised his baton and Price shushed him again.

Price found the second half even more moving than the first, but was able to contain himself and sat instead in quiet awe. After the concert, Price found his way to the punch. Price brought Anna and Mr. Bates cups of the drink and then went back for one for himself.

“This’d taste better with some spirits in it,” Thomas said, getting his own cup.

“Indeed,” Price agreed. “I wonder where one could get that kind of thing.”

“In general?”

Price nodded.

“Well, there are pubs in the village.”

“I’ve never been. Maybe we could go sometime.”

Thomas paused with his cup raised halfway to his mouth.
“What?”

“You, David,” Thomas said, drinking most of the punch in one gulp.

Price sipped his punch. “Never seen you wear that suit before.”

Thomas looked down at himself. “I don’t have much occasion to wear it these days.”

“You should find occasion.”

Thomas finished his drink, inspecting Price over the rim of the glass. He licked his upper lip and set the cup down on the table behind him. “I suppose you mean when we go out on the town?”

“If you’d like.”

“And you think Mr. Carson will just go on and give us both the night off so you can wet your whistle?”

Price finished his drink and placed his cup next to Thomas’s. “Fine, fine. You’re right. I guess that means we’ll have to stay in. I wonder if anyone could get a drink into the house somehow.”

Thomas laughed openly. “Why don’t you come out and ask me?”

“Mr. Barrow,” Price whispered, looking around. “Could you get a man some bourbon?”

“Only if that man promised to share.”

Lee and Daisy approached Price. “We were about to head back. Care to join us?”

“I told Anna and Mr. Bates I would wait for them. Let’s see if they’re ready to go.”

Price, Lee, and Daisy headed toward where Anna and Mr. Bates were seated. Price turned and called, “Mr. Barrow, you, too. Come with us.”

On the walk back, Anna and Mr. Bates dropped back and watched the other four walk ahead of them.

Anna sighed and looked up at Mr. Bates. “I should hope if we ever have a son, he’d be like David.”

Mr. Bates held Anna’s hand. “If he had a quarter of David’s character, I would be a proud father.”

“I think he purposely set Daisy up with the gardener,” Anna said.

“Why would he do that?”

“She pines for him, but he doesn’t feel the same. Maybe he just wanted her to be happy without breaking her heart.”

Mr. Bates smiled. “Or maybe he just wanted to get her off his back.”

Anna playfully hit Mr. Bates’s arm. “Bite your tongue. He’d never.”

“He has you wrapped around his finger, doesn’t he?”

“I feel like I understand him,” Anna explained. “I lost my father young, he lost his mother. Our lives were harder for it, and we’ve both endured so much. Did I tell you he said I remind him of
“Her?”

“That’s very sweet.”

“It is. He loved her dearly.”

“And I love you dearly,” Mr. Bates said, kissing her hand.

“Hey you back there, come join us!” Price called. He stopped and waited up for them.

“Were your ears burning? We were talking about you,” Anna said.

“Good things, I hope?”

“Always good things,” Mr. Bates said. “I’d be in deep trouble with her if I said otherwise.”

“Please, please,” Thomas protested. “I can’t take any more of that.”

“Even you’ve got a soft spot for David, Mr. Barrow,” Anna said.

“Whoever thought a day like that would come,” Mr. Bates added.

Thomas shook his head. “Enough with the lot of you. Have your toothache, I’ll see you in the morning,” he said, picking up his pace, walking the rest of the way alone.

“You deserve an award if you can crack his shell,” Mr. Bates told Price.

Price chuckled. He was quiet for the rest of the walk, listening to the others talk instead. He inhaled the honeysuckle scent still hanging in the air and followed the slow pace of the others. His thoughts drifted, wondering how much of Thomas’s shell he’d already cracked, and what it would take to make it the rest of the way through.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thomas awoke early to sneak Price a flask of the drink he desired, but Price didn't answer Thomas's knock on the door. Thomas peeked his head inside. Price's bed was made and his hat was missing from the hat peg.

Thomas found both Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes in Mr. Carson’s office.

“You’re up early,” Mr. Carson observed.

“I was going to go out for a walk and noticed David was missing.”

“We were going to announce it at breakfast,” Mrs. Hughes began. “There was a call very late last night that David’s father passed.”

Thomas thought of the walk to the concert where Price prophesied his father’s death. He felt badly for making light of it so close to the actual event. After absorbing the news, he said, “I’d like to attend the funeral.”

Mr. Carson sighed. “I’m down two footmen and now I’m to be without an under butler for a night as well?”

Mrs. Hughes shot Mr. Carson a quick look. “Thomas, it’s very noble of you to want to attend. I should think that would be fine. You could bring condolences on behalf of the whole house.”

“Fine, you may go,” Mr. Carson relented. “Go that morning and come back with David the next so that we don’t have to send a car twice.”

“Thank you Mr. Carson.” Thomas turned to leave, and then turned on his heel. “I’ll need to place a telephone call later to make arrangements for the night.”

“That should be fine as well,” Mrs. Hughes said on behalf of Mr. Carson.

Later that afternoon, when the staff was busy preparing for dinner, Thomas let himself into Mr. Carson’s office and called Eric’s boarding house. To his surprise, Eric was in. Eric was overjoyed to hear Thomas’s voice, but then sorry to hear the circumstances under which he would be visiting London.

“I can’t promise you a night like the last one,” Thomas said. “Not sure I'll be in the mood after a funeral. I hope you'd still let me come.”

“I’m glad you want to see me while you’re here, even as friends. In fact, I hoped we were becoming friends over our latest exchanges. The room I rent is quite cramped, I’ll ask my friend if we can stay at her flat. She’s the one who took my picture for you, so we wouldn’t have to stay under false pretenses.”

Thomas fingered the phone cord and pictured Eric sitting on the other end of the line. “I’d like a night not living under false pretenses.”

“What time will I see you?”
“I expect by lunch time. But you know how these things go.”

“Is it wrong of me to look forward to this?”

Thomas laughed. “I’d be a little hurt if you didn’t.”

Mr. Carson opened the door, and Thomas dropped the phone cord. “Thank you for your help. See you soon.”

Eric took the hint. “See you, friend.”

Thomas hung up the receiver and nodded to Mr. Carson on his way out.

The morning of the funeral, Thomas caught the milk train and arrived three hours before the service was scheduled to start. He dropped his suitcase with the doorman at Eric’s friend’s apartment building, then spent the morning walking the neighborhoods by the church where the funeral would take place. He stopped under an awning that caught his eye. “Price & Son,” it read. Not sons, Thomas noticed. There was a posting on the door about the news of Price’s father’s passing and information regarding services. Thomas peered into the shop, putting his hand above his eyes to block the reflecting morning sun. There wasn’t much in the cases; Thomas assumed the merchandise was locked up given the circumstances. But it looked like a nice little shop on what was probably a very busy street later in the day.

There was a small diner next door, and Thomas ordered himself some eggs, bacon, and coffee. He asked the waitress about the shop, and she jumped at the chance to talk on and on about old Mr. Price.

“Do you know either of his sons?” Thomas asked, biting into a piece of bacon.

“I do, both of ‘em. We all grew up together.”

“I know the older one, we work together,” Thomas said, digging into his eggs.

“Awe, Davey. You know him? How is he? We don’t see him much these days.”

“He’s well enough.” Thomas smiled at the woman referring to him as “Davey.”

The waitress ran off quickly at the sound of a bell. She served breakfast to another table, then came back to fill Thomas’s coffee mug.

“I wondered if maybe he would move back. To help his brother, you know? It’s quite the business to run alone.”

“Is it successful?”

The waitress laughed lightly. “I should say so. Davey doesn’t speak of it? Price’s is known as one of the best. I don’t know how they got on so long with just the two of them, honestly.”

A voice from the kitchen impatiently called for the waitress. “Sorry for chattering on. When things calm down, if you remember, please tell Davey I said hello. My name’s Lucy.”

“I will, Lucy, thank you,” Thomas promised. He finished his breakfast and left a generous tip on the table.

It was a bit early but Thomas decided to head to the church. There were no ushers yet, so Thomas sat himself in the back corner. The casket was at the front, white flowers placed on top.
watched the casket for a while. He remembered he had tucked another of Eric’s friend’s novel in his pocket and took it out to bide the time.

Thomas was engrossed in the story and didn’t notice the church had filled up until a funeral goer sat next to him. He cleared his throat and closed the book. The organ started up shortly after that, and then the procession into the church.

Price entered wearing a well-fitted black suit, holding the arm of a very elderly woman. Behind Price was a younger, thinner, taller version of Price, but otherwise strikingly similar in appearance. The young man held the hand of a pretty red-headed woman on one side and a small red-headed girl on the other. The woman held a baby in her arm. It never occurred to Thomas that Price’s brother was old enough to be married and with family. He wondered what that felt like to Price; his brother with a happy, traditional family, and now the family business.

The church was packed to the rafters. The reverend clearly knew Mr. Price for many years and had many stories to tell, both funny and touching. Thomas stretched his neck to see Price when he gave his eulogy, though he was easy to hear across the hushed crowd. The relationship may have been strained, but it was clearly special to him. Price’s brother has a similarly moving eulogy, but broke down at the end. Price jumped to his side and finished reading the speech on his behalf. Price patted his brother’s shoulder and whispered something in his brother’s ear that made him smile.

During the burial service, Price caught site of Thomas in the crowd. As tired and grief-stricken as he was, his face brightened and he smiled before looking back to the reverend. After the service, and receiving condolences from numerous guests, Price waived Thomas over.

“Sam, this is Thomas. He’s the under butler at Downton. Thomas, this is my brother, Sam.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Thomas told Price’s brother, shaking his hand. Thomas said the same to Price’s sister-in-law, Marie.

“Thank you very much, and thank you for coming. It’s touching that Downton could give up another man for the day for David,” Sam said.

“The whole house sends their condolences, upstairs and down.”

Price didn’t take his eyes off Thomas the entire exchange.

“You’ve come all this way. You’ll join us for lunch, won’t you? We’re hosting at our house,” Marie offered.

Thomas thought over the timeline he had provided Eric, and then looked at Price. “If you want me to join?”

“I’d like that very much.”

“Then it’s settled,” Marie said.

“I’ll walk you there once I’ve finished greeting people,” Price told Thomas.

Thomas found a bench and continued his novel until Price came to retrieve him. The walk lead from busy streets to quiet, cobblestone roads. Buildings shrunk from large storefronts and flats, to townhouses and single family homes. The two arrived at a brick cottage covered in ivy. The little red-headed girl ran around the yard, chasing a boy. Price scooped her up and kissed her cheek, then led Thomas into the house.
The house was full of activity. Friends and family milled about telling stories of Mr. Price while other friends and family set up lunch. Price and Thomas carried dishes from the kitchen to the dining room.

“You don’t even get a break from service for a funeral,” Thomas joked.

“Curse my lot in life,” Price joked back, shaking his fist at the ceiling.

Thomas laughed, but wondered if Price did curse his lot. Sam’s home was small, but lovely and well-appointed. Thomas pictured Price’s tiny dormitory room, lacking much in the way of personal belongings or other adornment. It made Thomas think of his own sister’s home and her family. He never visited there, his jealousy being too much to bare.

“Stop helping and eat,” Marie told Price. “You, too,” she said to Thomas, who was fetching a bowl of egg salad from the kitchen.

The two men joined the line for food and were hurried to the front by the guests. They filled their plates and Price led Thomas to the backyard. Tables and chairs were set up, and Price selected one furthest from the house.

“Do you miss it here?” Thomas asked over his sandwich.

“This house? Or you mean London?”


Price looked at the house. “I grew up here, it’s my parents’ home. My father asked Sam to stay when he was married. Marie always helped with everything around the house, anyway, so it was for the best.”

“How old is your brother?”

“Twenty-four, why?”

“I don’t know. I pictured someone younger, I suppose. And unmarried.”

Price chewed his sandwich and nodded at guests as they came into the backyard.

“I got in early so I walked around the area. Ate breakfast at the diner next to your father’s shop.”

“I haven’t been there in ages.”

“I heard. By the way, Lucy says, ‘Hi, Davey’.”

Price laughed while chewing and covered his mouth. “Oh god, don’t call me that. I only ever forgave my father for calling me that, I don’t need to hear it again now that he’s gone.”

Thomas smiled, “No promises.”

Marie found Price and Thomas in the backyard and joined them with her lunch. “Thomas, do you have somewhere to stay the night? We could arrange something if you haven’t.”

“Oh, thank you, but I’m staying with a friend.”

Price’s face fell and he looked away from the conversation.
“*She* lives not far from here,” Thomas added for Price’s benefit.

“That’s nice. Old friends?”

“We go way back.”

Price gave Thomas a quick look and decided to accept the story.

“Well if your plans change, or you’re ever in town, you’re welcome here. Any friend of David’s, as they say.”

They could hear the baby crying in the house, and Marie excused herself to go look after him.

“So everyone in your family is just a nice, warm, caring, friendly person?”

Price shrugged. “Is everyone in your family a cold, unfeeling jackass?”

Thomas kicked Price’s foot under the table. “I came all the way here and that’s the thanks I get?”

Price stacked his empty plate on Thomas’s and rose from the table. “I really am touched you came. I couldn’t believe it when I saw you in the churchyard.”

Thomas leaned back. “Anything for you, Davey.”

“If I let a compliment be without deflecting it, can you?”

“I don’t have much practice with compliments, I’m afraid,” Thomas said, rising himself, taking the plates from Price.

…..

Thomas took a taxi back to Eric’s friend’s flat. It was late afternoon, but didn’t feel badly for his late arrival. The building was modern and there were buttons next to the name of each resident. Thomas pressed the button for “K. Christian.” The door remained locked. He tried again, and finally looked up to find Eric behind the glass.

“Patience, patience. I wanted to greet you in person.”

Thomas shook Eric’s outstretched hand. “I preferred how you greeted me last time, but this will do for today,” Thomas said.

Eric lead Thomas up three flights of stairs to his friend’s flat.

“She’ll be back in time for us to go out tonight,” Eric told Thomas.

“We’re going out?”

Eric poured Thomas a glass of water and put a kettle on for tea. “I know, you’re probably emotionally spent. We don’t have to stay out late, but there’s somewhere I want to take you.”

“It’s not a photography studio, is it?”

Eric laughed. “No, but if Kait wants to take your picture tonight, do let her. Nothing racy, I
promise.” Eric motioned for Thomas to sit at the kitchen table. “Whose funeral were you attending, if you don’t mind my asking?”

Thomas placed his hat on the table and took the water glass from Eric. “A friend’s father.”

“How is your friend holding up?”

“Well, I suppose. But he seems to take everything in stride.”

“That’s an honorable quality,” Eric said.

“His sister-in-law asked me to stay with them for the night.”

“Do you want to?” Eric asked. “I wouldn’t be offended.”

Thomas placed the water glass on the table and twisted it in his fingers. “Oh no, no. I want to see you. I just thought it was a nice gesture.”

“What’s your friend’s name?”

Thomas thought about how he’d hidden any mention of Eric from Price. “It’s David.”

“Well, my condolences to David. He must be a special chap if you’d come up here for him.”

Thomas looked up from the glass.

“I’ve been begging you to come.”

Thomas took a sip of water and placed the glass back down. “Well if your father dies, I’m happy to come up.”

“Please don’t be defensive, I didn’t mean that how it sounded. But I know that look because I’ve seen it in other men. David’s more than a friend, isn’t he?”

Thomas met Eric’s eyes. He didn’t appear accusatory or upset. “We’re just friends,” Thomas said.

“Alright, then let me phrase it another way-”

The kettle began squealing. Eric rescued it from the stove and poured the water into a teapot. He brought the pot and cups to the table.

“Thomas, do you want David as more than a friend?”

“Well that’s just my point. You came in the door with a look on your face that matches what I heard in your voice on the telephone, and read in your letters as of late. I know I pursued you out of lust, and I’d devour you right now if you’d let me, but I genuinely like you. I want what you want. If that’s not me, you can just tell me.”

Eric slid his foot next to Thomas’s. “You’re right, Thomas. You’re here now. I don’t want to ruin our few hours together. We’ll have tea, and then get ready and go out tonight. We can talk about the rest another day.”
Thomas wanted to protest, and say there was no “the rest” to discuss, but he thought of his most recent fantasies and realized he hadn’t retrieved Eric’s picture from his suitcase as frequently.

Eric changed the subject and engaged Thomas about the novels he had sent and the most recent story he published. He slowly came around to the subject of Price only to ask how the services were, and to learn a little more about the man. Thomas opened up just a little, enough for Eric to see the look come over Thomas’s face when he described what Price was like.

“So where are we going this evening?” Thomas asked when their tea was finished.

“You’ll see when we get there.”

The doorknob turned and Kait let herself into her flat. She was younger than the two men, with a light brown bob hairstyle and an upturned nose speckled with freckles. She was dressed simply but fashionably, in light summer colors and a pale blue hat.

“You must be the famous Thomas!” she exclaimed, dropping her bag and hat onto the sofa and running to him with her hand outstretched. Thomas stood and shook Kait’s hand. She stared up at him, looking back and forth between his eyes. “Eric wasn’t kidding. You’re a handsome bugger, aren’t you?”

Thomas laughed and looked away from her.

“Thomas, this is Kait. Did I mention she’s not particularly shy?”

Kait helped herself to a cup of tea from the table and joined the two men.

“I figured she might not be, considering the subject matter she photographs.”

Kait met Thomas’s eyes as she stirred sugar into her tea. They both smiled.

“Eric refuses to tell me where we’re going. Will you have some mercy and give me a clue?”

“A clue?” Kait said coyly. “Hmm. Well, we’re going somewhere-”

“No clues. You’ll see when we get there.”

“Are we getting dinner first?” Kait asked Eric, though she still stared at Thomas.

“I’d love a bite to eat,” Eric said. “You, Thomas?”

“Sure, why not. If we’re having a night on the town, let’s have a night.”

Kait cocked her head to one side, then the other. “Stay right there,” she told Thomas.

“Here she goes,” Eric said.

Kait ran to her bedroom and returned with a small camera. She extended the bellows.

“What, me?” Thomas asked, putting his forearm in front of his face.

“No! I said don’t move!” Kait batted Thomas’s arm away and he looked over at Eric and laughed. Kait’s camera made a cranking noise. “Actually that was even better than what I was going to get. So thank you for being disobedient.” Kait put her camera down carefully. “On second thought, I
don’t want to butt into your evening. You go out.”

“It’d be fine if you joined us,” Thomas assured her. He still felt awkward from his conversation with Eric and welcomed the diversion.

Eric nodded. “We should get ready then. I don’t want to waste a moment of the time I get with Thomas.”

The trio dressed and walked to what Eric described as his favorite Mediterranean restaurant. Thomas didn’t offer an opinion because it would have forced him to admit to never eating at a Mediterranean restaurant before. He was quiet as well during the meal, instead letting Eric and Kait lob conversation back and forth over their plates of unfamiliar food.

After the meal, the three took a taxi, but when they got out, Eric explained they were still blocks from where they were going. Thomas followed Eric and Kait through small streets and alleys until they came to a door with a small light above it and a man in front. He man recognized both Eric and Kait and waved all three inside.

Thomas could hear muffled music from outside. The lobby was dark, but as they moved through a hallway and past a curtain, everything came to life. The music was upbeat, with musicians playing all different kinds of brass, string, and percussion instruments. The crowd in front of the stage danced wildly while people looked on talking, laughing, and drinking. As Thomas took a closer look around the room, he noticed the couples weren’t only paired off as man and woman, but man and man, woman and woman. He looked up at Eric, who was smiling down at him.

“Kait went to get us drinks. Let’s find a table.”

Eric grabbed Thomas’s hand and guided him through the crowd. They brushed up against people in many states of dress; collars and ties undone, short fringe dresses, rolled shirtsleeves. Thomas craned his neck as they walked by one man kissing the hand of another man, then two women holding hands, and then a man with his hand on the waist of another. They climbed up a metal staircase to a balcony. Eric plopped Thomas into a chair facing the room below.

Eric laughed and stroked Thomas’s face with the palm of his hand. “God you look so cute right now.”

Thomas’s mouth was agape. “Where are we?”

“Heaven?” Eric laughed.

“Is a place like this legal?”

“What a downer! And obviously, no. That’s why there’s a man out front, and lots of dark space to get through before you get in. With warning, it’s easy enough to pretend this is an average club.”

Thomas leaned on the banister overlooking the balcony.

“I told you there are plenty of people like us.”

Kait handed Thomas a glass of whiskey over his shoulder. “He in shock?” she asked Eric.

“That I am,” Thomas answered. “How often do you come here?”

“Weekly, when we’re both in town.”
“And it’s like this all the time?”

“All the time,” Kait and Eric said in unison.

“I’m going off on my own. I’ll see you back at the flat,” Kait said, patting their shoulders as she went.

Eric placed his hand back on Thomas’s face. Thomas turned and looked at him, his eyes a bit watery. “I won’t ask for more,” Eric began, “but will you at least kiss me? Just once?”

Thomas put both hands on the side’s of Eric’s face. He kissed Eric breathlessly, eagerly, letting the moment take him like the music had taken Price just a few nights before. Price’s face flashed across the back of Thomas’s eyelids and he pulled away from Eric.

Eric kissed Thomas’s cheek and turned his head back to the club. “Whether you were thinking of me or someone else, you just kissed a man in public. How did it feel?”

“It felt bloody fantastic,” Thomas said loudly over the music. He downed his drink in one gulp.

Eric slid his hand from Thomas’s face to his thigh. “Will you dance with me?”

Thomas laughed and wiped his eye. “Who leads?”

“You do.”

The two wound their way back down the stairs. Eric grabbed Thomas’s hand and walked backward onto the dancefloor, pushing between bodies, keeping Thomas’s gaze as they went. As if on cue, the music slowed and Thomas held Eric, following steps he’d followed hundreds of times before, but never from his heart. He pressed his forehead against Eric’s, still unable to stop intermittently laughing or wiping a tear.

“How do you feel?” Eric asked, his lips by Thomas’s ear.

Thomas whispered back, “Like I’m home.”

…

Eric was true to his word and didn’t press Thomas for more than a kiss all evening. Thomas awoke up on Kait’s sofa the next morning to Kait shaking his shoulder. “You have an early train. Get up, Thomas.”

Thomas groaned and creaked to his feet, letting both Kait and Eric help him put himself together.

“We’ll walk you to the station. Don’t want you walking all groggy into traffic,” Kait said. She sat Thomas in front of a plate of toast and eggs and made sure he ate them before they headed off.

“Still drunk or just tired?” Eric asked Thomas as they walked the quiet early morning streets.

“A little of both,” Thomas said, hitting his suitcase against his shin as they walked.

“I take it you enjoyed yourself?” Kait asked.

“Never enjoyed myself more,” Thomas answered, his lips creeping into a smile as he replayed the night before.

By the time they all reached the train platform, the walk had woken Thomas fully. Kait grabbed
Thomas’s shoulders and kissed his cheek. Eric shook Thomas’s hand, then pulled him in for a quick hug.

“I’m taking more pictures next time,” Kait warned Thomas. She looked from Thomas to Eric and decided to give them a moment to say goodbye without her.

Thomas put his suitcase down and looked up at Eric. “Thank you for last night.”

“No, thank you. I thoroughly enjoyed watching you have the experience.”

“I wish I could stay. I feel a little nauseous having to go back, though that could also be the whisky.”

“You don’t have to be there forever. There are so many opportunities in London.”

“Let’s not leave on that note. I don’t have any opportunities, but I had last night and it won’t be my last one like it. That’s good enough.”

“I disagree, but we can argue about that in writing,” Eric said. The train whistled and Eric shrugged. “Guess it’s goodbye for now.”

“See you in writing, then” Thomas said, picking his suitcase up again. He watched Eric join Kait and then raised his hand as they waved goodbye. He turned to the train to see Price across the platform, watching him. Price picked up his own suitcase and walked to Thomas. They boarded together, stowing their bags, finding seats in the back of a train car together.

“I’ve had such a long few days,” Price said once they were seated. “Please, Thomas. Please just tell me if he was ‘Erin’.”

Thomas looked out the window across Price as the train pulled out of the station. “He was. And do you know what he was preoccupied with last night?”

Price looked out the window, too, unable to look at Thomas.

“He spent the whole night wondering what was so special about this ‘David’ character.”

Price turned from the window and looked at Thomas. “You mean it?”

“He thinks I have feelings for you.”

Price’s eyebrows raised. “Is he right?”

Thomas held his gloved hand to Price, palm down.

“Take it off.”

Price studied Thomas’s face for a moment, then grabbed the wrist of Thomas’s glove, pulling it over Thomas’s fingers. He looked around the train car, and finding no eyes on him, grabbed Thomas’s hand and kissed the back of it. Thomas held Price’s fingers briefly, then released them and put his glove back on.

“It doesn’t repulse you?”

“Nothing about you ever could. I like every part of you,” Price whispered.

Thomas patted Price’s leg and then leaned his head back against the seat. The motion of the train
car began lulling him to sleep. “Wake me when we get there,” he requested of Price. When there was no response, he opened one eye and saw Price already sleeping, a small smile on his lips.

Chapter End Notes

I had the following conversation with my husband this morning.

Him: "So, is it your writing that's been putting you in the mood lately."

Me: "...mmmmayye..."

Him: "...could you write something extra sexy, then?"

And so the next chapter will be dedicated to my understanding husband, who has been supporting my fandom love ever since he suffered through, what I call, The Great Cillian Murphy Crush of the Early 2000’s.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Mature content ahoy!

Thomas’s nausea upon leaving London was not, in fact, due to the whiskey he drank the night before. In the weeks following his return, Downton felt impossibly claustrophobic, worse than it had in years past. He was irascible, blowing up over the slightest of grievances. Price felt helpless, watching Thomas self-destruct while others in the house rolled their eyes and shrugged as if the behavior was routine. Price was especially bewildered given the train ride home from London, which he thought represented a final break through Thomas’s wall, not the building up of a new one.

Price began to commiserate with the only other person who didn’t simply accept that Thomas was just being Thomas. He asked Miss Baxter to try and help him get through to Thomas, or at least understand what was upsetting him so deeply. At breakfast one morning, Miss Baxter attempted conversation.

“Mr. Barrow, what are you planning to do with your half day tomorrow?”

“What’s it to you?” Thomas asked, barely glancing at Miss Baxter.

“Are you going to do anything fun?”

“Fun? Around here? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Miss Baxter’s just trying to be kind, Thomas, though I don’t understand why she bothers,” Mr. Bates said.

Thomas pushed his plate away. “And I don’t know why I bother with any of you, anyway. I should probably take my meals in the courtyard with David’s stable cat. Better company even with the fleas.”

“Fine with me,” Mr. Carson said under his breath, but loud enough for the table to hear.

“Well then, if we’re all in agreement, that’ll be my plan moving forward.” Thomas avoided Price’s eyes as he excused himself from the table and went up to the dormitories.

“I thought we’d seen our last of this Thomas,” Mr. Bates said. “I never expected he’d become friendly, but this is quite the step backward.”

“You know Thomas,” Mrs. Hughes said. “It’s only a matter of time before he flies off the handle.”

Price put his fork down carefully. “With due respect, Thomas is like a bottle of champagne. Something shakes him up, then someone here pops the cork and wonders why he’s exploding. I don’t think he’s acting this way just for the sake of it. I think something shook him.”

The senior staff exchanged glances. “David, you are such a sweet young man,” Anna began. “You want to see the good in everyone, even Thomas. But you haven’t even known him a year. I know
you want to believe he’s not like this, but this is who he is.”

Price took a breath before he spoke to ensure his voice didn’t quake. “Miss Baxter has known him longer than any of you, and she’s never given up on him.”

Miss Baxter smiled at Price. “He’s a tortured soul,” she said quietly.

Mr. Carson looked at Mrs. Hughes and shook his head.

“If I may be excused?” Price asked Mr. Carson.

“Yes, David, go on. But I agree with Mrs. Hughes. We’ve known Thomas a very long time. Whatever analogy you want to make, the bottom line is that Thomas always ends up exploding, and you, David, don’t need to be caught in the crossfire.”

“Thank you, Mr. Carson,” Price said as warmly as he could manage, and then headed up to find Thomas.

Price knocked on Thomas’s door but entered without waiting for a response. Thomas sat on his bed, feet on the floor, forearms on his knees, a cigarette between his fingers. He looked up from his feet. “What have I told you, David? Never shut the door when you’re alone with me. The staff would have a field day.”

“They already know I’m up here,” Price said, sitting next to Thomas on the bed. “What happened in London that’s had you so down since we got back?”

Thomas finished his cigarette before speaking. “I have to ask you something. David, how do you stay so positive when your brother is off leading a life someone like you or I could never dream of, while you’re trapped downstairs at Downton?”

Price put his hand on Thomas’s shoulder. “But I’m not trapped. Maybe you haven’t noticed, but I’m well suited to this work and this life. Most servants are single, so no one questions me about a wife, and I like serving a family I respect alongside people I enjoy working with day in and day out. I won’t deny that this wasn’t the life I pictured for myself, but here I am, and I’m making the best out of it that I can. I’m happy for my brother, and I’m happy for myself.”

Thomas moved his hand from his lap to Price’s. “I wish I was like you.”

Price held Thomas’s chin between his forefinger and thumb and lifted Thomas’s face to his. “I wish you could see what I see in you, even just for a moment.”

The two looked into each others eyes, their lips inches apart. Price leaned in for a kiss.

“David, you shouldn’t,” Thomas said, turning his head back down. “Not here, at least.”

“Where then?”

“There is nowhere here. That’s part of why I’m so bothered.”

Price laughed. “In this giant home the size of a passenger ship, is there really nowhere two men could hide away for a little while?”

“Well when you put it that way, maybe I can think of something.”

“Now for the most important thing. Where is that drink you promised me?”
Thomas smiled and looked back up at Price. “Ah, maybe that’s how you stay in such a good mood. Lousy drunk.” He stood and walked to his dresser, retrieving the flask from his drawer and tossing it to Price.

“Ah, finally,” Price said, twisting off the top to take a quick sniff. “Thomas, do something on your half day tomorrow that will raise your spirits. Promise me you won’t just sit here and sulk.”

“I promise, if only to get out of here for a little while,” Thomas said. “Don’t I get a thank you for the drink?”

“I can show you how thankful I am, just find a private place as I asked.”

There was a knock on Thomas’s door and Price stood quickly, tucking the flask under Thomas’s pillow as he rose. Thomas opened the door to find Mr. Bates behind it.

“There’s only so much patience you can expect from Mr. Carson,” Mr. Bates said. “You should both head back downstairs.”

“I was just leaving, thank you, Mr. Bates.” Price followed him down the hall, resisting a look back at Thomas.

....

Thomas left for his half day without saying any goodbyes. He headed into Ripon in search of an address he hadn’t visited in ages. He wasn’t sure if ownership had changed, but the house looked much the same as the last time he visited, other than an unfamiliar and curious dog in the yard. Thomas pulled the sleeves of his jacket straight, closed his eyes, exhaled a puff of air, and then knocked.

The owner was indeed the one he expected. The door opened, and on the other side was a woman who looked older than he pictured, but undeniably the person he came to see; his sister.

“Thomas?” she gasped as though he were an apparition.

“Yes, Jennie,” Thomas said, pressing his lips together into what he hoped was a smile.

Jennie motioned for Thomas to come into the house. He took off his hat and held it by his side. The house was quiet other than the tick tock of a grandfather clock by the door. Jennie hung Thomas’s hat and then pulled him by the arm to the window.

“Let me look at you,” she said, holding his face gently in her hands.

“I’m pretty much the same, maybe grayer above the ears.”

Jennie laughed but her eyes filled with tears. She threw her arms around him and cried into his shoulder.

Thomas stood frozen for a moment, then put his arm around her back. He stood there, letting her cry, while he listened to the clock ticking. She finally pulled away and wiped her eyes with her handkerchief.

“Why did you come? Was it Phyllis? I write to her sometimes to ask how you are.”

“No, not her. I realized I’ve been unfair to you, Jennie.”
Jennie shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

Thomas motioned toward two chairs near the fireplace. They sat, and Jennie moved her chair closer so she could hold Thomas’s hands.

“I’m never going to have a life like yours, and I punished you because of it. It’s not your fault I’m the way I am. And I didn’t only punish you, I missed out on having you in my life, whatever life it is. I know now that I was wrong.”

Jennie looked down at Thomas’s hand, having finally noticed his glove.

“War injury.”

“Yes, so I heard. Thomas, you know I would always want you in my life, no matter what way you are. You’re family.”

“You may feel that way, but does Paul?”

“Paul is my husband, not my keeper. I honestly don’t know what way he feels any more, it’s been so long since we’ve seen you. He would probably be less upset about who you are and more upset that you’ve been avoiding me for so long.”

“He’s every right to feel that way.”

They sat quietly together, one pair of gray eyes looking into the other, until Thomas broke the silence again.

“Where are the kids?”

Jennie’s eyes filled again and she leaned closer to Thomas. “It’s really been that long since we’ve seen you. They’re grown, silly brother! Even Tommy is sixteen.”

Thomas was the one who now looked like he saw a ghost. “Even Tommy is sixteen,” he repeated. “I missed so much.”

“It’s alright. Well, no, I won’t lie. It’s not alright, Thomas. I’ve been hurting over it for years. However, I always vowed if you wanted to come back into my life, I would be here.”

Thomas finally felt his own eyes water. “What did I do to deserve you?”

Jennie squeezed Thomas’s hands in hers. “I will always be your big sister. It’s as simple as that. I’ve loved you since you were a little bundle in mama’s arms.”

Thomas spent the afternoon with Jennie. They walked around her neighborhood and stopped into a local shop for tea. She asked him to stay for supper, but Thomas wasn’t quite ready to see his brother-in-law. He vowed to visit again, to read and reply to her letters, and to call if he could manage. He felt lighter as he headed back to Downton.

The rest of the staff was just sitting down to supper when Thomas came home. He got his own plate from the kitchen and joined everyone at the table.

“So, how was your afternoon?” Price asked. The staff stopped chewing for a moment awaiting Thomas’s response.

“Went into Ripon and saw my sister.”
Miss Baxter dropped her fork onto her plate. “You what?”

“She says ‘hello’,” Thomas told Miss Baxter.

“Is that a big deal?” Anna asked Miss Baxter.

“Only that he hasn’t seen her since long before I came to Downton,” Miss Baxter answered, resuming her meal.

“What brought that on?” Mr. Bates asked.

Thomas drank his water and took another bite. “I dunno. I just felt inspired.”

Price pushed his potatoes around his plate and tried not to smile.

…..

Thomas put on his pajamas and sunk into bed that evening feeling like he may actually be able to sleep through the night, something he hadn’t done since returning from London. He turned on his side and, unable to get comfortable, realized the flask was still under his pillow where Price left it. He smiled and removed it, placing it on his nightstand. As he began to fall asleep, he heard his door open. The moonlight came through the skylight enough that he could tell it was Price.

“Did you come for this?” Thomas asked, sitting up, holding out the flask.

Price shut the door and walked to Thomas. He sat on the bed, took the flask and put it back down on the nightstand. “No. I came for you.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Yes. You haven’t let me kiss you yet.”

“I told you I would come up with something.”

“Well I came up with a plan. You shut up and kiss me. Now.”

“David, you can’t get caught in here, it would ruin you.”

“If someone catches me when I leave, I will confess to having asked you for liquor. We’ll both get a slap on the hand and that will be the end of it.”

Thomas opened his mouth and Price laid his finger on his lips.

“Not another word,” Price ordered. He leaned closer to Thomas, but the bed creaked, and Thomas put his hand on Price’s chest.

“See, this is a bad idea.”

“Does your floor creak?”

“Not… usually?”

“Then stand up.”

Price stood and pulled Thomas by the hand out of bed. He put his other hand on the side of Thomas’s face. “Tell me you want me.”
“Why? You know how I feel.”

“Yes, but I need to hear you say it.”

Thomas looked down into Price’s eyes. There was no hint of teasing.

“Say it, Thomas.”

“David,” Thomas said, closing his eyes. “I want you so badly.”

Price pulled Thomas’s face to his. “Then please have me.”

Thomas couldn’t stop himself from picturing his failed attempts at love and love making with other young men behind closed doors in the dormitory. He pressed his cheek against Price’s and put his hands on Price’s waist. “So, so badly,” he repeated, whispering into Price’s ear. “But it’s just not safe here.”

“If we wait for safety we’ll be waiting forever. So as I said, shut up and kiss me.”

Thomas hesitated, then lowered his lips to Price’s. He kissed Price softly as though Price’s lips may shatter beneath his own, then pulled away, releasing Price’s waist from his hands.

Price grabbed Thomas’s wrists before Thomas could back away. “Don’t say you can’t, don’t tell me you’re doing this for me, don’t tell me I don’t know what I’m getting into. Save it all, Thomas. I’m not naive. I know exactly what I want, what I’m asking, and what I’m risking. And not to be crass, but I’m actually quite good at doing these things covertly.”

Price let go of Thomas’s wrists. His eyes were wider and more serious than Thomas had seen in him before. Price was practically panting, staring back at Thomas, awaiting reply.

Thomas put his hands back on Price’s waist and pulled him so that their bodies came together. His hands traveled slowly up Price’s stomach, then chest, then neck, and finally he pulled Price’s face up to his. He kissed Price’s lips gently once, then kissed them over and over. “Alright, David. No more waiting,” he said between kisses.

Price unbuttoned Thomas’s top while they kissed, slipping it easily off Thomas’s shoulders and onto the floor. In return, Thomas’s slid his hands under Price’s undershirt and pulled it over his head. Price laid light kisses on Thomas’s collarbone and neck while his hands explored Thomas’s back. Thomas tilted his head to give better access, allowing his hands to explore Price as well.

Price pulled back and smiled up at Thomas. “It’s so nice to finally see your skin.”

Thomas kissed Price’s neck, then whispered, “I have to admit, I’ve seen yours before.”

“You what?” Price said, not quite shocked enough to stop Thomas from kissing him.

“The night you confessed you snuck out to go swimming, I already knew, because I saw you there.”

Price laughed and pinched Thomas’s sides. “How much of me did you see?”

“Everything that counts,” Thomas said, licking his lips before putting them back on Price’s.

“You’re naughty,” Price whispered.

“Well if that’s not the pot calling the kettle black.”
“There’s no sense in keeping these trousers on when you’ve already seen the goods,” Price said, removing everything below his waist. Thomas quickly followed with his own bottoms, as well as his glove. The two looked at each other in the dim moonlight.

“I suppose I don’t need to ask how you feel about me,” Thomas said, looking down at David. “I must say, you look even better up close.”

“And you look even better than I imagined,” Price replied.

“Do you imagine me often?” Thomas asked, pulling Price back to him again.

Goosebumps covered Price’s arms when their naked bodies touched. “Only once per night, unless you’ve been especially handsome earlier in the day.”

Thomas kissed Price again, this time slipping his tongue between Price’s lips. He let his hands find their way from Price’s lower back to his backside, and squeezed him, pulling him even closer. Price moaned quietly into Thomas’s mouth, eliciting a moan from Thomas in response. Price’s goosebumps spread to the rest of his skin as he throbbed against Thomas’s thigh. He began thrusting between Thomas’s legs, his moaning becoming quicker and higher pitched.

Thomas broke their kiss and grinned. “My goodness, a little kiss and a moan and you’re halfway to ecstasy.”

“Not usually, but this is what you do to me, Thomas.”

“I love hearing you call me Thomas.”

Price smiled impishly and moaned, “Oh, Thomas.”

“Ooh, now that I like. Say that again.”

Price grabbed Thomas’s cock and stroked him, moaning his name again softly.

“And that makes it even better,” Thomas said, tilting his head back and closing his eyes.

“Why don’t we move to the floor?” Price said, laying himself on Thomas’s braided rug.

“Please, help yourself to my lavish accommodations,” Thomas said, tossing his pillow down to Price before joining him.

Price put the pillow behind his head as Thomas knelt between his legs. Price sighed. “Your accommodations are just fine, though it wouldn’t matter to me if we were laying on a pile of angry snakes, so long as you keep looking at me like that.”

Thomas rubbed his hands from Price’s bent knees to his hips and back a few times before leaning down and licking Price’s stomach. Price flexed in response, and Thomas traced Price’s muscles with his tongue. Price weaved his fingers gently through Thomas’s hair, stroking himself with the other hand. Thomas’s tongue traveled lower, licking the sensitive spot where Price’s thigh met his groin. Price laughed and flinched in response, and Thomas flicked the spot again.

“Do you want me to wake people up?” Price whispered.

Thomas looked up at Price and smiled, then enveloped Price in his mouth. Price arched his back and bit his bottom lip, catching himself before crying out. He tightened his grip on Thomas’s hair, guiding Thomas’s head up and down. He propped himself up on his other elbow to watch, panting
quietly, still biting his lip. “You look so good,” he whispered to Thomas.

Thomas looked up, and Price murmured a barely audible, “oh god” at the sight of Thomas with mouth full and eyes on him. Thomas kept his eyes on Price and let him slip out of his mouth, licking his stomach again before kissing his lips. Price nibbled Thomas’s bottom lip before sliding his tongue into Thomas’s mouth. He rolled Thomas onto his back, crawled between Thomas's legs, and returned the same favor Thomas had paid him.

“Do you- would you, are you-” Thomas stuttered.

“What is it?” Price asked, looking up, stroking Thomas as they spoke.

“Would you let me inside you?”

Price giggled. “Hmm, I don’t know Thomas, do we know each other well enough yet?”

“That’s not what I meant, you just don’t always know if someone is open to that.”

“I’m very open.”

Thomas rolled his eyes and shook his head.

Price climbed off of Thomas and onto all fours, watching as Thomas positioned himself behind him. Price hugged his arms around the pillow and sank to the floor, raising his hips to Thomas. Thomas rested his body on Price’s back, guiding himself inside.

Price used the pillow to muffle his grunts, raising his hips higher as Thomas wrapped one arm around Price’s chest, his other hand around Price’s hardness. When he was finally in completely, he licked Price’s shoulder, neck, then ear, and asked, “You sure this is alright?”

Price pushed himself back and forth against Thomas in response. Thomas dug his chin into Price’s shoulder and joined his rhythm, panting as Price picked up his pace. They both struggled to keep quiet, Price pressing his lips together, Thomas biting Price’s shoulder. Thomas pushed as deep as he could into Price, and in Price’s attempts to stifle himself, he growled.

“See, I said you were a dog.”

“Not now, Thomas!” Price laughed. “Let me on top so I can at least see the face I should probably slap.”

Thomas pulled out and took Price’s former place on the ground, face up, grabbing Price’s hips as he climbed on top. “Slapping, hmm? You into that?”

“I ought to punish you at least a little for sneaking a peek at me by the pond,” Price said, letting Thomas back inside him.

“Yeah, how’re you gonna punish me then?”

Price grabbed Thomas’s forearms and laid his body onto Thomas, pinning Thomas’s arms above his head. He poked Thomas’s nose with his own. “I could stop.”

“That would punish us both.”

“True, true,” Price whispered, riding Thomas slowly. “I could… bring you just to the brink, and not let you cross.”
Thomas smiled, “After all this waiting, that would be very mean.”

“I can be mean.”

“No, I can be mean. You’re incapable of such a thing.”

Price pulled off of Thomas. “Is that mean?”

Thomas raised his hips, trying to reach Price, but Price pulled himself up further and held Thomas’s arms harder against the floor. Thomas tried again in vain to reach Price with his hips, and Price shook his head.

“Oh oh oh, there are actually several crimes against you for which you must be punished.”

“Stop it, I need you on me.”

“The first crime, spying on me at the pond.”

Thomas tried once more to reach Price. “And the second?”

Price rested his forehead against Thomas’s. “Going after that tall, handsome London man when I was right here the whole time.”

“David!”

Price laughed, sat back up and guided Thomas back inside him. “You deserved that,” he said, lacing his fingers through Thomas’s. He pulled Thomas’s fingers to his lips and kissed them. “The look on your face is priceless.”

“I take back what I said; you’re very mean.”

“Then we’re equally matched,” Price said, picking up his speed again.

Thomas let go of Price’s hand to stroke him again. “I think that little stunt made you even harder.”

“Imagine how hard I’d be if I actually slapped you.”

“Remember how you told me to shut up and kiss you? Well shut up and fuck me.”

Price smiled. “Yes, Mr. Barrow.”

“I’m warning you. Don’t test me.”

“Or what?”

Thomas rolled Price onto his back and held him tightly. Hi thrust into him, hard and fast, with all the desire and longing he had been harboring since his knees first touched Price’s when he sewed the younger man’s finger. Price hugged Thomas in return as tight as he could, arms and legs around him, burying his face in Thomas’s shoulder. Thomas’s breath became ragged as the emotion of their lovemaking finally caught up with him. He suddenly wanted to say dozens of things, and make dozens of promises and apologies. But all of his avoidance and deflecting with Price came from the same place that made him want to stay in their tight, sweaty, intimate embrace forever. He slowed his pace so the moment could last.

“I’m sorry, I crossed the line,” Price whispered, and Thomas could hear the beginning of tears in the words.
“No, no,” Thomas said into Price’s ear. “I forget you can be very much like me, but let everything else go, David, and just be here with me now.”

“I have. I am.”

Thomas pushed up onto his hands so that he could look at Price below him. Price’s parted lips were swollen from kissing and sucking, his cheeks rosy and glowing with sweat, his eyebrows knitted together as Thomas reached a hand down to pleasure him. “You look incredible right now.”

Price smiled and closed his eyes, “Shh, I’m trying not to finish.”

Thomas smiled as well and stroked Price faster, speeding up his hips to match. Price squirmed and opened his eyes again. “See I knew I upset you. Now you’re punishing me.”

“Not hardly. I just want to see what your face looks like when I make you cum.”

Price’s cheeks grew even more flushed. He held Thomas’s gaze until the rush of orgasm flooded him. He closed his eyes, tilted his head back, and grabbed the rug below him, seeing stars behind his eyelids as he came. Thomas wrapped his arms back around Price and kissed his neck before he let his impulses take over, biting Price’s shoulder again to avoid moaning while finishing. He kissed the spot he had bitten, then Price’s lips. They continued to hold each other as their hearts came to rest.

Price traced Thomas’s cheekbone and jaw with his finger. “I really am sorry. I’ve just been worrying that you’re so angry lately because you want to be in London with him, not here with me.”

Thomas laid next to Price and held his hand. “That’s not it at all, but I do wish I lived like him. For one thing, he doesn't worry about getting caught having sex under a roof where he lives in servitude.”

“Then I envy him for that, too. I wish I could make love to you somewhere without any fear. Maybe someday?”

Thomas kissed Price’s hand. “At least once, we can make that happen.”

Price sat up. “With that all said, I think I ought to get back in my bed.”

“I see, you got what you wanted, now you're off?”

Price stumbled, his legs not steady yet, as he searched for his clothes. “Not quite, I didn't get to be inside you, which hardly seems fair.”

Thomas found Price’s shirt and handed it to him. “Honestly, I haven't let anyone do that in years.”

“But I'm not just anyone.”

Thomas poured water from his pitcher into his bowl and washed himself while Price dressed. “That is a fact, David. You are something else.”

Price snatched the flask from Thomas’s nightstand. “Next time, somewhere less risky, for your sake.”

“And less cheek next time, for both our sake?” Thomas requested.

“You know I can’t promise that.”
Thomas wrung the washcloth out into the bowl. “Why’re you looking at me like that?”

“You’re standing there, naked as the day you were born, and now you’re all wet. How am I supposed to leave you looking like that?”

Thomas put his hand out and Price walked to him, taking it in his. “Will you let me be serious for just a moment?” Thomas asked.

“While you’re, I repeat, naked and wet?”

Thomas took Price’s other hand as well. “None of my anger is toward you. You are the only thing in this house that keeps me inspired to trudge onward.”

“Don’t say that, Thomas.”

“Why not?”

“Because I want you to find that inspiration in yourself.”

“Enough.” Thomas kissed Price one last time for the evening. “Now don’t go stumbling on the way back to your room like you did on your way to your shirt.”

Price put Thomas’s pillow back on the bed before heading to the door. “That’s exactly what I should do. Don’t forget my cover story,” he said, shaking the flask at Thomas.

When he was finally in his bed for the night, Thomas looked out the skylight above him. He promised himself he would have a different view from his next bedroom. One of a city, London or not, somewhere the walls didn’t feel like they would close around him. In the meantime, he could find his freedom in the moments he spent with Price. Even if they couldn’t shout how they felt from the rooftop of Downton, they could at least whisper their feelings back and forth while wrapped in each other’s arms.
Chapter 13

Summer finally surrendered to autumn, with crisp air flowing downstairs as the staff prepared to serve the family and their guests for the first hunt of the season. Thomas’s mood had cooled off as well; he was dissatisfied, but not destructive. Both Bateses commented to Price that he must have some kind of power over Thomas to have swayed him so much when they spoke, and Miss Baxter admitted to being just a little envious of the friendship.

Thomas was glad to have a reason to train Price on something again, since so many of the tasks had become routine, Price handling them with ease. Thomas explained what to bring to the family and guests and when, how to serve, where to stand, and how to keep a hunting dog from thieving a sandwich. Thomas hated to admit that Price was right about his talent with doing things covertly. He wasn’t a step out of his usual behavior, even when it seemed no one was near them.

Price took the first opportunity to get a break from the hunt and fetch more food from the kitchen with Thomas. He picked up a bundle of dried thyme to play with while he waited.

“How’s your brother fairing with your father’s shop?” Daisy asked Price.

“Alright I suppose. Well, not really. He writes me often asking me to come help. Begging, more like.”

“And will ya?” Daisy asked, her eyes hopeful his answer would be ‘no’.

“I couldn’t, I have a different career now. That’s my past.”

Thomas shook his head. “I’ve no idea how you can turn down an offer like that.”

“I don’t consider it an offer particularly, and I don’t know that he’s thinking long term. Everything is still new for him, and I’m not making life changing decisions while he tries to work himself out.”

“You’ve got a good head on your shoulders,” Mrs. Patmore said, handing him a plate of hors d’oeuvres. “Now, take that head and shoulders outside before those get cold.”

Price nodded to Mrs. Patmore and raised his eyebrows at Thomas on his way out of the kitchen.

“I’d hate it if he left,” Daisy said.

“I don’t think a person here would disagree with you, Daisy,” Thomas said.

“Including you?”

Thomas accepted a plate of hors d’oeuvres from Mrs. Patmore and left without answering.

“David ought to be careful of that one,” Mrs. Patmore said to Daisy.

“Oh, you think so? I think Thomas’s just being friendly.”

“Daisy, Thomas is never just being friendly.”

Outside, Price watched Thomas’s behavior carefully as he maneuvered around the horses and dogs. Price was intimidated by what seemed like disorganized chaos, but clearly wasn’t, as Thomas navigated it more like a dance. Price watched Mr. Molesley as well, who clearly didn’t know the
same dance steps as Thomas.

Mr. Carson noticed Price seemed a bit anxious. “Is Mr. Barrow helping you?” Mr. Carson asked.

“Yes sir, Mr. Carson. It’s more a matter of me putting his lessons into practice. He’s good at this.”

“I can say many things about Mr. Barrow, but I must admit, he is good at his job.”

Thomas couldn’t hear what Mr. Carson was saying to Price, but with both sets of eyes on him, he was extremely curious. He pulled Price aside as soon as there was a moment.

“He was complimenting you,” Price told him.

“I don’t believe that.”

“Course you wouldn’t,” Price teased. “He agreed with me that you’re good at your job.”

Thomas returned to his tasks, having no good response for what Price told him.

At the servant’s tea that afternoon, Mr. Carson handed out the day’s mail. An envelope arrived for Thomas with a return address from “K. Christian.” While everyone opened their letters, Thomas wasn’t sure what to expect in his, and put it in his pocket for later. Price watched the behavior with interest, as Thomas had read every letter he received out in the open, and wondered what could possibly require a private reading.

Price turned his attention to the sizeable package Mr. Carson had handed him, which had a return address from Sam and Marie. Inside the box were two more boxes, one containing Price’s favorite chocolates from a shop local to his family, the other containing his favorite tea leaves. Price opened the chocolates and offered them to everyone around the table.

“What are these for? Anything special?” Anna asked.

“Oh, um, they’re for my birthday.”

“Your birthday!” Anna exclaimed. “Did we miss it?”

“No, it’s next week. My sister-in-law is just proactive.”

“Well we should celebrate,” Mr. Bates suggested.

Price finally received his box back after it made its rounds and retrieved a piece for himself. “Don’t go to any bother, I’ll be twenty-nine and that’s nothing special. Maybe for my thirtieth I’ll let you make a fuss.”

Price bit into his chocolate, and warm caramel dripped down his hand. He licked the drops from his skin, then looked to make sure Mr. Carson didn’t catch his improper table manners. While Mr. Carson hadn’t noticed, two of the housemaids had. They looked at one another and giggled.

Thomas saw both Price’s licking and the reaction of the maids, and looked down at his teacup. If they had any idea where that tongue had been less than twenty four hours ago, he thought. He smiled slightly thinking of how Price was desired by several of the young women in the house, and who knew who else out there pining for him. Yet it was Thomas he wanted, had longed for, and had given himself over to fully the night before.

“Would you like another?” Price asked, holding the box across the table for Thomas.
Thomas cleared his throat. “No, you keep the rest. You’re the birthday boy, after all.”

That evening, Price followed Thomas to the hallway outside his door. “What was in the envelope?”

“You’re nosy, aren’t you?” Thomas said, turning the knob on his door.

“I would call it ‘inquisitive’.”

“Well I don’t know, I haven’t opened it.”

“Fine, be boring. I’ll just go to bed dying of curiosity.”

Thomas opened his door and stepped inside. “I guess you’ll have to,” he said, shutting Price out in the hallway.

Thomas turned the envelope over in his hands a few times, and finally opened it. He smiled at the contents; a copy of the photograph Kait had taken of him at her kitchen table. It was a little blurry due to their movements, but it only served to make the image feel more lifelike. There weren’t many photographs of him he knew of in existence, and certainly none that were candid. He turned the picture over, and there was a small inscription.

Thomas: Come to London and be my muse, you beautiful man, you. - Kait

Thomas laughed, then looked at the picture again. He wondered if this was what he really looked like; how other people actually saw him day to day. Objectively, he could almost see what Eric and Price, and even Kait, found so handsome.

Downstairs, Mrs. Patmore, Daisy, and the kitchen maids were cleaning up the final remains from dinner.

“Did you hear everyone talking at tea?” Daisy asked Mrs. Patmore. “It’s David’s birthday next week.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. And I were thinking about something Mr. Bates said. Maybe we could make a little celebration? We could decorate, and I could bake a cake.”

Mrs. Patmore stirred a pot that would be the servant’s stew for supper the next night. “I don’t think that’s a bad idea, especially with his father passing so recently. I’ll mention it to Mrs. Hughes.”

“What will you mention to me?” Mrs. Hughes asked, making her last round for the evening.

“David’s birthday next week, we’d like to have a little celebration for him,” Daisy told her. “Maybe include nanny since they get on so well.”

“Why that’s a delightful idea, Daisy. And I don’t think Mr. Carson will take too much convincing. Thank you for the suggestion.”

…..

Thomas heard Lady Edith invited dinner guests from her magazine, and the thought of having Eric under the same roof as Price made Thomas more than a little anxious. However, the evening’s guest list included an illustrator, a photographer, and two columnists; no journalists, Thomas noted with relief.
The family was happy to make their acquaintance, except Lady Mary, who was dubious about the visitors before they even arrived.

“You have so many journalists and writers. How much is there to say in a society magazine?” Lady Mary asked Edith while Anna dressed her for the evening.

“As I’ve said before, if you took the time to actually read my magazine, you would know that we publish all different kinds of stories.”

“I’ve been near by when mama was reading it. Isn’t that enough?”

“You will be polite to my guests tonight?”

Lady Mary turned from her vanity mirror to face Lady Edith. “Wasn’t I polite when you invited those journalists before?”

“Polite and flirtatious are different things.”

Lady Mary turned back to her mirror. “Well boredom leads to flirtation for me, what can I say.”

Thomas listened during dinner to see if anyone would mention Eric, but his name didn’t come up in any conversation he could hear. The photographer, a young woman, looked Thomas over a few times during dinner. Barking up the wrong tree, Price thought. When Thomas went around the table to pour the dessert wine, the photographer put her hand on his wrist. “That’s it, I know where I know you from! I just saw a picture of you hanging in my friend’s flat.”

“That hardly seems possible,” Lady Edith said. “It was probably just someone who looks like Mr. Barrow.”

Thomas continued around the table, working hard to keep his hands steady.

“No, I swear it was him. Mr. Barrow, is it? Do you know Kait?”

Thomas looked at the family and back to the photographer.

“Barrow, are you going to answer her?” Lord Grantham coaxed. Everyone at the table looked at Thomas expectantly.

“Yes, I know Kait,” Thomas said, then returned to his spot at the side of the room.

Lady Mary and Lady Edith traded perplexed but entertained glances. “You’re not getting away that easily, Barrow” Lady Mary said. “How do you know this photographer?”

“She’s a friend, m’lady. She let me stay with her so I could attend David’s father’s funeral. That’s when she took the photograph.”

“How interesting. Do you think we could get a copy?”

“Mary, let the poor man be,” the Dowager Countess sighed. “You do know servants have lives outside of these walls, don’t you?”

“I apologize, I didn’t mean to cause commotion,” the photographer told the family. “Or to make you uncomfortable,” she said across the room to Thomas.

Thomas felt Price’s eyes on him. “Don’t worry, ma’am, I’m not uncomfortable.”
“Let’s turn to other conversation topics, shall we?” The Dowager asked, noting Thomas’s relief as Lord Grantham began discussing the hunt earlier.

Price pictured the scene on the train platform when Thomas said goodbye to his friends, and then the rest of the dots connected. That tall man he saw was one of the first guests he served at Downton. His heart was in his stomach as he pictured Thomas with Eric, hidden away in the house.

Price all but ran to bed after dinner service, not joining the servants for their supper. His absence was quickly noticed, but Mr. Carson said Price did look a bit gray after dinner and perhaps he wasn’t feeling well. Thomas wondered why talk of Kait upset Price. Thomas had already told him about staying with a female friend in London, and he had seen both Eric and Kait at their departure. None of this seemed like new information.

Price came out of the bathroom as Thomas headed to it with his towel.

“What’s got you so upset?” Thomas whispered.

Price whispered back, “Just being a green-eyed monster. Ignore me.”

“Over a girl? You know there’s nothing to be jealous about there.”

Price made his voice even quieter. “I realized where I saw your ‘Erin’ before. Here. Among Lady Edith’s guests. Now I know that you know places to hide away here, because you’ve hidden with him.”

“You can’t possibly be upset with me for that, you’d been here all of five minutes when that happened. If I recall, you were sneaking back in your room when I was getting back to mine that night.”

Price shook his head. “Of course I don’t fault you for that, but if you could find a place with him, you could have done the same for me. Not made me beg and bargain for a night with you.”

Thomas looked both ways down the hall, ensuring they were still alone. “David, for Pete’s sake.” Thomas laughed. “Do you have any idea how jealous he was that I would go all the way to London for you and not him?”

Price shifted his weight. “I told you to ignore me. I know I’m being silly.”

“And unfair. All I’ve ever done is tried not to hurt you.”

“Is there anything still between you two?” Price asked, the words falling from his lips. He wished he could pick them up and shove them back in before Thomas heard them.

“How can you ask me that after last night?”

Price switched his towel to his other shoulder. “A lack of self confidence? I don’t know. I guess it feels more real to me now. He’s a real person, he’s really been here, he’s really been with you. Maybe he’ll come back. Maybe he’ll offer himself again and you’ll have him. He’s a journalist, isn’t he? And I’m one of the lowest rungs on the servants’ ladder.”

“I hate hearing you talk like this.”

“I hate that I’m saying any of it out loud.”

The two men looked at each other. Price hoped a door would open and he would have an excuse to
hide behind his own.

“I remember you being hard on me for behaving like you could have no other friends. Eric is a friend now, David, nothing more. Not now that I have you.”

Finally hearing Eric’s name gave Price a little jab in the heart, but he tried to take in the rest of Thomas’s words instead. “Okay. I won’t mention it again. I’m glad you have friends, really, I am. Even handsome, globe-trotting friends.”

“At least Kait doesn’t make you jealous.” Thomas said, giving himself an idea. “Come with me.”

Price followed Thomas to his room. Thomas retrieved Kait’s photograph from his drawer and handed it to Price.

“What’s this?”

“That’s the photograph that embarrassed me at dinner.”

Price examined it, smiling. He flipped it over and laughed at Kait’s note.

“So that’s your big dream? Become a model in London?”

“Do you think I’d be successful?”

“Well, I’d buy anything with your picture on it, I can tell you that.”

“Why don’t you keep it?” Thomas suggested.

“Really? Are you sure?”

“What am I going to do with a picture of myself?”

Price smiled down at the picture and then up at Thomas. “Thank you. I love this. Thank Kait for me, too.” Price hid the picture under his towel and headed to his room.

Thomas didn’t like seeing Price so hard on himself, but couldn’t help getting a little thrill over Price’s jealousy. It was validating that Price was so moved by the thought of him with someone else.

……..

It took a little investigating to figure out Price’s actual birthday. Daisy set Lee on the case to avoid causing any suspicion on Price’s part. Mr. Carson asked Lord Grantham’s permission to start the servants’ supper a bit early for the celebration, and since Mr. Carson’s request came after Lord Grantham consumed an impressive amount of both dinner and dessert wine, he was feeling quite generous. After telling Mr. Carson the staff could take the whole night off if they fancied it, Lady Grantham talked him back down and agreed to half an hour accommodation.

The staff made a day of finding Price activities outside of the house; errands in the village were followed by trips to the garden and then a run to the Dowager house. Price was finally sent to the stables on an errand, where he was asked to send some refreshments for Lady Mary and Mr. Branson, who just returned from a ride.

Price eyed the horses carefully as he served Lady Mary and Mr. Branson, and Lady Mary took notice. “I saw the same look in your eye during the hunt. You’re not much of an equestrian?”
“No, m’lady. I’m not sure what it is exactly, but horses make me a bit nervous.” Price averted his eyes to avoid Lady Mary detecting his lie. He had been uneasy around horses since being trampled by one during the war.

“I’ve let footmen take my horses out in the past. Not any footmen, but the ones I’ve liked. Perhaps some exposure is all you need.”

Price met Lady Mary’s eyes again and smiled. She and Mr. Branson both belonged in one of the many equestrian paintings he studied in his time before service, Lady Mary especially looked like she had just climbed down from an oil painting. “I am honored you’d offer, your Ladyship, but I confess I would be too afraid of hurting your poor horse to accept it.”

“If she can teach me the proper way to ride, I’m sure she could have you on a horse without putting the animal any danger,” Mr. Branson said, petting the walnut colored mare at his side.

“So you see, you can’t decline my offer. We’ll pick a day and I’ll have you confident with a horse by the end of it.”

Price chewed his lip and sighed. This was indeed something he should not decline. “As long as you ask Mr. Carson, m’lady, I would be grateful for a lesson.”

Price finished serving Lady Mary and Mr. Branson, packed everything back into the bicycle he had brought down to the stables, and went back to the house.

“I think he may have a crush on you,” Mr. Branson said to Lady Mary as they brushed their horses.

“Why on earth would you say that?”

“It’s the way he looks at you, like he’s enraptured.”

“Hmm,” Lady Mary said, studying her horse’s face. “I agree that I’ve seen that look in him, but he seems to look at everyone like that. I think he’s been in a constant state of awe since coming here.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Mr. Branson said. “Now that you say it, I’ve even seen him look at me that way.”

“See? It’s not a crush at all.”

“Well, if it is, you’ll have to let me know how your personal time with him goes.”

Lady Mary gave Mr. Branson a sideways smile.

Back in the kitchen, Daisy had hidden Price’s cake in the cupboard, and Anna hid decorations in Mrs. Hughes’s sitting room. The activities had given them all a sense of purpose that day, and Price could tell something was different with the staff, but he was so busy he hadn’t time to ask.

During dinner service, Thomas found reasons to avoid sending Price downstairs for any food or dishware, and the rest of the staff used the time to decorate the servants’ hall in paper streamers and pennant banners. Lady Grantham loaned the gramophone, and Mr. Bates set it up while Anna set out wine at each place setting.

“Do we usually go to this much trouble for a birthday?” Ellie asked Daisy.

“No, but it’s not usually David having the birthday, is it?” Daisy said defensively. “He’s lost his father so recently, can’t we do something nice to cheer him up?”
“I was just asking,” Ellie said, shaking her head before turning back to her vegetables.

Mr. Molesley alerted the staff that Price was coming down, and they lined up behind the table waiting for him. The quiet seemed odd to Price as he descended the stairs. Turning through the doorway he caught sight of a banner before his eyes laid on the two rows of waiting staff. Their cheering “Surprise!” ripped through the silence, followed by clapping and singing “for he’s a jolly good fellow.” Price stood frozen in his spot, his cheeks pink, as he covered his face and laughed.

Anna pushed a glass of wine into Price’s hand as Nanny Rebecca slipped a necklace of paper rosettes over his head. “Sybbie made this for you,” she informed Price as she kissed his cheek.

Miss Baxter pulled Price by the elbow to his seat, and he was the first served for supper as Mr. Bates started the gramophone. “I can’t believe you all went to this much trouble,” Price said, finally finding his voice.

“It was no trouble at all,” Mrs. Hughes said. “It was as much fun for us as it is for you.”

Daisy and Ellie served roast chicken, green beans, and mashed potatoes to everyone before joining the table themselves.

“This is amazing,” Price told Daisy.

She blushed and shrugged. “Weren’t nothing.”

Dinner turned to dancing. Price spun Anna around the room while Thomas took Miss Baxter’s hand for a turn themselves. Anna traded Price off to Daisy, who blushed deeper than she had at dinner when her palm touched Price’s.

The staff’s voices rose again as they chanted, “speech, speech!” and Mr. Bates lifted the needle on the gramophone as they awaiting Price’s words.

Price stood, the dinner wine making him just the slightest bit unstable. “My goodness. Are those two words enough?”

Anna playful booed him.

“Alright, alright,” Price waved her off and sighed. “I can be a little sentimental when I’ve a drink in me, so you’ll have to forgive me,” Price started as he fingered the rosettes on his necklace. “I thought the place I worked before was a great group. And they were. But here - you all,” Price said, looking around the table, allowing his eyes to meet Thomas’s before speaking again. “I am amazed everyday by how kind and caring and loving you all are. It’s hard to become an orphan at any age, and I feel the loss and distance of my family greater now than ever. So it’s that much more meaningful to have you all around me as my new extended family. I feel like the world’s luckiest man right now.”

Every female body around the table jumped up to hug and kiss Price. Daisy took the opportunity to dash out and fetch the cake. She lit it with candles and brought it in as the group sang “Happy Birthday.” Price sliced the first piece carefully, and then followed the group’s eyes to the doorway, where the Crawley family stood.

“We don’t want to interrupt,” Lord Grantham said. “We just wanted to wish you a happy birthday. It certainly looks like you’re having just that.”

Price wondered if perhaps he was dreaming the entire evening. “Thank you so much, all of you. It’s the happiest birthday I’ve had.”
“Mr. Carson has given permission for me to get you on a horse tomorrow,” Lady Mary told him. “So you may want to go a little easy on that wine.”

“Too late for that,” Mr. Molesley whispered to Miss Baxter.

“Would you care to join us for cake?” Mr. Carson asked.

“No, no, we should be on our way,” Lady Grantham said. "Happy birthday, David. Goodnight all.”

Price ate his cake feeling in a haze of good fortune and good spirits. He watched on as the dancing continued, thankful his birthday was the reason for so much merriment.

“I think he ought to get to bed,” Thomas suggested to Mr. Carson as they both watched Price struggle to keep his wine glass upright.

“Yes, especially if he’s to meet Lady Mary in the morning.”

Thomas linked his arm through Price’s and pulled the man to his feet. “Say thank you and goodnight, David.”

Price gave a sloppy wave and blew kisses around the room. “I love you all!” he called as Thomas escorted him out of the servants’ hall.

“Wasn’t that so much fun?” Price asked Thomas as Thomas pushed him through his bedroom door.

“If it were any other man being lavished with that much attention here, I’d have about died of jealousy.”

Price threw his arms around Thomas’s neck and laid his head on Thomas’s collarbone. Thomas caught their reflection in Price’s mirror, and he smiled at Price, who looked like a tipsy girl at a fair hanging on the neck of her beau.

“Dancing was nice, but I’d rather have danced with you,” Price said, swaying his body.

Thomas pictured his night with Eric in London and closed his eyes, imagining the same scene with Price. With eyes closed, he was startled by Price’s lips on his. Price parted his lips and snuck his tongue between Thomas’s, languidly probing Thomas’s mouth. Price’s kiss tasted of cake icing and merlot, and Thomas let the kiss go on quite some time before breaking it.

“We shouldn’t push it. If I spend too long in here, it won’t go unnoticed.”

“No, stay, dance with me, kiss me. Kiss me, kiss me,” Price said, his voice getting softer with each word.

“I knew you were a drunk,” Thomas said, kissing the merlot on Price’s lips one last time for the night. “At least you’re a happy one.”

“Full of love!”

“Love for everyone.”

“But most of all you,” Price said, laying his head back on Thomas’s chest.

“Is that so?”
“It’s so. I love you more than any other.”

The words tickled Thomas in a way he didn’t anticipate, perhaps because he believed they were true. He kissed Price’s forehead and led him to his bed. “I suppose you can undress yourself when you wake up at some point in the night a little more sober.”

Price laid his head on his pillow, falling asleep before Thomas reached the door. Thomas entered the hallway with the first “I love you” from Price still making his smile.

“That took a while,” Mr. Bates said. Thomas hadn’t seen him in the hall. Mr. Molesley was a few steps behind Mr. Bates.

“He’s a lightweight,” Thomas said to both men, his lips twitching from his genuine smile to a nervous one. “Just needed some help getting to bed.”

“I’m sure you were happy to help,” Mr. Bates said.

“And just what are you implying? Aren’t you one of David’s biggest fans?”

“I’m not implying anything about David. But maybe you’d take advantage of his present state.”

In his younger days, Thomas would have raised his fist without hesitation. But a fight would only worsen whatever damage may be in progress of getting done. Instead, Thomas said, “I wouldn’t take advantage of anyone in this house, least of all him. I’m sorry that’s how you see me.”

Mr. Bates looked at his feet. “That was a low blow, I admit. It just made me a bit nervous that you were in there so long.”

“Well you needn’t worry. He’s in bed unharmed.”

Thomas’s words swayed Mr. Bates, but Mr. Molesley, who remained silent in the hall, wasn’t silent the next day. As he and Miss Baxter sat together tending to clothing in need of mending, he pressed Miss Baxter for her thoughts.

“How awful that Mr. Bates would suggest such a thing,” Miss Baxter said.

“But do you think Mr. Barrow may have something for David? Or David for him?”

“First, I don’t think Mr. Barrow would open his heart to another in this house. Second, David have a thing for Mr. Barrow? What makes you say that?”

“Well they’re awful friendly.”

“David is everyone’s friend.”

“Yes, but it got me thinking. Most girls in this house are half in love with David, and yet he hasn’t shown interest in a single one of them. He doesn’t even flirt back.”

“Maybe it’s not in his nature to flirt.”

“And the two of them, Mr. Barrow and David, they’re out in the courtyard or up in the halls chatting whenever they can.”

“Have you forgotten Mr. Barrow is tasked with training David when needed?” Miss Baxter said, missing the next stitch in her hemming. She cursed the fabric and tried again.
“Sure, maybe it’s nothing. But something just seems a bit off to me.”

“You have no proof of anything being off and you’re making a dangerous accusation. I should hope to not hear it from your lips again.”

Mr. Molesley straightened, surprised by the strength of Miss Baxter’s words.

The two fell silent as Priced passed through the room on his way out to meet Lady Mary.

“I suppose I forget sometimes that you wish to be Mr. Barrow’s friend.”

“Well please don’t forget it, and don’t make things harder for him than they already are. If you want to remain my friend, you'll never mention any of that to anyone.”

Mr. Molesley acquiesced, but remained convinced that he was on to something.
Chapter 14

Thomas nodded to Price as he headed out the next morning to meet Lady Mary. He was still a bit shaken by his run in with Mr. Bates, though unkind words and accusations were commonplace for Thomas long before he came to Downton. As he went about his duties that morning, he wondered if the same had been true for Price, or whether the other man had avoided such things by being friendly and likable. He knew Price’s relationship with his father hadn’t always been easy, but in the end, Price spoke a touching eulogy that seemed quite genuine from where Thomas was sitting. Thomas wouldn’t have been able to muster a touching sentence about his father let alone an entire speech.

He recalled the first good friend he made as a boy. Curiosity around puberty led to exploration of each other’s bodies, and as other boys were falling for girls, Thomas found himself falling for the friend. Reality came down on him like an ocean wave when his friend confessed a crush on a girl. Thomas struggled as though he were drowning, grasping to understand how their young intimacy could have meant nothing to the other boy. His friend left that day in disgust, vowing not to come back, despite Thomas’s begging and pleading that he would never mention it again.

As though his first puppy love had not ended badly enough, out of fear that someone may find out about their kissing and petting, the friend told Thomas’s father that Thomas had confessed his love and he wanted Mr. Barrow to keep Thomas away. Thomas was dragged to his father’s workroom by the shirt. He anticipated a beating, and would have preferred it over the string of heinous insults his father hurled. All of the beastly things said to Thomas by others since could never compare to the bite of his father’s words. The look in his father’s eyes that night never softened afterward.

Thomas always wondered how life may have played out if not for that day. Could he have kept himself hidden, at least enough that his father wouldn’t have to admit he knew Thomas’s true self? And if he hid well enough, would he have inherited his father’s clock making business, instead of his father selling it after the war? Or would he at least have had the kind of support he needed to get a job in the field? Perhaps he would be in a shop right now like Price’s brother, not at Downton, he thought.

Price returned from his lesson with Lady Mary quite tired. He changed into his livery and sat with Anna in the servant’s hall as she tended to a pair of Lady Mary’s evening gloves.

“How was your ride with Lady Mary?” Anna asked.

“It was lovely, though a bit challenging at first. I started by confessing to her my actual reason for fearing horses.”

“Which is?”

Price picked up one of the slate gray silk gloves and ran it between his fingers. “I was run over by one during the war. It broke my arm, my leg, my ribs, to say nothing of my spirit.”

“That’s awful, David, I’m so sorry to hear it.”

“There are worse things that happened, but that one still lingers. I was nervous to share it with Lady Mary, but she seemed very understanding.”

“Well, she’s no stranger to what war does to men.”

“She explained that as well. She’s delightful, really. An exquisite rider, and a striking beauty. I
must admit, it was hard to focus on the lesson when I kept picturing her frozen in time, recorded with paint on canvas,” Price said, still playing with the glove.

“My my, David, do I sense a special fondness for my Lady?”

“Oh, no, no. No, not like that, at least.”

“Like what, then?” Anna asked, giggling.

“I just hold her in high regard, that’s all. Anyway, you never have to worry about me falling for someone in the family. They’re so far above me that I don’t even see myself in the same species.”

“David, that’s a silly thing to say,” Anna said, comparing the glove in his hand to the one in hers before continuing her work. “It’s not as if they see you so far below them. Why, Lady Mary was the one who asked you to come out for a lesson.”

“I’m not pitying or belittling myself, please don’t misunderstand me. They’re the family, I’m the servant. It’s a clear line.”

“But we are more than that to them. We spend every day together, sharing their lives with them, even their most intimate moments. You shouldn’t feel so far removed. Afterall, they came down here to wish you a happy birthday last night.”

“You’re right. I’d forgotten that.”

“I’m surprised you remembered any detail from last night,” Anna teased. “You do look a bit fatigued. Are you alright?”

“I think between the wine and the horse, I’m worn out.”

“Well you best buck up, guests were announced for this evening.”

“Overnight and all?”

“Overnight and all.”

Price laid Lady Mary’s glove carefully on fabric Anna had placed on the table and went off to help with luncheon. He bumped into Mr. Molesley as he came around a corner, and apologized. Mr. Molesley stuttered an awkward “it’s fine,” without meeting his eyes. Price attempted to speak with him while they waited for dishes in the kitchen, but he gave one word answers and left the room as quickly as he could.

“What’s up with that one?” Price asked Thomas as they ran dishes to the dining room.

“What do you mean?”

“Mr. Molesley is being a bit funny to me. Did I say something rude to him when I was lit?”

Thomas considered whether to share the truth, and decided against it. “He’s probably just jealous that you had a ride with Lady Mary this morning. I know I would be if I were him.”

“I suppose. He’s never acted like that to me before.”

“Well, you weren’t such a threat before, but now you’re clearly in the good graces of Mr. Carson’s favorite Crawley.” As Thomas said the words, they didn’t seem like a lie anymore. Perhaps Mr. Molesley was being odd with Price for both reasons.
They reached the dining room, and Mr. Molesley was already there. Price smiled at him, and he looked away. “See?” Price whispered to Thomas.

“Hush, not here.”

The family discussed their guests for the evening over luncheon. A marquess and marchioness whom Price had never heard of were coming along with their adult children. Price realized he may have to tend to one of them that evening, and followed Thomas out during his next cigarette break for advice.

“You never dressed anyone at your last job?” Thomas asked.

“No, I was a hallboy, remember?”

“And you’re sure you haven’t had to since coming here?”

Price tapped his foot. “Am I sure? Yes, I think I would remember.”

“Why are you so nervous about this? It’s all very straightforward.”

“For you it is.”

“Are you feeling alright?”

“Anna asked me that, too. My stomach hurts a bit, actually,” Price said, rubbing his abdomen. “Between that and Mr. Molesley being odd, and now new duties for the evening - for a marquess’s family no less - I’m just out of sorts.”

Thomas held Price’s forearm lightly. “David, you’ll be just fine. Why don’t we walk through some of the things you may be required to do this evening?”

“That would help,” Price said. He looked up and saw Mr. Molesley looking out at the both of them. Thomas’s eyes followed Price’s and he let his hand fall from Price’s arm back to his side. Mr. Molesley ducked out of view.

“See? Now he’s spying on me through a window. It’s getting ridiculous! I’m going to talk to him.”

“No, don’t,” Thomas said sharply. “What I mean is, focus on what you need to know for the guests tonight. Worry about Molesley later.”

Price followed Thomas to one of the rooms in a wing of Downton which Price rarely had reason to visit. It always seemed strange that he lived in the house and yet there were still parts that were a mystery to him. Thomas showed him a number of things to be aware of in the room, the right way to hang up clothing, where to put cufflinks, in which direction to brush a hat.

“You know, you may not even have to do this tonight. They could bring their own staff.”

“I will keep my fingers crossed. One more question.”

“Of course.”

“Who knows we’re here?”

“David…”

“You could probably give me at least one kiss and no one would know.”
“I thought you weren’t feeling well.”

“I could be dying and I’d save my last breath to kiss your lips.”

Thomas rubbed his temple. “Fine, just one. Not ten strung together as one. One kiss, David.”

Price stroked Thomas’s cheek with the back of his fingers. “Are you jealous thinking of me undressing another man tonight? What if he’s handsome?”

“I’ve seen the family. I have nothing to fear.”

Price laughed and caught Thomas’s lips with his, giving Thomas five quick kisses. “See, I didn’t give you ten. I compromised.”

When the convoy of cars soon arrived with the evening’s guests, Mr. Carson grumbled. There were four additional guests, cousins of the marquess, and none brought men of their own. Even Thomas was assigned to help.

“I had to help him when I was a footman,” Thomas told Price of the marquess’s oldest son as they scrambled to rearrange the dining room. “Such a bore, drones on and on when you're dressing him.”

“Did you see the cousin I was assigned to? Not half bad. You had me thinking they’d all be unattractive.”

“He only seems attractive compared to the others,” Thomas whispered. “He’s a toad.”

“I disagree. I’m going to undress him slowly so that I can savor every moment.”

“You’re a brat,” Thomas said, smiling.

“Is something funny over there?” Mr. Carson asked from across the room.

“No sir, Mr. Carson,” Thomas said. “Trust me, no one is enjoying themselves.”

Price pulled a few chairs to the table for the new guests, and then rested against one for a moment.

“Are you not feeling well?” Mr. Carson asked.

“This isn’t a convenient time to feel sick. I’ll be fine, thank you.” Price breathed for another moment and then reached for a place setting just as Mr. Molesley reached for the same. Mr. Molesley pulled his hand away quickly.

“Well if I am sick, it’s probably nothing contagious,” Price said. “You don’t have to be so jumpy.”

Mr. Molesley reached for a different place setting without responding to Price.

“I seriously cannot deal with his behavior,” Price told Thomas during the frenetic pre-dinner activities downstairs. “I must have said or done something.”

“Why is it bothering you so much?”

“I don’t like to be at odds with people, especially for no reason.”

“See, that’s your problem. It’s much more fun to be at odds with people.”
Price huffed. “I mean it. This is very upsetting to me. What could it be?”

Thomas gestured for Price to follow him to a quiet corner of the hallway.

“David, Bates and Molesley saw me come out of your room last night, and Bates questioned my being in there so long. Don’t worry,” Thomas said, seeing panic in Price’s eyes. “It’s not you he questioned, just me. He thought maybe I took advantage of you in your drunken stupor.”

“Accusing you of taking advantage of me? How could he say something so horrible?”

“Because they think I’m horrible, David. I keep telling you that.”

“As if you would ever do something so nasty! I’m so surprised at Mr. Bates.”

“It’s not all his fault. I’ve earned my reputation here many times. Trust me, I have,” Thomas added in response to Price’s shaking head.

“I don’t care what you may have done in the past. I’m sure it wasn’t anything close to what he suggested.”

“Of course not.”

“Then you don’t bloody deserve it, and no one here better say anything like that around me, because I’ll tell him as much.”

Thomas laughed. “That is the most darling string of words ever spoken to me.”

Price crossed his arms. “Mr. Bates hasn’t been making faces at me all day, though, so why is Mr. Molesley?”

“Bates seemed content with my explanation.”

“But you think Mr. Molesley still suspects something?”

“That, or he just really hates the idea of you rising horses with Lady Mary.”

Upstairs, Anna dressed Lady Mary for the evening.

“David seemed to enjoy your lesson this morning,” Anna told Lady Mary, helping her into her evening gown.

“I’m glad to hear it. He’s a sweet young man.”

“Speaking of sweet, I think he may be sweet on you.”

Lady Mary smiled. “Mr. Branson said the same, but I think you’re both wrong. Still, it would be a bit flattering if he were.”

Anna straightened Lady Mary’s shoulder straps. “Would it really?”

“Well I’m not blind. I bet all the girls downstairs go crazy over him.”

“Of course they do. You should see how Daisy glazes over when he speaks to her.”

“I bet even Mrs. Patmore blushes. Honestly, I blushed a little this morning when he helped me into my saddle”
“My lady, I’m surprised!”

“Oh, don’t be. I’m just trying to have some fun before I spend my evening with the world’s worst conversationalists.”

“Are they really that bad?”

Lady Mary pulled on the gloves Anna mended that morning. “I’ll just say, prepare for me to turn in early tonight.”

“Well, maybe you can keep yourself entertained picturing David helping you up on your horse.”

Lady Mary laughed and shook her head. “Thank goodness you don’t repeat the things I say. Poor David, the victim of our teasing.”

“Yes, poor David, spending the morning with a beautiful Lady.”

“Did he call me beautiful?” Lady Mary asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I think he called you a ‘striking beauty,’ if memory serves.”

“My goodness. Look out, Daisy, now I’m glazing over.”

Lady Edith came to collect Lady Mary. She exchanged a final smile with Anna before heading to the dining room. The conversation over dinner bored even the servants, though the handsome cousin was at least somewhat entertaining to Lady Mary.

During after dinner drinks, Lady Mary stepped away from the marquess’s tedious conversation with Lord Grantham and found Price. “Anna said you had a good time this morning. I wasn’t sure, I know it was hard for you to get back in the saddle.”

“I did, your Ladyship. I can’t say my fear is gone, but I can see now that, with time, it will be. Thank you for that.”

“Well, we need to get you out there soon.”

Price smiled and took Lady Mary’s empty glass. “I would like that very much.” Price looked over Lady Mary’s shoulder at Mr. Molesley, who was watching their conversation intently. Price lowered his voice. “Though, I think it may make some of the others jealous.”

“So let them be jealous,” Lady Mary said, accepting a full glass from Thomas. She waited for Thomas to step away before continuing. “Some have been envious over things I’ve done for Anna in the past, but that doesn’t stop me. She deserves to be treated well and so do you.”

“I agree with you that she deserves it. I do adore her.”

“I find the relationships downstairs so fascinating sometimes. I know Anna is quite fond of you as well. And,” Lady Mary said, leaning closer, “it sounds like Daisy may have a bit of a crush on you?”

Mr. Carson interrupted the conversation. “My lady, we could use David’s assistance if you’ll excuse him.”

“You’re right, I’ve stolen him quite enough today. Thank you for indulging me, David.”

Thomas pushed in next to Price at the wine table. “Well if Molesley wasn’t already resentful, my
god, that probably put him over the edge. What was she going on about? Did she ask you to marry her?"

“Yes, it will be a spring wedding and you can be my maid of honor.”

Thomas resumed the conversation once they were finally heading down for the servants’ supper.

“On the plus side, if he thinks you have a thing for Lady Mary, it will put him off our scent.”

“That’s not what I’m mad about. As you said, he didn’t think anything of me. It’s you he accused.”

“I can handle myself. I have all these years. Don’t bother yourself with it.”

Price decided to sit next to Thomas at supper. He did occasionally, but usually he preferred to sit across the table to look at him. From this seat, he could instead stare back at Mr. Molesley.

When the meal was served, Price looked away from Mr. Molesley and stared instead at his plate.

“Not going to eat?” Thomas asked.

“I’ve no appetite all of a sudden.”

“They say being lovestruck can do that,” Mr. Molesley said with forced pleasantry.

“And just what is that supposed to mean?” Price asked. A few heads popped up from plates and tea cups at the first harsh words Price had uttered publicly since joining the staff.

“Nothing really, you just seem a bit enamored with Lady Mary.”

“Excuse me?” Mr. Carson and Price both said in unison.

“You’re just full of accusations these days, aren’t you?” Price added. He grabbed his side as a stabbing pain overcame him.

“What’s wrong?” Thomas asked.

“I had a sharp pain. I think I’m alright now.”

Thomas reached across Price. “Does it hurt to the touch?”

Price winced and pulled away.

“What wrong with him?” Mr. Carson asked.

“I’m not sure but it could be appendicitis. If it is, we should call the ambulance.”

“No!” Price rebuffed, but within seconds he was doubled over.

“Give him space,” Mr. Carson ordered as the staff all jumped. Bells on the wall began ringing.

“Thomas, go call the ambulance. Mr. Molesley, take care of your man and then Price’s.”

Thomas ran to Mr. Carson’s office, Miss Baxter and Anna ran off for their ladies, but Mr. Molesley stayed, gaping at Price.

“Staring at me again, huh?” Price yelled at Mr. Molesley across the table and through his pain.

“Lady Mary was just being kind, so don’t be a pervert. Speaking of which,” Price pushed himself away from the table and leaned back against his chair, his hand fixed on his side. “Mr. Barrow told
me what was said to him after he helped me upstairs last night.” Price looked back and forth between Mr. Bates and Mr. Molesley. “You know, Sean Moore threatened to do to me what you accused Mr. Barrow of doing last night, and it was Mr. Barrow who stopped anything from happening.” Price grimaced and then continued. “Not only would Mr. Barrow never do what you say, he’s prevented that kind of wretched thing from happening to me in this very house.”

Thomas returned to the doorway just in time to hear Price’s words. He knew Moore had threatened Price, but not to what degree. His expression was as shocked as Mr. Carson’s, both over the revelation and the fact that Price was announcing it to the entire staff.

“The ambulance is on its way,” he managed to say.

“Is what he says true?” Mr. Carson asked, his voice deeply serious.

“Well… yes, Mr. Carson.” Thomas said. All eyes were on him now.

“And you didn’t think to tell me?”

“I found out only the night before he was fired. I was going to tell you, but by that time it just seemed like salt on the wound.”

“Mr. Molesley, why are you still here? Go like I told you.” Mr. Carson waited for Mr. Molesley to disappear.

Mrs. Hughes knelt down and held Price’s free hand as they waited for the ambulance. “You did nothing wrong. Either of you. I can understand why you wouldn’t want to run to Mr. Carson with that kind of information,” she said, looking up at Mr. Carson.

Mr. Bates was near speechless. “David, I’m not sure what to say to that. Sean really threatened you that way?”

Price nodded.

“Ghastly,” Mr. Bates said to himself.

The bell rang for Thomas’s man. “Go, Thomas. Mrs. Hughes and I will stay with David.”

Thomas nodded and ran up the stairs. He gripped the railing on the way up, his eyes still wide.

Mr. Carson dismissed the rest of the staff and he and Mrs. Hughes waited with Price. He gritted his teeth and fought back tears. “I’m sorry I can’t help tonight, and I’m sorry I made a scene.”

“Pain can bring out the worst,” Mrs. Hughes reassured him.

“Mr. Molesley was being disrespectful, of Lady Mary and of Thomas. But I should have kept my mouth shut.”

“We can talk about it when you’re well,” Mr. Carson said. “I hear them coming now. Don’t strain yourself further.”

Price was encircled by the emergency staff and rushed into the waiting ambulance. Thomas’s diagnosis was correct, and Price’s appendix was removed at the hospital. He was sent back to Downton early morning three days later with orders for at least another three days of bed rest. The mood cast over the staff was just beginning to clear up as he returned.

Mr. Carson sat by Price’s bedside once he was settled. Price had feared what he may return to, but
Mr. Carson was quite paternal. “There will be people who challenge you,” Mr. Carson advised, “but you can’t let it get the best of you.”

“I often let things get the best of me, I just do it more privately. I’m so embarrassed. No, ashamed more like,” Price said with a timid smile.

“Well, I can’t blame you for defending Lady Mary’s honor. Mr. Barrow, however, I don’t know that his honor needed defending.”

“I resented what they said. It wasn’t fair that he should be blamed for the very thing he protected me from. Do you not agree?”

Mr. Carson sighed. “I do wish you had come to me directly, David.”

“Yes, Mr. Carson. I should have let you deal with it.”

“It reminded me of what Sean said about you in my office, about what you ‘get up to’. I understand now he was trying to get you in trouble for his actions.”

“Exactly. That was exactly what he was doing.”

Thomas knocked on the casing of Price’s open door. “I thought I’d come see if you need help changing your dressing.” He had a stack of books under one arm and the first aid kit in the other.

Price lifted his shirt and saw some blood seeping through the gauze on his side. “Mr. Carson, is that alright?”

“Yes. This task, I am happy to let Mr. Barrow handle,” he said, excusing himself from the room.

Thomas placed the books on Price’s nightstand and took Mr. Carson’s place in the chair. Price held his nightshirt up and let Thomas remove the gauze.

“How do these sutures compare to your handiwork?”

Thomas gingerly cleaned Price’s wound. “These are acceptable, but I consider myself more of an artist. Not a hint of a scar on your finger.”

“Then you should have just laid me across the table and performed the operation right here. Saved me the trouble of a bumpy ambulance ride and lonely hospital stay.”

“Laying you across the table, I like that idea.”

“Cheeky.”

“As if you’re one to talk. Serves you right that you didn’t get to undress Cousin Half-handsome afterall.”

Price’s face brightened with a devilish grin. “Mr. Molesley had to take care of two of them that night. Did he pass out? Tell me he passed out.”

“Nearly. I had to help him.”

“No surprise there. By the way, what’s this stack of books?”

Thomas glanced at the books and back to Price’s stomach. “A mix of novels, just something to keep you busy while you’re laid up.”
“Thank you for that. I’m already stir crazy and I have a few more days like this.”

Daisy appeared in the door with a tray of breakfast and tea for Price. She froze at the site of Price’s exposed scar, and exposed skin.

“You can come in, Daisy,” Price told her.

“I heard you need to take all your meals up here, at least for a few days. Ellie’s busy so I thought I’d bring it for ya.”

“That was very kind, thank you Daisy. Can you put it on my dresser?”

Daisy looked away from Price’s torso and set the tray down for him. “Anything else I can do to help?”

“Do you want to throw this away?” Thomas asked, holding out the bloody gauze.

“Oh, be nice,” Price said, grabbing the gauze from Thomas’s hand. “No thank you, Daisy. See you here at tea time?”

“Sure, David. Yes. See you then,” Daisy said, turning on her heel quickly, scurrying out of the room.

“So what did Mr. Carson say of your outburst?”

“Not much, I think things are square.”

“If I caused a scene like I don’t think things would be square when I returned.”

“Oh dear, are you gonna behave like Mr. Molesley now?”

“I better not, or you’ll emasculate me in front of the entire staff,” Thomas said as he finished taping on Price’s new, clean gauze. He pulled Price’s shirt down and patted the pile of books. “These are in no particular order, read any you like. I expect they should keep you occupied for at least a couple days.”

“Thank you. You’re the very best nurse.”

“And don’t you forget it,” Thomas said, lifting the tray from the dresser and placing it across Price. He stole a strawberry and popped it in his mouth before leaving.

Price looked down at the tray a bit, but his appetite hadn’t returned. He selected a book from the middle of the pile and opened it. A colorful envelope fell out. He picked it up and turned it over. The glue wasn’t sealed and he could see writing on the paper inside, enticing him to take a look. Despite his better judgement, he removed the paper and unfolded it, holding it beneath the tray lest someone walk by.

My dear friend,

It pains me to hear how unhappy you are with your employment. Perhaps you could appeal to Edith? There are many jobs at the magazine which are mechanical in nature. You could be well suited to them with your affinity for clockwork. A machine is a machine, is it not? I realize I know a different side of Edith, but she is always very helpful and understanding. I don’t think it would put your present employment at risk to have a conversation. Things aren’t as bad as they seem, even on
your darkest day. They can get better. They will get better.

I know to London and back in a day is a chore, but a visit with a friend may cheer you up. Let me know if you can make it. It’s getting colder and I will be traveling less, so there would be more opportunities to see you. Kait would be pleased to see you as well. How she goes on about you!

On a more positive note, it’s comforting to know that someone who cares about you a great deal is there with you every day. I still picture your face when you told me about him, and I can see it in your letters. I can’t deny that I wish I made you light up like that, but if someone can these days I’m all for it. I would love to meet him. You should both come. We can take him out.

Write to me soon, you have me worried.

- E.

As if I didn’t feel guilty enough opening that letter, Price thought. He pushed the tray aside and pulled himself to his bare feet, walking carefully to his dresser to retrieve paper and pencil before returning to his bed. He hastily jotted down the return address on the envelope, then tucked it back into the book. He put the book at the bottom of the pile, deciding he would tell Thomas he didn’t get a chance to read it.

With pencil in hand, his fingers hovered above the paper as he thought through the exact words he would put down for Eric.
Chapter 15

Price hid his letter to Eric among a stack of others he wrote during his three days of bedrest. He penned a letter to Sam and Marie, then his grandmother, friends at his prior employer, cousins, Lucy the waitress, and by that point he figured he might as well keep writing until he ran out of note paper. Daisy agreed to post the letters, and Price handed them to her with more than enough money to cover the postage.

“Please, keep the rest for your troubles. Buy something fun. It will make me feel less guilty for all the help you’ve given me the past few days,” Price told Daisy when she pushed the coins back into his hands.

“I can’t, this is too much, even for all these letters.”

“I won’t take no for an answer,” Price said, closing Daisy’s hand around the money.

Daisy would have protested again, but she couldn’t produce words while Price’s fingers touched hers. She nodded and left with his stack of letters.

Price’s last day in bed was the hardest. He desperately wanted to rejoin his colleagues, bored almost to tears in the dormitories, which were near silent and empty during the day. He thought it would be less lonely than the hospital, but it was worse knowing everyone was so close but completely inaccessible.

He admitted to himself that the isolation gave him anxiety. Being constantly occupied and around other people prevented him from ever having to think too much. One couldn’t contemplate too deeply working fourteen hour days, and even his half day was always busy. Thomas was at the forefront of his mind. Eric’s concern over Thomas’s unhappiness made Price more worried than he had been before.

An icy rain began to rap against Price’s windows and on the slanted roof above his head. A fat drop here and there quickly grew to a crescendo of pelting hail and rain. He rose to his feet, much more easily than he had even one day prior, and watched the storm from his small window. He pressed his cheek to the cold glass and breathed hot air, drawing shapes in the condensation with his finger.

“Planning your great escape?” Thomas asked from the doorway.

“You’d think I’d have been locked up here for months by how eager I am to get out,” Price said, still drawing on the window.

“I doubt Mr. Carson will let you go full speed tomorrow.”

“I’ll take anything, I don’t care.”

“The books didn’t help?”

Price looked at the pile. “I read most of them, but there’s only so much reading one can do before it all just blurs together.”

“You do know that it will only be a week tomorrow? This is quite melodramatic for just six days of solitude.”
“I suppose I don’t do well in a cage.”

Thomas gathered his books from Price’s nightstand. “Funny, that’s how I’ve been feeling about this entire house.”

“With me as the only exception?”

“The one and only,” Thomas said with a quick smile. Price hadn’t bothered to put pomade in his hair, and loose pieces fell across his forehead, covering an eye. Thomas brushed them back with his fingertips. “Why do you look even sadder now?”

“Just want you to be happy, that’s all.”

“Happiness is a lofty goal. Can I just aim for not being terribly depressed?”

Price laughed and his hair fell right back where it had been. “You know, there’s a practical reason I style my hair. It’s not just to look so incredibly seductive all the time.”

“I don’t know, this rumpled look is actually quite seductive, what with the same pajamas you’ve been wearing since Tuesday and those bags under your eyes.”

“Please, go on.”

“Well, the gloomy weather makes you look especially pale, and since I have shoes on and you don’t, you’re also quite short. Your eyes are watery, your lips are chapped, and I think you’ve lost weight since you’ve been sick.”

“Thomas, I was feeling so low. Thank goodness you were here to raise my spirits.”

Thomas fixed Price’s hair again and patted his cheek. “With all that said, you’re still achingly beautiful.”

“Sounds it. Now take your books and leave me in my misery. I’ll see you at breakfast, where I’ll be clean and combed and clothed.”

“I’ll take clean and combed, but don’t worry about clothed.”

Price pushed Thomas to the door. “Don’t flirt, I’ve been entertaining myself... other ways... and I need a break from that, too.”

“Really? I’d like to hear more about that. Or you could reenact it for me.”

“Sorry. Use your imagination.”

“I will!” Thomas called as he left.

Price was in his livery the next morning before the sun was even up. Mr. Carson found him in the servant’s hall polishing candlesticks, two dozen completed and one dozen to go.

“Welcome to the world of the living,” Mr. Carson greeted him.

“You’ve no idea. I now know my version of Hell, Mr. Carson: extreme boredom.”

Mr. Carson rumbled with a chuckle. “I’m relieved to have you back. When you’re missing it’s like losing the work of two men. But pace yourself, otherwise you’ll be back up in that room.”
“Please, anything but that,” Price said with a smile.

The rest of the staff began rising and working. Thomas found Price in the servant’s hall and joined him with his cup of tea. He watched Price work a candlestick over and grinned. “Couldn’t break your hands from that motion after days of doing it in bed?”

“Did you busy your thoughts with that last night?”

“Busy myself with thoughts of you every night.”

Miss Baxter entered the hall and sat across from Thomas and Price with her tea. “Mr. Barrow, we both have the same half day this week. I was going to walk to the village to see a picture. Would you like to join me.”

“Do join her, Mr. Barrow. Have a bit of fun.”

“I can answer for myself, you know.”

“What would you have said?” Price asked.

“He would have said ‘no’. Or a very reluctant ‘yes’ after I pushed him,” Miss Baxter answered.

“Will both of you let me speak?”

Price and Miss Baxter stared at Thomas, awaiting his answer.

“Yes, fine. I’ll go. I knew the two of you would start scheming against me.”

“Breakfast soon, David,” Mrs. Hughes said from the door. “Better clean up.”

“Was just finishing, Mrs. Hughes.”

Miss Baxter helped Price put everything away, by which time porridge and toast was served and all were seated. Price’s eyes kept falling on Anna while they ate. Something about her looked different.

Price passed Lady Mary’s suite later that morning and saw Anna cleaning jewelry with a cloth. He poked his head in. “Is everything alright with you?”

“Yes of course, why do you ask?” Anna replied, waving him into the room.

“I can’t put my finger on it. Something seems different.”

Anna smiled. “Maybe you noticed my tightening waistband?”

Price’s cheeks warmed. “Oh, I shouldn’t have bothered you, it’s not my business.”

“No, it’s alright, David. Lady Mary and Mrs. Hughes know, and Mr. Bates of course. And everyone will know soon enough if they haven’t figured it out. I’m four months along already.”

Price clapped his hands together. “How exciting for you both! I won’t tell a soul until you do, I swear it.”

“You’re fond of children, but how do you feel about babies?”

“You’ll have to keep me away from yours, I’ll never want to put him down.”
Anna picked up a new pair of earrings and began working again. “So I’m having a boy now?”

“Have a boy, have a girl, have both. I’ll juggle one on each arm.”

“Oh don’t wish that for me, David,” Anna laughed.

“A whole gaggle of babies! Is that what you call a group of them? A gaggle?”

“Maybe a gurgle? Or a giggle?”

Lady Mary entered her room and stopped at the sight of Price.

“My apologies for being in here, m’lady. I was just stopping to check on Anna.”

“He knows,” Anna said, meeting Lady Mary’s eyes.

“I wasn’t going to ask, it was just nice to finally see you up and about, David. I trust you’re feeling better?”

“Much better, thank you. I should get back downstairs,” Price said, leaving with a quick bow of his head to both women.

“I don’t know if you’ll get him on a horse soon now that he’s had surgery,” Anna told Lady Mary.

Lady Mary held one of the newly cleaned earrings to the window and admired how it sparkled. “I don’t think mother nature would allow it soon, anyhow.”

The weather was as dismal as the day before, and it dragged on that way for the rest of the week. By Thomas’s half day it had let up only slightly, enough that he and Miss Baxter could walk to the village with umbrellas by their sides, their hats and coats providing enough protection from the elements.

“What picture are we seeing?”

Miss Baxter linked her arm through Thomas’s. “There are two playing, I figured we could pick when we got there.”

“I heard there’s one come out with a musical score synched up to the film.”

“Well if it’s showing, that’s the one we’ll see. Do you like music?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“Some do more than others.”

Thomas shrugged. “More than some, I guess. Less than others.”

“Always such a contrarian.”

“That’s my specialty.”

The rain picked up as they passed the farms and Thomas opened his umbrella to cover them both.

“Have you seen your sister recently?”

“Seen, no, but we write frequently and I call her about once a month.”
“That’s so wonderful to hear. You’ve really opened up since David came along.”

Thomas gave a small, bashful smile. “Coincidence.”

“It’s okay, I’m not prying. It’s clear how special he is to you. Clear to me, that is.”

Thomas looked at Miss Baxter but didn’t respond.

“How’s he feeling after his surgery?”

The two finally reached the village, and Thomas walked carefully to avoid leading Miss Baxter into any puddles. “He was like a lion in a zoo the last day in bed. The one who slinks around his cage, but you know he’d bite and claw his way out if given the chance. It worried me a bit, if I’m being honest.”

“How do you mean?”

“In many ways, he’s quite like me, especially when I was his age.”

“You say that as if you’re a generation older.”

“No, but I am older, and wiser for it. If six days makes him that cagey, I worry in five or ten years’ time he’ll be crawling the walls of Downton like I’m doing now. It would break my heart to see him leave, but I can’t help but think he should take his brother’s offer. Work at the family shop. Be in the city, a place full of life and energy just like him.”

“Have you told him as much?”

“Of course, but like I said, he’s quite like me. He doesn’t want to hear it.”

“Is he like you… in other ways?”

Thomas swallowed. “I couldn’t ever confirm what you’re asking. It’s not my place.”

“Sure,” Miss Baxter said, holding Thomas’s arm tighter. “Can you at least tell me your feelings for him, then?”

Thomas wanted to share his feelings for Price with the whole world if he could. “As you said, he’s very special to me.”

“I’m glad to see someone so special to you is so kind in return.”

“I’m glad of it, too.”

“You deserve it.”

“Well I don’t know about that, but it’s quite nice in contrast to past experiences.”

The theatre came into view and Thomas read the marquis. “You know, I don’t know the name of the one I wanted to see.”

“Then let’s let the ticket seller choose for us.”

“A gambling woman. I like that,” Thomas said, closing his umbrella as they approached the booth.

Price always missed Thomas when he was off on his half day, but Eric’s response to his letter
arrived while Thomas was out, and Price thanked the heavens for the timing. He sat in the corner of the servants’ hall, away from the others, to read it.

Dear David,

It was such a nice surprise to receive your letter! Of course I won’t tell Thomas that you wrote to me, you have nothing to fear. In fact, if he finds out we communicated, you can say I wrote to you first. Oh, and I would have opened the letter if it fell into my lap as well, so you have no judgement on my end.

I’m relieved to hear Thomas is doing better, but you’re right, there’s only so much better he’ll ever be while working at Downton. As for my suggestion that he talk to Edith, he wrote that he was too worried his inquiry would get back to the butler, and he would be fired. He said he’s been close to fired before and didn’t want to give any good excuse to let them see him out the door. I found his letter so that I could quote him on that, by the way.

I forget what a challenge it is for him to get to London, so I will take your advice and visit. I can come in a few weeks, I just have some deadlines to meet first. Please call at the number below when you know his half day around that time and I will do whatever I can to come. Do your half days ever align? Could you join us? I want to meet you, especially now.

I have hope that something will work out in his favour. Something besides you, of course.

Talk soon.

Yours,

Eric Weatherbee

Price was glad to have an ally in Eric, and reassured to confirm that he posed no threat, though picturing Eric and Thomas meeting for dinner still made him a little jealous. It would be worth it, however, to know Thomas was enjoying himself.

A letter from Marie had arrived as well.

Dearest David,

If I knew you were ill I would have rushed down. I hope you’ve recovered by the time this letter reaches you. I need to see you and ensure you’re truly on the mend. Telephone and let me know when I can come, and make it soon before I am ill with worry. My sister could watch the little ones, and frankly I would be happy to have a break for the day.

I know your answer, but don’t be too surprised when I ask again if you will come home. We need the help desperately, not that your brother would admit to just how desperate he is.

I gave the children kisses from you just as you asked.

With love,

Marie

I knew I shouldn’t have admitted to being sick, Price thought. He asked Mr. Carson’s permission to use the telephone and called his brother’s house. Marie was in, and practically deafened Price with her excited greeting. She said she would make herself available on his next half day, five days from then, and he gave her instructions for how to find the village pub where they could meet for dinner. He spoke to his niece, and then listened to his nephew babble before reminding Marie that he was working and had to get back. He also had one more request for her, which he asked her to
keep under her hat for now.

“Yes, of course. I won’t say anything,” she said. “But it would please your brother to hear it.”

“It’s just an idea for now. I don’t want to get his hopes up, so please, please keep it between us.”

“I won’t tell, I promise! Anyway, I’m so looking forward to seeing you,” Marie said. Her son began crying in the background. “And looking forward to a day of quiet. See you soon. I love you!”

“I love you, too,” Price said, replacing the receiver. He went up to his rooms to put away his letters, and on the way back downstairs saw Mr. Molesley standing over a chessboard alone in his room.

“Who are you playing against?” Price asked.

Mr. Molesley was startled, and then flustered by the first conversational words Price had spoken since blowing up at him. “I play with a friend, we mail each other moves back and forth. I just got his letter, so I moved his piece, and now I’m considering where to move mine.”

Price let himself into Mr. Molesley’s room and looked at the board. “Which are you?”

“Black.”

“Okay, you tell me the move you’re going to make, and then I’ll tell you if I would have made the same.”

Mr. Molesley eyed Price cautiously, then reviewed the board again. He moved a piece and looked at Price.

“That’s what I would have done, too. You know, you could write down the configuration of your current game with your friend, and then we could start a game, you and I.”

“You want to play chess with me?”

Price stuffed his hands into his trouser pockets. “If you’ll play with me, that is. I’m sorry I yelled at you. That wasn’t the right way to tell you how I felt.”

“It certainly wasn’t,” Mr. Molesley said, finding confidence in the face of Price’s humility.

“I wasn’t considering your feelings. I should have spoken to you like a gentleman. I’d understand if you’d rather just keep to your current game.”

Mr. Molesley’s shoulders rounded. “No, we can play. I accept your apology. Though I must say, being the one person in the house to ever receive your wrath made it especially hurtful.”

“I don’t handle it well when I feel my friends have been wronged. That’s no excuse, but it wasn’t anything personal toward you. You’re my friend now, so that just means no one better cross you,” Price said. He smiled at Mr. Molesley and felt some solace when Mr. Molesley smiled in return.

“I’ll find some paper and write out the board, and then our game can begin. I must warn you, I was known as somewhat of a chessmaster in my younger days,” Mr. Molesley said.

“Well then, I look forward to the challenge.”

Mr. Molesley struck up conversation with Price at supper that evening, though it was less like
conversation and more like a lecture on the history of the modern chess game. Price did his best to feign enthusiasm for the subject matter while avoiding Thomas’s staring eyes.

Thomas stayed behind after supper to roll cigarettes at the table. Price joined him with a sketchbook and colored pencils.

“So, now you’re getting cozy with Molesley?” Thomas asked, shaking tobacco onto paper.

Price sharpened a pencil and started lightly sketching on a clean sheet of paper. “He was in the wrong, and I’d tell him that again, but yelling wasn’t right on my part.”

“Or maybe it’s just that you can’t handle being in someone’s bad books.”

Price looked up from his sketch. “Is it really so bad if I can’t?”

Thomas licked the paper between his fingers. “A thicker skin would do you good. Not everyone is going to like you in life.”

“Not everyone has liked me in my life, but it’s different here. I live here, and hopefully I will for a long time. It’s too hard to live somewhere full of tension.”

“That’s the way I’ve lived and it hasn’t bothered me,” Thomas said, tapping his fresh cigarette on the table before moving onto the next.

Price raised his eyebrows. “Hasn’t it, Thomas?”

“Who hasn’t liked you?” Thomas asked, changing the subject.

“Not many who mattered. My father, for a while. Then I came back from the war and he was just happy to have me alive.”

“Sounds like a large chunk of that story is missing.”

Price sighed, trading his pencil for another, before changing his mind and picking up a third. “I’m going to tell you the story, and I really don’t want to answer questions about it.”

“This I have to hear,” Thomas said, leaning back in his chair. “I’m all ears.”

Price waited for Ellie to collect a forgotten supper dish before speaking. “I was engaged at seventeen to a girl I knew since childhood. At first I thought maybe I was wrong about how I am and if I were with a woman, I could change. But I couldn’t. Obviously. We only kissed, but it was enough to confirm what I already knew about myself. So, before too much wedding planning took place, I called it off. I said I wasn’t in love with her, but that wasn’t convincing to my father because the marriage was practically arranged and love wasn’t a factor. He couldn’t make sense of what happened since she was really a lovely girl, kept asking me what was wrong with her. I finally broke down and exploded, like I do sometimes, and told him no girl would ever be right for me. I lived in the same house with him but we didn’t speak for nearly a year.”

Thomas hadn’t moved a muscle since Price began speaking. He licked his lips and resumed rolling the next cigarette. “I’m sorry, David.”

“Once I got my papers to go to Germany, he came around. Not to say he ever accepted me as I am, but at least we could be father and son again. I’m thankful for that.”

“Does Sam know?”
Price switched pencils again. “Yes. He didn’t understand the distance between me and my father, so my father blurted it over dinner one night.”

“Does he accept you?”

“We never spoke of it again, but he doesn’t seem to hold it against me at least.”

“Well that’s something.”

“What about your sister?”

Thomas nodded. “She does. Now she does.”

Mr. Molesley popped his head into the room. “David, I took my turn. Heading to bed, you can take yours in the morning.”

“Thank you, see you in the morning, Mr. Molesley.”

“He’s the new Daisy in your life,” Thomas smirked. “Though Daisy seems to still be a bit sweet on you despite the gardener.”

“She’s quite cute, if only that were my type. At least I can say I tried. Did you ever try? With a girl?”

“No. I can’t say I have. Though years ago Daisy would have let me.”

Price laughed. “My goodness, has the poor girl ever fallen for someone who would fall in love back?

“I’ve yet to see that happen. What’s that you’re drawing? Is that me?”

Price turned his sketchbook to Thomas. “I’m a little rusty. What do you think?”

“If that’s rusty then I’m never drawing in front of you. I didn’t realize you were an artist.”

“Oh I’d never give myself that title,” Price said, turning the sketchbook around again. “I do love art, though. Which reminds me, I have books of his Lorship’s I have to return. There’s a wealth of books about art in the library, some with incredible illustrations.”

“I’ve read most of the books in that library thrice over, but not the ones about art.”

“You should, art is about history, and you like reading about history.”

“I have plenty to read at the moment. Maybe you could talk about the books you’ve read with your new best friend Molesley.”

Price flipped to a new piece of paper and drew a crude frowning face. “Nevermind, this is a better drawing of you.”

Thomas laughed and tapped his final cigarette on the table. “You forgot one thing,” Thomas said, taking Price’s pencil to draw a cigarette hanging from the face’s sad mouth.

“You’re right about your drawing skills. Don’t quit your day job.”

Price decided drawing would help to lift the cloud the early winter brought down around him, and he had filled up his sketchbook by the time his half day came around. He left early to meet Marie
to buy a new pad and notepaper in the village, but returned with much more after his visit. He arrived back to Downton during the servants’ supper, but didn’t join the others. Thomas watched Price walk by with a large box under his arm and head directly upstairs.

“How was your half day?” Thomas asked from Price’s doorway.

“Good. Come in and shut the door.”

Thomas complied. He sat on Price’s chair as Price stood in front of the box on his dresser.

“Do you want to help me with a project?” Price said, tapping the box.

“That depends on the project.”

Price lifted the box, which jingled as he handed it to Thomas. Thomas opened it and poked around at the contents.

“My brother’s in desperate need of help. I’m not quitting my life for him, but I talked with Marie and it would be helpful if I could refurbish these watches. He can then sell them in his shop, or at least loan them to customers since it’s taking him longer to repair watches then when there was two of them.”

“And what do you need me for?” Thomas asked, running his thumb over the cracked glass of a pocket watch.

“There’s so many here, if you help it will speed up the work, and we can split the money I get for doing it.”

Thomas perked up. “There’s money in it?”

“Well I’m not doing it out of the pure kindness of my heart.”

“I don’t know the first thing about watches,” Thomas said, handing the box back to Price.

“You know more than most would from the start, and I can show you the rest. It’s late tonight, but we can work on some together after supper tomorrow. Plus the family is going away for a little while, there may be more down time and we can get quite a bit done. The more we complete, the more we’ll get paid.”

“So your brother brought these to you today?”

Price poked through the box himself. “No, Marie. She didn’t tell him the watches were coming to me, she said it was someone she found in an advert.”

“Secret watchmaking, how wickedly sinful.”

“I don’t want him to get excited thinking I’m coming home.” Price handed Thomas a wristwatch and a suede pouch of tools. “We’ll start tomorrow.”

“How much money are we talking?” Thomas asked, accepting the items from Price.

“Enough. More than you’re making rolling cigarettes and reading novels in your spare time.”

“I also read newspapers, thank you very much,” Thomas said, kissing Price’s cheek before heading back to his room.
After changing for bed, Thomas opened the latest novel from Eric, but the items from Price kept calling to him. He laid the tools out on his dresser and opened the back of the watch, staying up quite late investigating the gears and springs inside.
Chapter 16

Lord Grantham stood in his silk pajamas holding a telegram loosely in his hand. Mr. Carson ran it up to him as soon as it arrived. He excused Mr. Bates and walked slowly to Lady Grantham’s room. The look on Lord Grantham’s face made Lady Grantham put her book down at once.

“What is it? What’s happened?”

Lord Grantham looked down at the paper in his hands. “You remember my cousin Gil passed away a month ago?”

“Yes, of course I do.”

“And you remember how he had a little girl?”

“Vaguely, yes. I don’t remember ever meeting her, but I recall he had a child.”

Lord Grantham handed the telegram to Lady Grantham. She read it over twice and looked up at him, bewildered. “How can this be? Is it even legal? Did you ever sign anything?”

“No, of course not, I never signed a thing. And I doubt it’s legal, I’ll investigate tomorrow of course. In the meantime time, as the telegram states, they’re already sending her here tomorrow.”

Lady Grantham handed the paper back to Lord Grantham and let her hands fall into her blanketed lap. “I just can’t believe it. How could he leave a little girl to us who we’ve never even met? Surely he had other family who would have taken her? And what of his estate?”

“I don’t know. I know no details other than the short words on this page.”

“It doesn’t even say her name. Do you know it?”

Lord Grantham shook his head. “I don’t think I could have recalled whether he had a boy or girl, in fact. ‘Eight-year-old girl,’ for now, that’s all we know.”

“I’ll prepare Nanny Rebecca in the morning. I wonder if they’re sending a governess with her, or if they’ve left that to us, too.”

“This is temporary until we can find a suitable place for her. He must have named someone other than us, or there’s a grandmother. Uncle. Aunt. Anybody.”

Lady Grantham sank under the sheets and rested her head on her pillow. “Poor creature, on her way to live with strangers after losing her only living parent. What happened to her mother? I don’t remember.”

“The flu, I believe.”

“Just awful. Nothing we can do about it tonight, though. Tuck in, Robert, we’ll need rest to handle things tomorrow.”

The news spread throughout downstairs quickly the next morning. Housemaids rushed to fix up a room near the nursery. The kitchen staff prepared a special basket of food fit for an eight-year-old’s lunch. Price took the bicycle to the village with pence in hand to fetch a teddy bear, per Lady Grantham’s request. The family gathered in the library after all ate a hurried breakfast. The Dowager Countess was driven up to Downton early to join them.
“Granny, do you know anything of this little girl?” Lady Mary asked while bouncing George on her lap. The news made all the young Crawleys want to hold their children near.

“Not more than your father knows from the telegram, I’m afraid. Something must be wrong with the executor’s interpretation of the will. This simply cannot be.”

“I agree,” Lord Grantham said. “But for now, we must welcome this little girl, and make her feel at home until we find her a true home.”

Mr. Carson let himself into the library. “The girl’s car is arriving, your Lordship.”

Staff and family headed out into the cold to greet the child. It took four men, including Thomas, to collect the girl’s numerous pieces of luggage. Mr. Molesley opened the back car door. Two small patent leather-clad feet swung out, followed by a dainty gloved hand. The girl held her hand out for Mr. Molesley to take, which he did while easing her out of the vehicle. In her other arm, she clutched a stuffed rabbit tight to her coat.

Lady Grantham approached the girl first, bending at the waist to see under the brim of the girl’s burgundy-colored wool hat. Two striking little violet eyes looked up into hers, though they gave no hint of emotion.

“Hello there. I’m Lady Grantham. Welcome to our home, Downton Abbey. What’s your name, sweet little girl?”

The girl surveyed the gathered family and staff behind Lady Grantham, then looked up again. “Nora.”

“Isn’t that funny? My name is Cora.”

The girl cocked her head slightly. “Why would that be funny?”

Lady Grantham looked at Lady Edith, who had joined her side, for assistance with what to say next.

“It’s cold out here, isn’t it?” Lady Edith asked Nora with a nervous smile. “Why don’t we go inside?”

Nora walked between the two women, past the servants and family, and entered the house alone.

Anna followed behind the Crawley women. “Let’s get you settled in your room,” Anna said. She led Nora up the main stairs as Ladies Grantham, Mary, and Edith followed.

“May I help you remove your hat and coat?” Anna asked as the men laid the luggage out in Nora’s bedroom.

“Yes,” Nora said flatly, but she didn’t move to assist Anna with removal of either item.

Nora’s thick, wavy brown hair sat loosely on her shoulders once her hat was taken, and beneath her coat was a white and navy dress so well made that it rivaled the quality of any of Lady Mary or Lady Edith’s dresses. She was near pretty as Lady Sybil had been as a child, Lady Grantham thought.

“Does your rabbit have a name?” Lady Mary asked.

“Frank.”
“How… very grown up of him,” Lady Mary replied.

Nora looked dubiously at Lady Mary. “He doesn’t age. He’s an inanimate object.”

The room was quiet. Thomas coughed to stifle a laugh.

Anna smiled. “That’s a very pretty dress you have on.”

“It is compared to a black and boring frock, I suppose,” Nora replied. She stared at Anna until Anna looked away.

“Once you’re settled, we can introduce you to the other children,” Lady Grantham offered.

Nora ignored the offer and approached the vanity. She picked up a brush and ran her fingers across the bristles. She made a face and placed it back on the glass surface harder than was necessary.

“How would you behave if you were in her shoes?” Lord Grantham asked.

“Papa, first, I don’t know that I’ve owned shoes as fine as the ones on her little toes. Second, I have always been respectful of my elders. I think Nora is respectful of no one.”

Thomas followed Price to the kitchen and shared the news from upstairs with the kitchen staff.

“She must be scared and lonely, she’s probably just acting out,” Daisy said.

“I think you’re right, Daisy,” Price said, taking the basket from her and leaving quickly to bring it to Nora’s room.

“He wasn’t in the room with her,” Thomas told Daisy. “Parents or no parents, that is one nasty little brute.”

“I should hope you’re not speaking that way about a child,” Mrs. Hughes said, appearing behind Thomas.

Thomas took a freshly peeled carrot from a pile next to Ellie and bit off a hunk. “Spend two minutes with her and we’ll see what kind of things you say.”

The basket was, of course, unacceptable to Nora and she demanded to eat luncheon with the adults.
“Maybe we should let her, she only just arrived,” Lady Edith suggested in a hushed voice to Lord Grantham.

“It sets a bad precedent,” Lady Mary said. “Plus I already need a break from her.”

“I can eat with her,” Price offered, holding the rejected basket by his side.

“I say go for it, and best of luck to you,” Lady Mary said.

Price knocked on Nora’s door and entered after a length with no response. “I know you don’t want to eat, so I’ll eat for you. Everyone will think you ate lunch and they won’t bother you about it anymore.”

Nora sat on a chair by the window and stared out onto the gray landscape. “I don’t care what you do with it.”

“I better eat it in here or they’ll know it wasn’t you.”

“I said I don’t care.”

Price sat on a chair opposite Nora and placed the basket on the floor between them. He picked out a sandwich wrapped in a cloth napkin and laid it on the flap of the open basket. He took one of the four pieces and left the others.

“Thank you for sharing. This is actually quite good.”

Nora watched Price eat the piece, and then leaned forward. “What’s in it?”

“Ham and cucumber.”

Nora leaned forward further. “Did you touch the other pieces?”

“No, not one bit.”

Nora reached down and picked up the corner opposite the one Price had eaten. She nibbled it while looking out the window.

“There’s an apple in there, too, and a chocolate biscuit. And something else.”

“What else?” Nora said, her eyes darting to Price’s.

“Have a look.”

Nora slinked off of her chair and knelt by the basket. The little button eyes of the teddy looked back at her.

“Where did he come from?”

“I don’t know. I looked inside and there he was. You should give him a name.”

“What’s your name?”

“My name is David.”

Nora pulled the bear from the basket. “I’ll call him David, then, because you found him.”

Price stood. “I’m not really hungry any more, that filled me up. So you’ll have to finish everything
“Alright. You can go, then. Don’t send anyone else in. I only want to eat with Frank and David right now.”

Price stood and bowed to Nora. “I’ll tell the others. You can put the basket outside of the door when you’re finished, and then we’ll all know it’s okay to come back inside.”

Price left and relayed his experience with Nora to the family.

“Are you some kind of wizard?” Lady Mary asked.

“I think she’ll be more open to one-on-one interactions, at least for now,” Price replied.

A half hour later Thomas walked through the gallery, and Nora’s door cracked as he passed. She pushed the basket into the hallway, then looked up at him.

“You can take that, it’s empty,” she told him.

“How kind of you, I’d be honored,” Thomas said, lifting the basket from the floor. He noticed the teddy under her arm as he bent down. “And where did he come from?”

“He was inside the basket.”

“I see. Did he eat the food inside?”

“Teddy bears don’t eat.”

“Right, of course. I’m always forgetting that.”

Nora switched the bear to her other arm. “What an odd thing to forget.”

“So they say. Do you need anything else? Or does Mr. Bear need anything?”

“His name isn’t Mr. Bear,” Nora said, pulling her thin shoulders back. “It’s David.”

Thomas rubbed his lips together to stamp out a smile. “Does David need anything?”

“No.”

“And you?”

“Some water.”

“I’ll send the news that you need water. Goodbye for now, Nora. And goodbye, David.”

Nora backed into her room and shut the door.

“So, David the bear?” Thomas asked during the servants’ tea.

“What’s this?” Mr Carson asked.

“Little Nora named her bear after David,” Thomas informed Mr. Carson, and the rest of the listening table.

“She said since I found the bear, the bear should be named after me.”
“How sweet,” Anna said. “I wasn’t sure she was capable of sweet.”

“I’m shocked at everyone today,” Mrs. Hughes said. “She’s just a little girl.”

Those around the table who met Nora looked down at their teacups.

After tea, Mr. Carson handed out the mail, and several letters arrived for Price. Nothing arrived that day for Thomas, however. He felt his letters from Eric were fewer and farther between, but began to shrug it off, assuming Eric may be going the way all his friends go, eventually.

Mr. Molesley went to his room after the mail call and came back to the servant’s hall. “Bad move on my friend’s part,” he told Price. “Check and mate.”

“You beat me and now him,” Price said while sorting through the pile of letters on his lap. “You really are a chessmaster as you said.”

Mr. Molesley beamed in response.

“You let him win, didn’t you?” Thomas asked once Mr. Molesley was out of hearing range.

Price winked and looked back at his letters.

“Who are all of those from? Do you get fan mail now?”

“Yes. My adoring public.”

Thomas eyed an envelope that was similar in coloring and size to the kind Eric sent. “What about that blue one?”

“My grandmother,” Price said quickly.

“May I see it?”

“May you see a letter my grandmother wrote to me? Before I even open it?”

Something in Price’s tone disquieted Thomas. “Just let me see the envelope.”

“You’re being weird. I’m going upstairs before you get weirder,” Price said, gripping his letters tight as he left the servant’s hall. He locked himself in the bathroom and opened the blue envelope.

Dear David,

I’m being sent to Bombay for a story, the man who was scheduled to go fell ill. I won’t be able to visit Downton as soon as I hoped. I’m thankful neither of us informed Thomas as I would hate for him to be disappointed. I will send him a letter before I leave, and then once I return I will let him know I intend to come see him.

I’m glad Thomas is helping with your brother’s watches, and not surprised at all to hear he’s picking it up quickly. I hope it helps keep his mind busy.

Do wristwatches exist with two faces for two timezones? I would love to have one like that for when I travel.

Yours,

Eric
Price went to his room and stuffed the letter into the bottom of a drawer. He opened the rest of his letters, including one containing payment for the first set of watches he sent to Marie.

Price found Thomas in the stairwell on his way to bring tea to the library. “Come to my room tonight. I got our first payment and I have your half.”

Thomas continued walking, and Price followed. “Who was that letter from, David?”

“Are we still on that? I told you who mailed me. I was coming to talk to you about more important mail from today. You worked so hard, aren’t you pleased to see a pay off so quickly?”

Thomas stopped and looked down at Price. “I’m not pleased at all right now, because I can tell when you’re lying.”

“You say that like I do it so often.”

“Who knows, maybe you do,” Thomas said, walking away from Price swiftly.

Price felt nearly ill over the interaction. He was lying, but felt it was in Thomas's best interest to do so. It would be an hour before he was needed an earnest, and he asked Mr. Carson for permission to go down to the stables. He took some carrots from the kitchen, bundled up, and rode out on the bicycle.

Thomas watched Price ride away and decided he would take the opportunity to see for himself exactly who sent the letter. He entered Price’s room and shut the door. Everything was tidy and put away, no envelopes lay on his dresser. The only things left out were watches mid-repair. He slid a drawer open as quietly as he could and looked under the items in it, and then another drawer, and another, until finally finding the letters from the day’s mail. He picked out the blue envelope with shaking fingers. There was no return address and the address was typewritten instead of written by hand, but it was stamped in London.

Thomas lifted the flap, but the writing was folded inward and he couldn’t tell if the penmanship was familiar without opening it fully. What would Eric be doing writing to Price, anyhow, he wondered. His mouth was dry and he could hear blood rush in his ears. If it wasn’t from Eric, he was blatantly violating Price’s privacy. If it was from Eric, and it wasn’t innocent, it could destroy the only two friendships he had in the world. He put the envelope back where he found it and nearly slammed the drawer in his haste to get out of the room.

The stables were empty of people, only the horses were inside. Price greeted each one with a pat on the nose before reaching Lady Mary’s. “Nice girl,” Price said, stroking the horse's long face. He fed her a carrot and smiled when she licked his hand. It was cold in the stables, and Price eyed an extra blanket in the back of the horse’s stall. He fetched it and added it to the one across her back, then put his head on her side.

The stable doors opened and Price stepped out of the stall to see who was there. Lady Mary was a silhouette until the doors closed behind her. Price raised his hand to remove his hat, but Lady Mary stopped him.

“It’s cold, keep that on,” Lady Mary said, approaching her horse’s stall. “It looks like we had the same idea today,”

“I was looking for a break from people for a bit,” Price admitted.

“Like I said, same idea,” Lady Mary said, running her hand over her horse’s mane.
Price handed Lady Mary a carrot to feed the horse. “A break from a little person, no doubt.”

“Quite. How did you manage to have a pleasant time with her?”

“Imagine you’re eight years old. Your mother passes, and then your father passes, and you’re whisked off to live in a new home with people you’ve never met. It must be overwhelming for her, and she’s being rude as a way to protect herself. That’s why I think one person at a time is a fair approach with her. It’s safer for her to let her guard down.”

Lady Mary accepted another carrot from Price and eyed him thoughtfully. “You’re right. Maybe we should hire you as a governess instead of a footman.”

Price smiled, “If I were born a different sex I think that should have been a good job for me. Will you really hire a governess? I just assumed Nora would be sent to boarding school.”

Lady Mary straightened the blanket Price had laid on the horse. “I don’t think anyone’s thought that far ahead. We’re just trying to make it through the day.”

“I’m happy to help where I can, though keep in mind she’s a child, and she may like me one day and change her mind the next.”

“Is it only children who do that? I can think of many adults who fit the same description.”

“As can I, your Ladyship. Can I help you with anything while I’m here?”

“No, but thank you. It’s nice to see you here. Becoming comfortable around horses?”

“I am,” Price said, tipping his hat to Lady Mary. “And I have you to thank. I should go back before I’m missed. Shall I leave the bicycle for you?”

“No, I don’t mind the walk.”

“I must say, I mind the thought of you walking back in the cold.”

“I can take care of myself, don’t you worry. I’ve survived many a winter here.”

Price considered leaving the bicycle anyway, but worried Lady Mary may find it disrespectful after giving clear direction. He peddled back quickly, and slowed in the courtyard when he saw Thomas having a smoke break. He returned the bicycle to its home and headed for the door.

“You ignoring me?” Thomas called from his spot in the least drafty corner he could find.

“Thought maybe it was the other way ‘round.”

“I suppose the family won’t be going on their trip now that Nora’s descended upon them.”

Price crossed his arms to keep warm. “No, but we won't need that extra time with the watched. You’re picking things up so quickly you shouldn't need much direction from me. Just keep practicing.”

“You don’t have to flatter me, I can accept the help. I trained you, now you can return the favor.”

“So you talked with Nora? You must’ve if she told you about David the Second.”
Thomas squinted as the sun made a rare appearance from behind the sea of clouds. “Not too much, though she didn’t throw me out of her room like the first time.”

“I feel so badly for her.”

Thomas shook his head. “How hard can things be in her life? She has her every need met and every whim catered to. One of her suitcases alone is worth more than my yearly wages.”

“I’m sure she’d trade all of her things to have her family back.”

“Yeah, well, I have no things and no family, so excuse me if I remain unsympathetic.”

Price frowned. “Picking on me earlier, and now you’re being mean about a child. What’s gotten into you today?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Well if it suddenly becomes something, find me and tell me,” Price said as he headed for the door.

The family’s dinner that evening was delayed due to the arrival of the lawyer Lord Grantham had summoned that morning. Thomas took the opportunity to work on a pocket watch he was struggling to repair. He sat on the edge of his bed holding the watch to the light, cursing as his tweezers slipped from a gear for the fourth time in a row.

“Those are bad words,” a little voice said from his doorway.

Thomas looked over his shoulder at Nora. “What’re you doing here? Shouldn’t you be off playing with the other children?”

Nora let herself into Thomas’s room and stood next to him. “They’re not children, they’re practically babies. What kind of games am I supposed to play with babies?”

“Careful what you say,” Thomas warned lightly, “I quite like those babies.”

“What are you doing?” Nora asked, looking at the watch with its exposed gears and springs resting in Thomas’s palm.

“I’m trying to fix this watch. I’m close, but I keep messing up.”

Nora lowered her face to the watch and touched a spring with the tip of her finger. “Is this stuff in all watches?”

“All of them. Clocks, too.” Thomas looked at Nora’s face in the light. “Are your eyes purple?”

Nora looked up. “Are yours gray?”

“Grayish. Blue I suppose. Not as pretty as yours.”

“Pretty is boring, it’s nicer to be smart.”

Thomas laughed. “Well you seem smart, too.”

“I am smart. I know a lot of things.” Nora pointed at Thomas’s head. “Can I touch your hair?”

“My hair?” Thomas asked, sitting up straight. “Why?”
“It looks like lacquer. I want to touch it.”

Thomas leaned forward and Nora ran her fingers from his forehead to his ear.

“Does it feel like you thought?”

“More slippery.”

Thomas laughed again. “Little lady, we better get you back before they send a search party.”

“I don’t want to go back.”

Thomas placed the pocket watch on his nightstand carefully and stood up.

“I don’t want to!” Nora protested, stamping her foot. “I don’t want to play with stupid babies. I don’t want to eat alone. I don’t want to sleep in that big, dark room for adults.” Nora grabbed Thomas’s sleeve. “Can’t you hide me somewhere here?”

“Everyone would be very worried.”

Nora pulled her hand from Thomas’s coat and balled it into a fist. She raised it over the watch, then looked up at Thomas. “I could smash it right now.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because you won’t help me,” Nora replied, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes.

Thomas lowered himself to one knee. “Why do you want my help?”

Nora held her fist above the watch a few moments longer, then slowly lowered it to her side. “My only friends at home are the servants. I thought it would be the same here.”

“Your bunny, was he named for someone at home, like your bear was for David?”

Nora’s face crumpled and she began weeping into her hands. Thomas put his hands on her shoulders.

“It’s not so bad here. You should give the other children a chance, they’re a lot like you. Master George has no father, Sybbie has no mother, Marigold has no parents at all.”

“Everyone’s saying mean things about me,” Nora said through her hands.

“Well, Nora, you weren’t very nice when you arrived.”

Nora pulled Thomas into a hug, resting her head on his shoulder. She cried into his neck, wrapping her arms around him. Thomas lifted her, carrying her to the library where the family was meeting with the lawyer.

“I have a delivery,” Thomas told Mr. Carson, who was standing outside the closed door to the library. Nora lifted her tear-stained face and looked at Mr. Carson.

“They’re meeting with the lawyer now,” Mr. Carson told Thomas. He gave Nora a sympathetic smile.

“I know, but she left her room and found me in mine. I didn’t think bringing her back to her room was the best idea.”
“What can we do for you while the family is in their meeting?” Mr. Carson asked Nora.

“I want to see downstairs. And I would like some biscuits and milk.”

Mr. Carson nodded. “I think we can arrange that. Mr. Barrow, will you take Miss Nora on the tour she requested, and then help find her some biscuits and milk?”

“And I want to eat them downstairs, I don’t want to eat them alone.”

Thomas lowered Nora to the ground and took her hand. “Let’s get going then. And don’t worry. You won’t have to eat them alone,” he said as they headed to the stairs.
Chapter 17

Mr. Carson knew he would find Price awake and completing tasks before the other men. He asked Price to put down the boot polish and come into his office.

“Is everything alright, Mr. Carson?” Price asked, wiping his hands on his apron.

“I should say it is. Lady Mary and Mr. Branson have been reviewing the estate finances and they remembered that we never replaced Sean. We didn’t have to with you on the staff. With some of the savings, I’m pleased to let you know that you have been promoted to first footman. There will be a small increase in your wages to go along with your new title.”

Price smiled radiantly. “I’d shake your hand if I weren’t so dirty. Thank you so much, Mr. Carson.”

“Well I had a say in it, of course, but it was Lady Mary and Mr. Branson who made the decision. I must ask that you not share the news of your raise with the other staff. Some haven’t earned an increase in some time, and I don’t need a line at my door requesting one.”

“Yes, Mr. Carson, I understand. The title alone is an honor.”

At breakfast, after everyone was settled at their places, Mr. Carson shared the news of Price’s promotion. Price received pats on the back and congratulations, but Thomas was noticeably quiet. Price tried to catch his eye, but Thomas kept his eyes averted through the meal.

Price was assigned tasks that kept him busy all morning, running throughout the Abbey without crossing Thomas’s path once. His anxiety climbed as the morning hours wore on wondering why Thomas was silent at breakfast. He finally saw Thomas in the dining room for luncheon table setting, but there were others present, and again Thomas would not look him in the eye.

“What is it?” Price whispered as Thomas looked over a place setting.

“You don’t take a hint, do you? I don’t want to talk to you right now.”

Price waited for Mr. Molesley to walk by and then followed Thomas to the next place setting. “What did I do?”

Thomas held his posture straight and kept working, but his lips were tight. “Don’t make me ask again, David. Give me some space.”

Thomas left the dining room to fetch some dishes from downstairs, and Price followed. He caught up to Thomas just as Thomas reached the bottom landing. Thomas turned on his heel and came face to face with Price.

“Are you deaf today? What part of ‘leave me alone’ is hard for you to understand?”

“Everything was fine yesterday.”

“Then today I hear of your promotion over toast.”

“I thought you’d be happy for me.”

Mr. Molesley pushed through the door above them. He trotted down the steps and stopped on the landing. “Something wrong?” he asked both men.
“No, nothing’s wrong, David’s just letting his promotion go to his head and making some errors today. I’m correcting him.”

“Alright,” Mr. Molesley said, dragging out the word. He descended the rest of the stairs and looked back up at them before disappearing.

“Even he seemed happy for me.”

“Well la-dee-da, David. You know, I’ve never even heard of Mr. Carson giving someone a promotion before they’d been here a year. You haven’t even been a second footman a year.”

“My first days here I told you I wanted to do well here and move up. That’s why I left my old house.”

“So you have your eye on my job, then?”

“No! ‘Course not.”

“You’ve no idea how hard I had to work to get where I am. And tell me - your new job came with a raise, didn’t it?”

Price looked out of the window past Thomas. “No. No, it’s just a title.”

“You’re lying. You’re lying to me again. That’s the same tone I heard in your voice when I asked about the letter.”

“So what if it did come with a raise?” Price asked, looking from the window to his feet. “Have I not earned it? I work hard and I do a good job.” Price lifted his eyes to Thomas, though his face was still downcast.

“Don’t play puppy, David. Not with me.”

Both men looked down as they heard a creak at the bottom of the stairs. “I’m not sure what’s going on up there, but we have a luncheon to serve. Get a move on, gentlemen.”

Thomas huffed through luncheon service and knocked on Mr. Carson’s office door shortly after the dining room was cleared.

“Mr. Carson, may I have a word?”

Mr. Carson leaned back in his desk chair and pressed his fingers together. “What is it, Mr. Barrow?”

Thomas stood on the opposite side of Mr. Carson’s desk, his shoulders straight and head raised. “If there was money in the household budget to give raises, I should have thought those of us who have given many years here would be first to receive it.”

“Why are you talking about raises?”

“I can tell David’s promotion came with one, he didn’t have to say it. Mr. Carson, my wage increases have barely kept up with inflation the past few years. My savings haven’t budged in as much time. I don’t understand why David gets a raise while I get next to nothing year after year.”

“David earned his promotion by going above and beyond, and I wasn’t the only one to take notice.”
Thomas began to feel exasperated, and laughed uncomfortably. “I can’t be expected to work at the pace of a man nearly ten years my junior.”

“I don’t compare you to him, Mr. Barrow. I compare you to the performance I expect from an under-butler. Some days you do the bare minimum just to get by. Now I’m not saying you don’t do your duties well, but you’re not exceeding expectations.”

“I feel like I could save the entire staff and family from certain death and it wouldn’t impress anyone here.”

Mr. Carson leaned forward in his chair and rested his hands on the desk. “Then maybe you’ve been here too long.”

“I see. Maybe you could promote David again tomorrow, give him my position, and I can take his old job as second footman.”

“I suggest you leave my office before you say something you’ll regret.”

Thomas nodded. “Yes, I suppose I should.” He stomped to the servant’s hall and grabbed a newspaper. He settled into a seat by the fire, but was in no mood to read. He sat for half an hour staring at the crackling logs until the servant’s tea shook him from his daze.

Anna announced her pregnancy at tea, and a room full of more congratulations was too much for Thomas. He pushed his cup and plate away, everything barely touched.

“This came for you,” Mr. Carson said, handing Thomas a small orange envelope. Thomas sighed. Eric had typewritten Thomas’s name and address this time, just like the letter he saw in Price’s dresser.

My dear friend,

I have to go to Bombay for a few weeks, but then I’m coming to see you, even if it’s not your half day and I have to throw pebbles at your window and wave to you in the dark. I worry about you, especially because I feel like you don’t write to me as often anymore. I know I’ll feel better just setting eyes on you. I’m bringing a copy of your picture with me so I can look at the face I miss while I’m traveling. I should be back before Christmas.

Yours,
- E

Thomas rubbed his thumb over the handwritten words on the paper, and then went to his room and took Eric’s picture from his suitcase. He had no difficulty or guilty feelings allowing himself thoughts of Eric that afternoon.

Thomas went down to the kitchen feeling quite cheerful and watched Daisy prepare a pudding he’d never seen before. “What is it?” He asked, picking up a piece between his thumb and forefinger.

“I’m not sure what it’s called,” Daisy said. “Or, well, I can’t pronounce it. Something Nora came down and asked for this morning, she knew the recipe by heart. She said she ate them all the time when she lived in India.”

“I didn’t realize she spent time there. Have you tried one?”

“Yes, they’re good. Different flavor and texture, but good.”
Thomas bit off half of the piece between his fingers, then finished the other half and licked his thumb. “They are good, Daisy. May I have another?”

Daisy looked around and smiled. “Just one more.”

“You always let me sneak a piece of pudding. Thank you, Daisy.”

“You’re so jolly now, what’s gotten into you since this morning?”

Thomas took his second piece and chewed a bite. “A nice letter from a friend arrived.”

“A friend? What friend?”

“You don’t know him. Speaking of India, he’s actually on his way to Bombay right now.”

“Really?” Daisy asked, intrigued. She continued forming balls and handed a third to Thomas. “What’s he doing in India?”

“It’s for work.”

“Is he a servant? Traveling with the family?”

Thomas finished the piece Daisy gave him and thought over what she asked. “Yes. That’s why he’s going to India.”

“I wonder why the Lord and Lady never travel there.”

“I don’t know, but keep making these Indian treats and maybe you’ll inspire them to visit.”

Daisy closed her eyes. “Yes, I’m sure, and then they can bring me with them to be their personal traveling cook. It’d be warm and sunny, none a’ this bleak winter nonsense.”

“Pardon me for taking you out of your daydream, but have you seen David? He wasn’t at tea.”

“It’s his half day, he said he’s spending the afternoon helping Nanny with Nora and then going to the pub. Do you want to bring some of the finished… whatever these are… up to the nursery?”

Thomas made up a small plate of the confections and went upstairs. He could hear squeals in the nursery from down the gallery hall. Nanny Rebecca and the younger children were playing Ring Around the Rosie, while Price sat on a chair with Nora on his lap. Nora was reading aloud from a well-worn copy of The Velveteen Rabbit, her own rabbit sitting beside them. Master George broke from his game to run to Thomas for a hug. Thomas lifted him and let him take a piece from the plate.

“Just one,” Thomas said. “One for each of you, and the rest for Nora. What’s that book?” Thomas asked as he put George back on the ground.

“It’s my very favorite, I read it at least once a week.” Nora handed the book to Thomas so he could look through it.

“You’re a good reader.”

“I told you, I’m good at a lot.”

Thomas let Sybbie and Marigold take their pieces and gave the plate to Nora. She jumped off Price’s lap and sat in the corner with the plate.
“What about me? Don’t I get one?” Price asked, his hands on his hips.

Nora ran back and held a piece out for Price, then popped it into her mouth before he could take it. She laughed and held out another, and he bit it from her fingers before she could snatch it away.

“What do they taste like you hoped?” Thomas asked Nora.

“They do. Finally, something edible around here.”

“I need to borrow David for a minute. Can you spare him?”

Nora put her nose in the air. “Fine, but not for long. I want to finish my book properly.”

Price reluctantly rose from his seat and joined Thomas in an alcove down the hall from the nursery. “What have I done now? You asked me to stay away from you and I have.”

Thomas took the orange envelope from his jacket. “This looks strikingly similar to your letter, doesn’t it? I thought I’d come up and give you one more chance to tell the truth.”

Price exhaled through his nose and rocked back on his heels. “It was from Eric. There. Are you happy?”

Thomas put the envelope back in his jacket.

“But we barely wrote, it’s not whatever you’re thinking.”

Thomas smiled coolly. “I don’t care if it’s the most innocent letter ever penned. What do you think you’re doing writing to him?”

“Would it be so bad if he and I were friends?”

Thomas’s eyes widened and the smile left his face. His eyes looked amber colored, reflecting the warm lights in the hall. “Why yes, David, it would, because I didn’t introduce you. I could have at the train in London, and I didn’t.”

“I suppose I introduced myself. I don’t understand why that’s a problem.”

“David, I need you to hear my words for once. Are you listening?”

Price huffed and looked up at Thomas. “Yes.”

“I am allowed to have a life outside of the house that doesn’t include anyone in it, and that means you, too. From the moment you pulled the letter from my hand in the post office you’ve been pushing about him. Stop pushing. I will let you in my life as much as I want, but if you push too hard, I won’t let you in at all.”

Price swallowed. “I just wanted to help. I thought maybe he and I could help you together.”

“Help me with what, exactly?”

“Help you get out of here,” Price whispered.

“Get out of here?”

“You’re so unhappy working here. I wanted to see if he knew of any options for you to work in London.”
Thomas rested his forearm on the wall and leaned closer to Price. “You’re ridiculous, you know that? You live in a fantasy world. I have no skills beyond service, not anymore. What do you think Eric can do for me?”

“I wasn’t sure,” Price said, crossing his arms. “But you’re right. There’s nothing he can do.”

“So you wrote to him, and he can’t help me. What’s your big plan now to get me out of here?”

“You don’t want to hear it.”

Thomas laughed. “You seriously have another scheme?”

“I did, yes. But I see now that you’re not interested. So forget it.”

Thomas tapped his heel on the ground. “Maybe you should worry about yourself and the life you’re leading. Or not leading, as it were. You obsess over art books and history, and you draw better than anyone I’ve known, yet you’ve decided to scramble your way up the service ladder. And do I even have to mention your watchmaking skills? Your brother is handing you a job on a platter, a job where you would answer to noone, and yet the closest you’ll get is sitting in your lonely little room repairing them in secret.”

“You’re the ridiculous one. ‘Answer to noone’? I’d be answering to my little brother. I love him, and I respect that he took the job I wasn’t capable of doing at the time, but I want to make my own life, not live one under him.”

“Then you’ll understand that I want to make my own life, not have my naive little pet devise one for me.”

Price narrowed his eyes. “I’m sorry you think of me that way.”

“And what about your art? What’s your reason for leaving that in the dust.”

“I wouldn’t know the first thing about any of that. I have no training. I have no portfolio. I have no connections.”

“But you have an imagination, so use it. Stop focusing on how you’re going to fix me, and take a look at yourself,” Thomas said, tapping a finger on Price’s chest.

“I concern myself with your life because I care about you.”

“There’s a difference between being concerned and meddling.”

“I’ve listened. Can I tell you what I think now?”

“Pretty sure I can’t stop you. Go ahead,” Thomas said, letting both arms fall to his sides.

“Whatever you tell me, or whatever you tell yourself, I think you still have feelings for him. If the situation were reversed, and he were the one here, there’s no question you’d be with him. I’m yours because I’m convenient.”

“That’s not true.”

“Which part?”

Thomas thought of Eric, and how he could have easily swept him off his feet that afternoon had he walked into Downton instead of entering in the form of a letter. “You need to learn your
boundaries, David, that’s all I’m saying.”

“I understand them clear as crystal now. I’m your naive little pet and I shouldn’t run off my lead.”

“Don’t turn this around on me. I’m not the one going behind your back.”

“I was honest with you about the letter. Now be honest with me about him.”

Thomas let two housemaids walk by before answering. “I would never take up with Eric while I’m with you, but my feelings for him are complicated.”

Price’s shoulders slumped. “I know that. That’s why I push so hard, I suppose. God it hurts actually hearing the words on your lips, though.”

“I can’t say how things would turn out between me and him if they were different. This is my life, and it’s much easier to survive it when I accept my fate and stop worrying about what could have been.”

“That’s so defeatist.”

“Then I suppose I’m defeated.”

Price ran his fingers through his hair and sighed.

“So you won’t write to Eric anymore?”

“You told me not to, so I won’t. I do respect you, despite what you think.”

“You know you’re more than little pet to me.”

“Let’s not do this anymore today. Whatever I may be to you, you mean the world to me. I was wrong to write to him, but I’m not wrong to hope for better things for you.”

“What was your new plan? I want to hear it.”

Price shook his head. “I’m not ready to give up completely, so I’m not telling just yet.” He pulled his jacket straight. “Please go sit with Nora so she can finish her book, I’m really not in the mood now. I’m going to take my broken heart to the pub. You can think I’m being melodramatic if you like.”

“I think I’ve called you enough names today.” Thomas straightened his jacket as well, then headed back to the nursery.

After the family’s dinner, Thomas knocked on Mr. Carson’s office door with a less heavy hand than earlier in the day.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Barrow?” Mr. Carson asked.

“I wanted to come by and apologize.”

Mr. Carson stopped polishing the serving fork in his hand. “I didn’t know you knew the words.”

“I should have waited to be less incensed before coming to your office. Maybe we can talk tomorrow about what I can do to start exceeding your expectations.”

Mr. Carson resumed polishing. He looked at Thomas from under raised eyebrows. “If you’re
serious, I would be willing to have the conversation.”

“I am. Quite serious, Mr. Carson. Thank you.”

Mr. Carson shook his head, processing Thomas’s apology.

“Just one more thing. Everything’s wrapped up early tonight, I hoped maybe I could go out for a couple hours?”

“That’s fine, Mr. Barrow.”

Thomas headed straight for his room and changed into a suit, donned his coat, hat, and scarf, and walked to the pub.

Price sat at a small table in the back of the pub playing cards with Lee. There were two empty glasses on the table and two half full, and the men laughed as Price beat Lee at a hand of the game they were playing.

“That’s about enough for me,” Lee said. He put money on the table to cover his drinks.

“You should stay, there’s so much time left before curfew.”

“I have to start getting the Christmas holly ready for the big house tomorrow, it’ll be time to decorate later this week. I’ll see you around the grounds I’m sure,” Lee said. He swigged the rest of his drink and gave Price a handshake goodbye.

Price gathered the cards from the table and shuffled them, laying out a game of solitaire. He waved to the barmaid for another drink and began his game.

Lee’s empty chair was pulled away from the table and Price looked up to find a lanky figure looming over him.

“Mind if I join you?” Sean Moore asked, tipping his hat to Price.

“I should say I do,” Price said, pulling the chair back to the table with his foot.

“Awe, that’s not very hospitable,” Moore said, pulling the chair out again, falling into the seat. He tossed his hat on the table.

The barmaid dropped off Price’s beer and Moore ordered one for himself.

“He’s not staying,” Price told the woman.

“Ignore what he says and I’ll give you a better tip than he does,” Moore said, grinning at the woman as she walked away. “That was the gardener with you, right? I should have loved to be a gardener. Know what I realized after I was booted outta Downton?”

“No, and I don’t care,” Price said, collecting his cards back into a neat pile.

“I really do belong outside, working with my hands.” Moore held his hands out to Price. They were weatherbeaten and still had a faint tan from a summer and autumn spent outside.

“Then I guess things worked out for you,” Price said flatly.

Moore laughed. The barmaid dropped off his drink and he winked at her, downed it, and asked her for another. “Oh yes, David, everything’s worked out for me. Since I left Downton with no
reference, the only kinds of jobs that’d have me were hard labor or farm labor, so I’m back on the farm. I actually had my eyes on gardener after seeing what kind of work they did at Downton, or at least under-gardener someday, but that’s not in the cards for me now, is it? And I’ve you to thank."

“I didn’t get you kicked out.”

Moore rested his forearms on the table and leaned toward Price. “Is that what you tell yourself so you can sleep through the night?” His blue eyes glimmered. “You ruined my chances of ever working on an estate, David,” Moore said, pronouncing each word sharply.

“I had no idea why you were in trouble.”

Moore leaned back in his chair as the barmaid returned. “I’m not as smart as you, David, but I’m not stupid, neither. You set the whole thing in motion. I know you did, don’t deny it.”

Price drank half his beer in one sip and fidgeted with the glass. “What do you want from me?”

“What I want is to haul off and clobber you, but really I just want to hear that you’re sorry you did this to me.”

“You would have gotten yourself kicked out, anyway.”

Moore laughed again. “I get myself kicked out of everywhere, but at least I do it on my own merit.”

“You said horrible things and made a hideous threat against me, Sean. I really don’t feel that badly that you found yourself without a reference. If you stayed, you would have hurt me or someone else. You promised as much.”

Moore shrugged. “I don’t even remember. Did I threaten you? They were just words, then. I didn’t do anything, now did I?”

“There’s no such thing as ‘just words’ when you say something like that.”

“I guess I’m not surprised you feel justified in your actions. But remember, I never actually did anything to you, yet you humiliated me, and I’ve a black mark on me for life.”

Price tapped the deck of cards on the table. “You tried to push Ellie to be with you, too.”

Moore swigged his drink. “Ah, Ellie. I remember her. Tried, is that what she said? There’s no ‘try’ about it, I succeeded.”

“Always the one to kiss and tell.”

“Oh, David, we did much more than kiss, if you want me to tell.”

“I really, really don’t.”

“Don’t be all high and mighty. You’re the one who first pursued me, if I recall,” Moore said, clinking his glass against Price’s.

“I might have considered asking Mr. Carson to rethink things and write you a letter, but you’ve learned nothing from your experience.”

“I learned something. I learned not to trust a pretty face with hungry lips. He might be holding a knife to stab my back when I turn around. You’re really not the least bit sorry?”
Price swirled the last bit of beer in his glass and drank it. “Guess I’m not. You would be glad to know, though, that you’re just capping off a day where I’ve been made to feel like utter rubbish. You can take that with you.”

“That’s something, at least,” Moore said, rising. He put his hat on and threw down enough money to cover his drinks and Price’s, then nudged his way through the crowd and out the front doors.

Under the front awning, Moore caught sight of Thomas approaching. He put his hands in his coat pocket and sauntered slowly toward Thomas.

“If you’re here for your boyfriend, he’s in the back.”

Thomas wrinkled his nose as if he smelled something foul. “You’re still slithering around the village? I figured all of Downton would have been off limits to you by now.”

“Nah,” Moore said, kicking a pebble out of his way. “No one cares as long as I’m not going after any kind of respectable employment.”

“There’s nothing respectable about you, so that sounds about right.”

“I wonder why I bother you so much. Could it be because I got a taste of David before you had a chance?” Moore’s grin widened when he saw Thomas’s stone expression crack.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I think you do,” Moore said with singsong voice. “Or have you not even had a turn with him yet? Ahh, that’s why you’re upset.” Moore filled his lungs with the cold evening air. “Well if you haven’t, you’re really missing out. He’ll do anything you ask him, just throw in an ‘I love you’ here or there and he’ll bend right over.”

Thomas ground his teeth. “Is that so? Just play with his heart and you can get whatever you want out of him?”

Moore nodded. “That’s about the size of it. Oof, and size, my goodness. He’s a little short but he’s not so small all over, am I right? One of my biggest regrets leaving Downton was losing access to him and his willing body. It never hurts to have a little side piece so close to home, you know?”

“I wouldn’t know, because I’m not a repulsive, misbegotten little bastard.”

“Funny. I heard that’s exactly what you are. What the rest of the staff thinks of you, that is.”

“At least I work with a staff. You work with animals, where you belong. Why don’t you head home and get some rest, I’m sure you have to get up nice and early and milk a cow or bale some hay or whatever a farm slave does.”

“That’s fine, that’s fine, and you can go home to your bed, and rest your head on your pillow knowing I’ve had part of me in just about every part of David. And you know what?” Moore said, walking up to Thomas, their chests nearly touching, “he loved every minute of it.”

Thomas pushed Moore away with both hands. Moore stumbled back, still tipsy from his drinks, and laughed. “That all you got?”

Thomas balled his fist and let it crack across Moore’s cheekbone. He stood panting as Moore hunched over.
Moore touched his long fingers to his cheek, then looked at the blood on the tips of them. “You know what, you enjoy the little tart. I may have to do farm work, but at least I can get it up for a woman. Neither of you deviants can say that.”

“It boggles my mind that you can be so hateful about it while still taking up with a man.”

“I don’t take up with any man, just the girly little ones like David. Does he pant and moan like a lady when he’s with you, too?” Moore mimicked feminine, high pitched moaning, “Oh Thomas, oh Thomas!”

Thomas swung again, hitting Moore across his temple. Other men leaving the bar ran over to them, pulling them apart. Thomas was held by the arms until he stopped resisting.

Price stepped out of the bar and, realizing who was causing the commotion, ran over. He put his hand on Thomas’s arm and stared daggers at Moore.

“Go home, Sean,” Price ordered. Moore yanked his arm back from the man holding it and waved them both off.

Price pulled Thomas along with him and Moore left in the opposite direction. “Are you alright?” he asked, examining Thomas’s face for signs of injury.

“I’m fine, except the damage his face did to my hand.”

Price held Thomas’s hand to his face and tsk’d over his bloody knuckles.

“Did he bother you in the bar?” Thomas asked.

“Not as much as it looks like he bothered you. What were you doing here, anyway?”

Thomas adjusted his hat. “I thought maybe you’d drown your sorrows and repeat the behavior you displayed at your birthday party, only there’d be no one to save you from yourself.”

“Do you really care if there had been no one to save me?”

Thomas stretched his hand, feeling it beginning to swell. “You know I care. I’m sorry I was so hard on you.”

“Don’t feel badly. I brought it all on myself. What was I thinking writing to him, and thinking I could hide it from you?” Price tripped on the road.

“You are a bit squiffy, aren’t you?”

“Only a bit. I could have taken care of myself, but I appreciate you came down to be sure. What did he say that made you take a swing at him?”

“Nothing that would shock you from what you’ve told me. I hate to admit it, but I let him get in my head. Now I’m picturing you with him.”

“Don’t do that or he wins.”

“Well I can’t let him win then, can I?”

Price smiled.

“Really, though, David. How could you be with someone like him? I can be difficult now and then,
but he’s subhuman.”

“I didn’t realize that about him at the time, obviously.”

“Then you should be more careful before you bed somebody next time.”

Price stopped where he stood on the sidewalk. He felt dizzy and hot, and pushed away Thomas’s hand when he reached for him.

“What? You’re more than a little drunk, aren’t you?”

“Thomas! You just made a reference to the ‘next time’ I’m with someone. Someone who isn’t you.”

“Bloody hell, David. I just walloped a man for besmirching your name and you’re going to pick on the next thing I say?”

“You hit him because of me?”

Thomas began walking again. “You can be so obtuse.”

“What things did he say?” Price asked, catching up to Thomas.

“I don’t want to think of it again.”

“Then I won’t ask again,” Price said. As they reached the much less traveled roads by the farms, Price linked his arm through Thomas’s and pulled him close. “Maybe you should stick your hand in some snow before you swell up around your glove.”

“That makes two, you know.”

“Two what?”

“Two gloves that have become bloodied because of you.”

Price was silent and Thomas looked at him. There was a little grin on his face.

“What?”

“I shouldn’t say.”

“What, David?”

Price squeezed Thomas’s arm tighter. “Only that I can afford to buy you several gloves with all my new first footman money.”

Thomas sighed and squeezed Price’s arm in return. “Why? Why do I always fall for the cheeky one?”

……

Thomas burned through two cigarettes anticipating his meeting with Mr. Carson that morning. He put on his most pleasant face, drank a cup of tea, and joined Mr. Carson in his office.

Mr. Carson motioned for Thomas to sit, and then sat in his chair behind his desk. “So, Mr. Barrow. You wanted to talk about your performance.”
“Yes, Mr. Carson, and what I can do better in future.”

“And this was suddenly brought on by David receiving a promotion?”

Thomas adjusted himself in his chair. “Not just that, no. Perhaps I’ve been a bit complacent as under-butler. I’m about as high as I can go, in this house anyway, and so maybe I’ve felt there’s nothing to strive for.”

“In that case, what is it that you want to strive for?”

Thomas’s eyes darted back and forth before settling back on Mr. Carson’s. “Well butler, naturally. I’m under-butler and my next position would be butler.”

“Naturally, would it?”

“Why, what else would I be? I wouldn’t go backward, surely. I’m also a trained valet, but that would be a lateral position at best.”

“Complacent is a good word to describe yourself, only you’ve been complacent in every position you’ve held at Downton.”

“I have to disagree. I put in a great deal of effort and many years to get where I am.”

“You’ve wanted title and position, but the work is third or fourth priority to you. If you were butler, you would have to work much harder than you do today, and you would have much more responsibility. There’s no room for fraternizing.”

“Fraternizing? Doesn’t that require having friends first?”

“You’re missing the point. I’m saying there’s much less free time as butler. You would also need to give orders and be taken seriously when they’re given.”

“I’ve had to give orders here many times, and I work hard when there’s hard work to do,” Thomas said, unable to hide that he was feeling defensive.

Mr. Carson folded his hands and rested them on the desk. “I’ve stuck my neck out for you on many occasions because you are good at your work and you want to succeed. I see it, and so does his Lordship, otherwise you wouldn’t be here. However, I’m not convinced you want to be butler. I think you would become frustrated and overwhelmed, and you would lose your patience and then ultimately lose your job. I’m not saying this to you to be unkind. You seemed to want to have an honest conversation and so I’m being honest.”

“So I’m to be under-butler for life? Thirty or so more years in the same position?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. Mr. Barrow, look at me.”

Thomas looked up, not realizing he had been staring down at the floor. “What are you saying, Mr. Carson?”

“I think you need to stop looking at your career like some game where, one day, you will be the winner, whatever that has meant to you in your mind. If you really do think butler is the next job for you, then why don’t you spend a day handling my tasks?”

“Where would you be?”

“I’d be here to help you, but not direct you. The guest list for dinner tomorrow is short, but if you
should feel overwhelmed, then I’ll step in to help.”

“Why would you do that for me?”

Mr. Carson gave Thomas a small, sympathetic smile. “You think I detest you, but that’s not the case. Maybe I don’t quite understand you, or always have patience for your mischief, but I don’t detest you. You’ve been here a long time, and I would like your next position to be something that truly suits you.”

“But it’s not butler.”

“Well we shall see, starting tomorrow. That is, if you want to give it a try.”

“I would very much like to try,” Thomas said. He stood and Mr. Carson rose as well. “Thank you, Mr. Carson. Your kind words mean more than I can say.”

Mr. Carson stopped Thomas before he could leave. “What happened to your hand?”

Thomas looked down at his knuckles. “Oh, that. I slipped on ice last night.”

“And you braced yourself with your fist? If you want to be butler someday, do try getting into less of that mischief I mentioned.”

Thomas considered arguing, but instead said simply, “Yes, Mr. Carson,” and nodded as he left.
chapter 18

though Thomas had been left in charge numerous times in Mr. Carson’s absence, he was anxious to run the house for the express purpose of demonstrating that he could. He felt agitated after supper and walked the halls of Downton, as the air outside was too frigid for even a smoke break. He made some rounds, tidying objects here and there as he went. In the gallery, he stopped outside of Nora’s room, hearing muffled weeping through the closed door.

Thomas rapped his knuckle against the door, eliciting an obstinate, “Go away!” from inside the room.

“Nora, it’s Mr. Barrow. May I come in?”

After a moment, the knob turned, and as Thomas opened the door, Nora ran back to the bed and covered her head with the blankets.

“Why are you doing that?” Thomas asked, taking a seat in the wooden chair next to her bed.

“I look a fright,” Nora said, her voice muffled.

“I can’t see much with just one little lamp lit.”

Nora threw the blankets off and sat up. Her hair was tousled and wider than her shoulders, and her cheeks and nose were red and wet.

Thomas pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and held it out to Nora. When she didn’t take it, he dabbed her eyes and wiped her nose.

“Did you come here because you heard me wishing for you?”

Thomas tucked his handkerchief back into his pocket and said earnestly, “Of course, how else would I know to knock?”

Nora sighed.

“What’s got you all sniffly tonight?”

“I said ‘go away’ because I thought you were that awful Lady Grantham, though I don’t know how they can even call her Lady. No real lady would come from America.”

“That’s not very kind, Nora.”

“Well she’s not very kind!” Nora cried, punching her thighs with her fists. “She’s sending me away!”

“Sending you away where?” Thomas asked, handing Nora her David bear.
Nora hugged the bear and looked up at Thomas. “A school in France.”

“A school doesn't mean you’re going away forever. You will come back for holidays.”

Nora buried her face in her bear and sobbed, her whole small body shaking.

“Come here, little Lady,” Thomas said, guiding Nora gently by the arm from the bed and onto his lap. She pulled herself into a ball, her legs gathered under her nightgown. “A school will be better than things are here. You won’t have babies to play with, you’ll have other girls your own age. France is a lovely country full of all kinds things to see and learn and do. Why, I’m surprised I didn’t think about school for you. Here it will just be you and a governess all day, and you’re much too smart, you need more than that.”

Nora’s sobbing quieted and her breathing slowed. She tucked her arms into her body and nuzzled closer to Thomas.

“The other girls will hate me.”

“They’ll like you just fine.”

“Nobody likes me.”

“I like you.”

Nora played with the hem of her sleeve. “My papa tried a school for me three separate times, but every time the girls hated me and I had to come home.”

“Did he try a school in France?”

“No, but girls are the same in every country.”

Thomas patted Nora’s shoulder. “Making friends is hard. I can tell you one thing, though. If you come into that school like you came into this house, making friends will be as hard for you in France as it has been everywhere else.”

“I make friends easier with boys than girls, and easier with normal people than snobby people.”

“Is that why you’re friends with me? Because I’m a normal boy?”

Nora giggled. “No, you’re snobby.”

Thomas smiled. “True enough. You know, Nora, we’re just a few weeks from Christmas. If you go to a school now you’d only be there a little while before you came back to celebrate with all of us. This is probably perfect timing to give it a go.”

“Will you still be here when I get back?”

“Where else would I be?”

Nora shrugged. “I just want to make sure I see you for Christmas.”

Thomas lifted Nora and laid her on her bed, sat next to her, and then pulled the blankets up to her shoulders. “You will see me for Christmas.”

“You have to swear.”
Thomas put his hand over his heart. “I swear it.”

“Please stay, just until I fall asleep. I so hate falling asleep alone.”

Thomas sat back in the chair and looked at the nightstand between them. “Shall I read ‘The Velveteen Rabbit’ to you?”

Nora turned on her side and settled into her pillow. “Yes. Yes, please.”

Thomas began reading the book, his voice animated but hushed. Though Nora had read the last parts of it out loud to him, he had been distracted by the other children and paid no attention to the story. After a few pages, he felt he was reading it more to himself than Nora, and after a few more pages, her eyes were closed and her breathing regulated. He continued reading the story silently, his chest feeling tighter and tighter as he read. By the end, he wished his handkerchief wasn’t already soiled, and wiped his eyes with the heel of his gloved hand. He watched Nora sleep for a few minutes until he felt composed, then put the book back on her nightstand and saw himself out of her room.

The next door he knocked on was Price’s.

“Tell me your scheme.”

“I have so many,” Price said as he rubbed a towel on his freshly washed hair.

“You know which one I mean.”

“I was relaxing, can’t we talk tomorrow?”

“I don’t want to go to sleep without knowing.”

Price noticed Thomas’s eyes looked a tad red. He opened his door and motioned for Thomas to come in. Thomas sat in Price’s chair, and Price took two biscuits from a napkin on his dresser and handed one to Thomas.

“Where are these from?” Thomas asked, chewing.

“Daisy made them for me,” Price said, taking a seat on his bed, a half played game of solitaire spread out on the quilt in front of him.

Thomas rolled his eyes. “She doesn’t give up.”

“So what’s the urgency? Why do you need to know right now?”

Thomas finished his biscuit. “I want to know if you have some kind of legitimate idea, if there’s actually something I could hope for. It sounds absurd saying it out loud.”

“You don’t sound absurd. It’s the best thing I’ve heard you say.”

Thomas wiped the crumbs from his hands. “So, out with it then.”

Price chewed his biscuit, looking Thomas in the eye steadily. “The watches we’re fixing. Yes, they help my brother, but that’s not why we’re doing it.”

“Okay…”

“I’m training you.”
Thomas laughed.

“What I told you is true, my brother doesn’t know who’s fixing these watches. He’s been very happy with them, according to Marie. If I told him it was you fixing them, and you wanted the job he’s offered to me, he would take you for it in a heartbeat.” Price finished his biscuit, his eyes still on Thomas’s.

Thomas’s smile faded. “I’m not as good as you.”

“Right, but you’re getting there. Marie says Sam wants help very badly, but he’s too worried about bringing in a stranger to trust with things. You’re not a stranger, and you’re a natural at this. He’d be happy to teach you the rest, I’m sure of it.”

Thomas broke Price’s eye contact. “How would I even get settled in London? I don’t have that kind of money.”

“I thought Eric might have some ideas, but you could probably stay with Sam and Marie until you found something suitable.”

Thomas smiled again, but it was the smile that tended to overcome him when he wasn’t sure what to do with his emotions. “Wouldn’t you miss me?”

“I’d miss you terribly. It hurts to think of it, but not half as much as bearing witness to you be unhappy day in and day out.”

“How would we both work there?”

Price shook his head. “I don’t think he needs two people, and I’m still not keen on working for him, at least not now. It’s different for you, he’s not your little brother.”

Thomas stood and paced the room.

“You don’t have to decide right now or anything, but I am worried he’ll be forced to hire a stranger eventually. Our little project may keep it at bay a few months, but not forever.”

Thomas ran both hands through his hair. “Mr. Carson’s gonna let me run things tomorrow. I’ve run things just about a million times in his absence but he’s trying to help me. I suppose I wanted to make tomorrow easier on myself knowing if there’s something out there for me besides butler.”

“Being butler would be an honor if you decide it’s really what you want, but I have a hard time believing that’s the case. I hope you’ll consider my idea seriously.”

Thomas sat on the bed hip to hip with Price. He kissed Price’s head and inhaled the scent of his damp hair. “I will.”

“Do you swear?”

Thomas laughed. “Not half an hour ago Nora asked me to swear to something while I was sitting next to her on her bed.”

“What did you have to swear to?”

“That I would be here for Christmas. They want to send her to boarding school, and I promised to be here when she came back.”

Price wondered if his comment to Lady Mary about boarding school sparked the decision and felt
a pang of guilt. “Poor dear, bounced from here to there. How was she when you left?”

“I tucked her in, read to her, and she was fast asleep. Do you want to be tucked in?”

Price laughed and smacked Thomas on the thigh with the back of his hand. “Don’t you dare tuck me in unless you’re getting under the covers with me.”

“Is that an invitation?”

“You know you have an open invitation when it comes to my sheets.”

“Is that so?” Thomas ran a finger down Price’s spine, and Price shivered. “How open an invitation?”

“Don’t tease,” Price said, his eyelids heavy and voice low. “It’s been too long and I’ll about explode if you tease me.”

“Who’s teasing?” Thomas asked, kissing Price’s earlobe. “Maybe a quick little something?” he whispered.

Price grinned and closed his eyes, shivering again. “God, yes, I’ll take a quick anything.”

Thomas squeezed Price through his trousers and Price bucked his hips in response. He undid Price’s buttons and zipper quickly and Price shifted his weight so Thomas could pull him out. Price wrapped his hand around Thomas’s and help him pump, pumping faster as Thomas kissed his neck. The room was bright with the light of two lamps and Thomas leaned back enough to watch Price’s face as he became more and more excited.

“I feel selfish, undo your trousers,” Price panted.

“No. I’m enjoying watching your enjoyment.”

Price leaned back on his headboard and took his hand from Thomas’s. He looked down and watched Thomas work, then met Thomas’s eyes. “I love you.”

“Of course you love me while I’m doing this. Here, let me make you love me more,” Thomas said, bending at the waist, taking Price into his mouth.

Price grabbed Thomas’s hair in one hand and the sheets in the other, pressing his lips together to stifle his moans as his climax came on more quickly than he anticipated. Thomas slowed and swallowed, licking Price clean before sitting back up.

Price smiled and let his head rock to the side until it fell on Thomas’s shoulder. “Ok, tuck me in. I can’t manage it myself.”

Before Thomas could speak, there was a knock on the door. Price fastened his trousers, sat up quickly and collected the cards that were now strewn across the bed. Thomas grabbed a watch from Price’s dresser and sat in the chair, leaning over his legs to hide that he was aroused.

“Yes?” Price said, his voice faltering slightly.

Mr. Molesley popped his head in. “I just wanted to make sure everything was alright.”

“Oh my goodness, Mr. Molesley, I’m so sorry. I forgot we were playing games tonight.”

“It’s alright,” Mr. Molesley said, though his hunched shoulders said otherwise.
“It’s not alright. I’ll meet you in your room in just a minute.”

“We can play tomorrow.”

Price put his cards in their box and tossed the box to Mr. Molesley. “No, tonight. Be right there.”

After the door was closed, Price rested against the headboard again. “That was close.”

Thomas shook his head. “I’d give anything for some real privacy with you.”

“Someday, right?”

“What is this watch?” Thomas asked, turning the face to Price.

“It has two timezones for someone who travels.”

Thomas turned the watch back to himself. “Never seen one like it,” he said, rising and placing it back on the dresser.

“They exist, but that one I made.”

“See, I’m not like you, able to make watches from scratch.”

Price stood as well and held Thomas’s hand. “But you could be someday, if you want it.”

Thomas lifted Price’s hand and kissed it. “You make me feel ‘Real’, you know that?”

Price rubbed his thumb over Thomas’s. “Like the rabbit in Nora’s book?”

“Mmm hmm, just like that,” Thomas said, kissing Price’s hand again before turning to leave.

“Wait, one thing about tomorrow,” Price said.

“Yes?”

“Do your best and don’t let yourself get overwhelmed, and if one of the staff members frustrates you, don’t lose your patience. Stop and think how you would respond if they were Master George or Nora, and then speak.”

Thomas looked at the ground as he considered Price’s advice. “Is that how you stay so patient with people?”

Price smiled. “Oh, no. I’m just generally nicer than you are.”

Thomas sighed. “You say that after I was just especially nice to you.”

“I wouldn’t recommend being that kind of nice with the staff tomorrow.”

“I’d certainly need that watchmaking job afterward, wouldn’t I?”

The next morning, Mrs. Hughes announced over breakfast that Mr. Carson was feeling under the weather and Thomas would be in charge for the day. The looks on the faces around the table were as disappointed as Mrs. Hughes’s, but Thomas smiled.

“Don’t look so distraught, I won’t bite,” Thomas said, scanning the group before resuming his meal. He ate his food and drank his coffee quickly, feeling energized about the day ahead.
Miss Baxter sipped her tea and smiled at Thomas. “Mr. Barrow has been in charge before, I’m confident today will go as well as any other.”

“Thank you, Miss Baxter,” Thomas said, taking another piece of toast before offering the platter to Mr. Molesley.

“Oh, thank you,” he said, a bit surprised by the gesture.

“There’s a relatively small party for dinner,” Mrs. Hughes informed Thomas. “Lady Mary has two guests, Lady Edith announced one late yesterday, and Mrs. Crawley will also be joining. I worked out the menu with Lady Grantham but we seem to be out of something Mrs. Patmore needs, so I’ll need to revise it.”

“I can fetch whatever is needed, no need to disappoint Lady Grantham,” Price offered.

Thomas frowned. Price felt like a good luck charm and Thomas didn’t like the thought of him being away for any part of the day.

“I’d say with Mr. Carson unwell it’s best we have all hands on deck,” Mrs. Hughes said, “but thank you for offering.”

At the family’s breakfast, Thomas delivered the news to Lord Grantham that Mr. Carson would be in bed for the day and that he was on duty. Lord Grantham took his eyes from his paper for a moment to remark that he hoped Mr. Carson recovered quickly and thanked Thomas.

“Who is your guest this evening?” Mr. Branson asked Lady Edith.

“My production manager,” Lady Edith replied, cutting into her slice of ham.

“You’re certainly becoming quite friendly with your staff,” Lord Grantham commented over his paper.

“Why shouldn’t I?” Lady Edith rebutted. “They’re all such interesting people.”

“I’ve enjoyed every guest you’ve brought to the table,” Mr. Branson told Lady Edith.

“Of course you would,” Lord Grantham said. Lady Edith and Mr. Branson smiled at one another and began eating.

While cleaning after breakfast, there was a crash in the kitchen and Thomas rushed in to find soapy pieces of a dish strewn on the floor by the sink.

“I lost my grip and the plate slipped,” a hallboy stammered. “I tried to catch myself and I smacked the plate into the side of the sink, and now look at what a mess I made.”

Thomas took a breath in through his nose and recalled Price’s advice the night before. “Did you cut yourself?”

Mrs. Patmore put her spoon down and turned her attention to Thomas.

“No,” the hallboy said. “It’s the plate that’s hurt, not me.”

“Alright, well, let’s clean up and dry the floor so we make sure it’s only the plate that’s in pieces,” Thomas said, squatting down, carefully gathering shards of porcelain into his hand.

“Are you sure that’s Thomas?” Mrs. Patmore whispered to Daisy.
“No, I’m Mr. Barrow,” Thomas said, looking up from the ground.

Mrs. Patmore shook her shoulders and resumed her work.

Slow footmen, clumsy hallboys, giggling housemaids - Thomas spent the day breathing and thinking before speaking with each of them. The control he felt over his mood was more empowering than the control he felt over the staff.

Mrs. Hughes sat back and watched Thomas help a footman with a pair of boots that the man had been just about to destroy with the wrong kind of shoeshine. “I’m not sure what’s come over you, but I dare say it’s impressive to watch,” she told Thomas during the servants’ tea.

“You’ve known me many years, Mrs. Hughes. I hope you’ve seen me grow a bit in all that time.”

“Yes, I should say I have, Mr. Barrow.”

After ringing the dressing gong, Thomas passed Anna in the hall on her way up and his way down. “Mr. Barrow, there seemed in a bit of a panic over something in the dining room. You may want to check it out before you go down.”

Thomas found Mr. Molesley and Price in the dining room, both staring at the table. Thomas stepped up to it and saw what they saw, a hole burned into the tablecloth by a candle that had fallen.

“Why are we staring at it instead of pulling everything from the table, replacing the tablecloth, and putting it all back?”

“That will take forever,” Mr. Molesley said.

“What’s the alternative? Put a flower on it and hope no one asks questions? David, go fetch every hand that can free itself to come help, male or female. Mr. Molesley and I will stay here and start stripping the table.”

Within minutes the dining room was full of staff members. Thomas directed each one in a great shuffling of dishes, utensils, vases, candlesticks, and chairs. When the table was finally clear, Thomas and Mrs. Hughes spread a new tablecloth and the staff descended upon it in another impressive flurry of activity. Five men then measured all the place settings, including Thomas and David. They all stood back and admired their work.

“Thank you, everyone. Now quick, back to whatever you were doing before someone set fire to the table. I don’t care who it was, but someone better stay back and make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“I will,” Price volunteered.

“No, there’s too much for you to do. You do it,” Thomas said, nodding to the hallboy who broke the plate earlier.

The young man straightened his shoulders and nodded. “Yes, sir, Mr. Barrow.”

The group dispersed, and Thomas let out a contented sigh.

Drinks and dinner were uneventful, and when it came time for the servants’ supper, Thomas was a bit disappointed that the day was nearly over.
“I knew you’d do well,” Miss Baxter said across the table.

“Aye, we should’ve all had faith in Mr. Barrow,” Mrs. Hughes agreed.

“You sure should have,” Thomas said, smiling over his water glass.

Mrs. Hughes tskd. “There, I knew we’d have cheek from you before the day was through.”

“Well, I’d hate to disappoint.”

Daisy set down a fresh platter of bread and stopped next to Mrs. Hughes. “If we clean up early tonight, do you mind if I take my supper with the outside staff? It’s Lee’s birthday and I were hoping to join in the celebration.”

“You should ask Mr. Barrow.”

Thomas shrugged. “I don’t mind if you don’t mind, Mrs. Hughes.”

“Thank you both,” Daisy said, running off.

“You’re a little more lenient than Mr. Carson,” Mrs. Hughes said.

Thomas put a cigarette between his lips and flicked his lighter open. “If the worst thing I do today is let Daisy spend her supper with the gardener, I don’t think Mr. Carson will complain much.”

“That depends on Daisy’s intentions.”

“Mr. Carson won’t want to ponder her intentions, now will he?”

Mrs. Hughes chuckled. “You’re right, he most certainly will not. You know, I think that’s the first cigarette I’ve seen you light all day.”

Thomas held the cigarette at arm’s length and looked at it, then put it back in his mouth. “Wow, you’re right. Here I thought I couldn’t survive more than a couple hours without one.”

“A busy body is probably the best thing for you, Mr. Barrow.”

“I keep telling him he’s like me, but he doesn’t listen,” Price interjected. “There’s a reason I’m always running around this place, and it’s not just because I like to help. I think I’d go crazy if I weren’t always occupied.”

Thomas tapped his cigarette on the edge of the ash tray. “Like when you were ill, and the only reason you didn’t throw yourself out your window was because it was locked shut?”

“The cigarette isn’t in your mouth thirty seconds and you’re already cracking wise. Maybe they’re your problem,” Mrs. Hughes said, sipping her wine.

“Not hardly. They’re the solution to my problems.”

“I wonder if Mr. Carson will be well enough tomorrow to return to work,” Mr. Molesley commented.

Mrs. Hughes finished her wine and put her hand up when Thomas offered more. “I stopped by before supper and he seems much better. I’m sure he’ll be back on duty tomorrow. But if he isn’t, we know Mr. Barrow will manage things just fine.”
After supper, Thomas sat in the servants’ hall with a pile of magazines next to him. Price pulled a stool up to Thomas, looking over his shoulder as he read. “What are you reading?”

“Lady Edith’s magazine.”

“Anything in there by Eric?” Price whispered.

Thomas flipped back three pages and pulled the magazine taught between his hands. “I was saving it to read for last, but we can read it now.”

“Read it out loud.”

“What are you, Nora?”

“Fine, I’ll read it out loud,” Price said, grabbing the magazine from Thomas. He read as Thomas rested his head against the back of the chair, closing his eyes as Price settled into a pleasant cadence. The piece was about a recent trip Eric had taken to Italy, and told the story of a village struggling to recover after a drought claimed its olive orchards. Eric captured the emotion of the villagers and the beauty of the land vividly. Towards the end of the piece, Thomas opened his eyes, realizing how odd it was to hear Eric’s words through Price’s voice. He sat up and watched Price read the final sentences, and accepted the magazine from Price when he was done.

“He’s a wonderful writer,” Price observed. “Makes me want to go draw the village he described.”

“Go for it,” Thomas said, folding the magazine. “Draw it and I’ll give it to him when he’s back.”

“Are you looking forward to seeing him?”

“Shouldn’t I?”

“Of course you should. I’m just making conversation.”

Thomas tossed the magazine onto a pile of others. “I know, I’m just tired. I wish tomorrow was my half day instead of Tuesday, I could use the rest.”

“You did a good job today. How do you feel, besides tired?”

Thomas poked through the magazine pile, and finding nothing interesting, lit a cigarette. “It’s just so strange how differently I felt than other times.”

“It’s because people were happy to work with and for you.”

“Maybe I’m supposed to be a butler after all.”

Price stood. “I still disagree. I think you’re meant to have meaningful work that busies your hands and makes you feel challenged. Being a butler won’t do that, after some time. Anyway, I better be off to bed. You should probably head up, too.”

“Oh,” Thomas whispered, tugging Price by the cuff of his shirtsleeve, “who burned the hole in the tablecloth?”

Price leaned down to Thomas’s ear and whispered, “it was me.”

Thomas held the cigarette inches from Price’s sleeve. “Should I return the favor?”

“A hole in the livery may be a worse offense than once in a tablecloth.”
“True. I’ll get you back on a day I’m not in charge.”

The next morning, Mr. Carson called Thomas into his office and said he was pleased with the feedback he received from Mrs. Hughes and asked for Thomas’s thoughts on the day.

Thomas squeezed the back of the chair he stood behind. “It made me pause and realize whatever I do, I need to feel I have a purpose.”

Mr. Carson wasn’t prepared for such a reflective response. “You got that from an average day running Downton?”

“No, things have been coming to a head for me. I needed Downton for the day to see that. You’re right, I spend too much time fraternizing. I’ll be happier if I’m focused.”

“Someone should pinch me, I might be dreaming.”

Thomas smiled. “I’m not a man reborn, just ask Mrs. Hughes. She was rolling her eyes at me over supper.”

“It just so happens I actually wasn’t feeling too well yesterday. It’s quite a comfort knowing I can really trust you these days.”

“Really? Well, then. It’s probably better I didn’t know you were actually ill or I might have mucked things up being nervous.”

“I don’t think you would have,” Mr. Carson said. “Have some confidence in yourself, Mr. Barrow.”

“I do, a bit. Thank you, Mr. Carson.”

Thomas was still in good spirits when his half day came, which he needed in order to face his first visit in years with his brother in law. He set out straight after luncheon service, receiving encouragement from Price on his way out the door.

An hour after Thomas left, the bell for the back door rung. Price volunteered to get it for Mr. Carson, and got half his greeting out before stopping short. The tanned, smiling face under the hat brim was familiar. He stepped out into the cold, shutting the door behind him.

“Hello, I’m looking for Thomas Barrow.”

Price glared up at Eric. “What on earth do you think you’re doing coming here for him?”

“Are you David?” Eric asked, unsure why he was being met with irritation.

“Do you have any idea what kind of trouble you could cause him coming here?” Price was so heated that the cold barely touched him.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” Eric said, still confused.

“What if someone recognized you from your last visit, or god, if Lady Edith decided to make a trip downstairs at this very moment?”

“I came back early and wanted to surprise him. Can you at least get him so that he can do the berating?”

“He’s out, thankfully. You wouldn’t want to see that kind of surprise on his face. Just tell me
where you’re staying and I’ll pass it on when he’s back.”

The door opened behind Price and Mr. Carson appeared in the doorway. “What’s going on? Who’s this?”

Price spoke before Eric could respond. “This is Mr. Weatherbee, a friend of Lady Edith’s. He’s at the back door because he wasn’t sure which door was appropriate when coming by as a surprise.”

“Welcome, Mr. Weatherbee. David, stop keeping him out in the cold. Bring him up to the library and then send for Lady Edith.”

“I was just about to, Mr. Carson,” Price said. He stepped in the house and Eric followed. He led Eric quickly through downstairs, Eric’s eyes darting around absorbing the busy scenes in the halls and rooms. Once they were in the servant’s stairwell, Eric stopped him.

“What are you doing?”

“You left me no choice. You will visit with Lady Edith and tell her you were passing through and were so excited about your trip and what you plan to write that you wanted to tell her in person.”

“What do I do if she asks me to stay for dinner?”

“What do you do? You stay! Don’t look so forlorn, this is your fault. I swear, I better be able to get to Thomas before he sees you.”

Eric put out his hand. “Meet me properly, it won’t help if you’re mad at me.”

Price shook Eric’s outstretched hand. “Only I have met you, I was here when you visited last.”

“You looked familiar, I just assumed it was from hearing about you through Thomas.”

Price climbed the stairs again and Eric followed. “Whatever you do, do not let on for a split second that you know Thomas, no matter how trusting or reasonable you think someone in this house may be, least of all Lady Edith.”

“I know a different Edith than you do.”

Price huffed. “Well you’re not in London, you’re at Downton. Here she’s Lady Edith and he’s Mr. Barrow, and you’ll leave it at that.”

Price practically pushed Eric through the door of the library and told him to wait for Lady Edith.

“I’ll do whatever I can do get out of an offer to stay.”

Price put his hands out. “You’re not listening. It would be very odd that you stopped by for a visit in the afternoon and then turned down an offer for dinner. Whatever she asks of you, you do it.”

“I’m so sorry, David. I really don’t know how these things work.”

“A more obvious statement has never been uttered, but it’s not me you’ll owe an apology.”

“Do you think he’ll be mad?”

Price checked the door to make sure no one was coming. “If he comes back early, he’ll be part of dinner service. He will be humiliated to have to play servant to you like this, but it’s worse if you behave oddly and make someone think you’re here for any reason other than a visit with Lady
Edith. Sit down, wait for her, and do as I told you.”

Eric removed his hat and fixed his hair. “I will, I have no intention of making things worse.”

Price took Eric’s hat and put out his hand for Eric’s coat. “He’s been trying very hard around here, anything you could do to not make things worse would be much appreciated.” Price left with Eric’s articles and without another word.

Eric stood alone in the library and spun around, gazing at the vast volumes of books on the shelves, and then sat on the sofa before thinking better of it and taking a chair. He stood again and put his hands in his pockets, then crossed his arms, then sighed and let his arms fall by his sides. He stood facing the door, wondering how he would survive the rest of the day, let alone rectify the situation.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

I was only going allude to sex in this chapter, but then I thought, the hell with it, I'll share the fantasy in my head with you all.

And there will probably be more in the next chapter because I'm in a sex mood. Sex sex sex.

PS to avoid confusion, no matter what happens, this isn't ending in a relationship between all three men. I won't let Thomas be that greedy!

Lady Edith was pleased but puzzled to see Eric standing in the library. He looked lost in the stately room and relieved to finally set eyes on her.

“Hello, Eric. What a surprise to see you here,” Lady Edith said, kissing Eric's cheek.

“Yes, I must apologize. I thought I’d drop in while I was here and share my trip with you, but now it seems like an imposition.”

“Not at all,” Lady Edith said, sitting on the sofa close to the fire.

Eric sat on the sofa opposite Lady Edith. “Are you sure? I can leave, I really don’t want to put you out.”

“Eric, you’re being silly. I’m glad to have you as a guest again. What are you doing out this way?”

Eric looked at the fire as he considered his response. “I so enjoyed the area when I was here before, I thought I’d spend time in the village before going back to the hustle and bustle of London.” He looked back to Lady Edith to see if his story stuck. He was staying in the village, at least that part wasn’t a lie.

“How many nights?”

“Two.”

“Well you should spend them here.”

Bollocks, Eric thought. “Now that would definitely be an imposition, I couldn’t possibly.”

Price and Mr. Molesley entered the room with trays for tea.

“But you must stay here, I insist,” Lady Edith said as Mr. Molesley poured tea. “I actually get quite a bit bored here and you’d do me a favor of being my guest.”

Price took his post by the door and stared at Eric over Lady Edith’s shoulder.

“How could I say no to that, then?” he said, accepting tea from Mr. Molesley after Lady Edith was given hers.
“Excellent! Do you have your luggage with you?”

“No, it’s already at the inn.”

Lady Edith called Price over. “David, can you please let Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes know that Mr. Weatherbee is staying tonight and tomorrow night, and retrieve Mr. Weatherbee’s bags for him?”

“Oh he doesn’t have to, I can go get them,” Eric offered.

Lady Edith laughed. “Absolutely not.”

Eric took his room key from his inner jacket pocket and handed it to Price. He gave him the details for the inn and his room, only able to make himself meet Price’s eyes briefly during the exchange.

“I don’t have anything appropriate to wear for dinner,” Eric admitted to Lady Edith, stirring his tea.

“That’s not a problem tonight, and we’ll find something for your second night. Just be thankful my grandmother isn’t coming to dinner this evening. She’d probably faint at the sight of you at the table in your suit.”

“Meanwhile I’ve spent the past couple weeks wearing just a shirt and pants and feeling overdressed.”

“Yes, please tell me of your travels. I’m looking forward to hearing what is so exciting that you had to come and tell me straight away.”

Price relayed Lady Edith’s message, and then requested that the chauffeur bring him to the village to expedite his trip. Mr. Carson agreed that there wasn’t time in the afternoon to waste and gave permission.

“He shows up at the back door,” Mr. Carson said to Mrs. Hughes, “and now he’s staying two nights. I hope he’s not planning something improper.”

“Mr. Carson,” Mrs. Hughes replied, “if a man wants to plan something improper with Lady Edith, I don’t think any of us can begrudge her at this point.”

Price asked the chauffeur to drive as fast as he was willing. He felt out of breath, as if he were running to the village rather than going as the passenger in a car. With building frustration, he hoped the bags had somehow spontaneously combusted so that Eric would have to suffer through his stay without his worldly possessions. Instead, the two bags were on the bed as Eric said they would be. Price grabbed them both by the handles, unable to stop himself from picturing Eric and Thomas on the bed together. If he had seen Eric under better circumstances he was sure he wouldn’t be so jealous. It was Eric’s fault he was feeling like this, he thought, as he locked the door and stomped back to the car.

Once back at Downton, Price ran the bags upstairs and saw from the gallery that Eric was playing hide and seek with the children in the main hall. Lady Edith and Lady Mary looked on.

“You’re too tall, I can see you anywhere you hide,” Nora taunted Eric.

“Well this game isn’t a challenge for a small person like you. Me, I have to be creative,” Eric replied.
Price put the two bags in Eric’s room and walked down the main stairs. Nora ran to him, forgetting that she was supposed to be hiding. Eric looked at him apologetically before looking for George under a chair.

“David, have you met Mr. Weatherbee?” Nora asked. “He just came back from one of my very favorite places.”

“Yes, we met when he arrived.”

“Can you play with us?”

“No, I have work to do,” Price said, looking at Eric. “Run along before he finds you and makes you ‘it’.”

Nora squealed and ran off to find a new hiding place, and Price went downstairs.

“What is it with her and men?” Lady Mary whispered to Lady Edith.

“Nora and men?”

Lady Mary played with her necklace. “Yes, she’s taken to every man in the house, even your trim and tanned visitor, yet every time I try to be kind to her she practically bites me.”

“You’re right, I get the same reaction, and mama has gotten even worse. It makes me worry about sending her off to school. If she’s difficult with us I don’t see how it will be easier for them.”

Mr. Branson joined the ladies and watched Sybbie run with the others.

“Tom, how is Nora with you?” Lady Mary asked.

“Much better than she is with you, from what I’ve witnessed.”

“If she does go to school,” Lady Edith said, “it would be nice to send her off on better terms.”

“Give her a carrot,” Mr. Branson suggested. “Something to make her like and trust you.”

“Like what?” Lady Mary asked, not sure there was anything Nora would ever like.

“I know,” Lady Edith said with a little grin. She called the children over, and the game stopped as the four children lined up in front of the three adults. Eric watched from a distance. “You, too,” Lady Edith said, waving him over. “I have a question for Nora.”

“Yes?” Nora asked, irritated that her game was stopped and that Lady Edith might ask a favor.

“I was wondering, since you haven’t had a chance to discuss much of Mr. Weatherbee’s travels with him, if you would like to join the adults in the drawing room while we have drinks before dinner.”

Nora rocked back and forth on her feet. “Do you mean it?”

“She does, we would love to have you,” Mr. Branson replied.

Nora jumped and clapped her hands together. “Oh, I would love that! I would love it so much! I know just what I will wear. I’m sorry, Mr. Weatherbee, but I can’t finish our game. I have to go make preparations for this evening.”
“I completely understand and expect you will be much better dressed than I will be,” Eric said, giving Lady Edith a smile.

Nora ran up the stairs and Lady Mary shook her head. “Now she’ll want to be with us every night before dinner. Thank you, Edith.”

“Then you better hope she takes a liking to France,” Mr. Branson teased.

“So,” Lady Mary said, her voice brighter, “does my sister have more entertaining plans for you besides playing with the children?”

“That’s all my fault, I volunteered,” Eric said, putting both hands over his heart.

“It’s warmed up a bit, we could walk the grounds,” Lady Edith offered.

Eric shrugged and smiled. “I’ve been so insanely busy and hurried, I’m very happy to stay in and relax.”

“Will the two of you be off relaxing somewhere together?” Lady Mary asked.

Lady Edith returned Lady Mary’s small, sarcastic smile. “As an employer and employee, no, we will not be off relaxing somewhere together.”

Mr. Branson gave Lady Mary a hard look.

Nanny Rebecca arrived to take the children back upstairs and Lady Mary followed, happy for the excuse to leave.

Mr. Branson shared a few friendly words of conversation with Eric, and Eric remembered him from Thomas’s letters. Though Thomas never spoke well of Mr. Branson’s position in the family, Eric thought it should give Thomas some hope that there could be better things for him, too.

Downstairs, Price kept his eyes peeled for Thomas, aware of every door opening and closing and every man taller than himself who passed through his peripheral vision. He joined the kitchen staff and offered to help peel parsnips so that he’d have a better view of the back door.

“You seem jumpy,” Daisy observed.

“At some point today, if you see Mr. Barrow before I do, can you send him my way please?”

“Isn’t he out for his half day? I shouldn’t expect he’d be back so soon.”

“I know. Just if you see him.”

“Why?” Daisy asked, her lip curled.

“I have a message for him, that’s all.”

Daisy took a towel from a large bowl and plopped a ball of dough onto the countertop. She kneaded it and made the same sour face. “David, if you don’t mind my saying, I don’t really understand why you’re friends with Mr. Barrow. You’re such a nice person, and he’s not very nice.”

“I do mind your saying,” Price replied. “I know you say it with good intentions, but I do mind.”

“What do you like about him?” Daisy asked.
“You liked him once,” Mrs. Patmore interrupted. “What was it you liked back then?”

Daisy looked up at the ceiling, thinking back many years. “Well he was quite handsome then,” she said, smiling.

“That’s probably not why David likes him,” Ellie interjected.

“Well that’s what I mean. Besides that, what is there to like?”

“You’ve known him so long and you can’t think of one other redeeming quality besides his appearance?” Price asked, looking from his parsnip to Daisy.

Daisy flushed. “He’s funny. And a good dancer.”

Price smiled. “Is he, now?”

“Quite good,” Daisy said.

“Daisy wanted to do all kinds of dancing with him back then,” Mrs. Patmore added.

“You stop it,” Daisy said, laughing.

Mr. Carson entered the kitchen and Price put down his peeler. “David, I need you to help set the dining room. There’s only one guest this evening, not that he has the appropriate attire.”

“You don’t approve of tall, dark, and handsome?” Mrs. Patmore asked.

“Not when he shows up without a tall, dark tuxedo,” Mr. Carson replied.

“I agree, Mr. Carson,” Price said as he hung up his apron. “It’s quite thoughtless behavior. Tall, dark, and daft.”

“I kind of enjoy it when he says something snarky,” Ellie said once Mr. Carson and Price had left.

Daisy smiled. “I enjoy when he says much of anything.”

“Don’t let Lee hear you say that,” Mrs. Patmore said.

“What? He knows I like him, but he knows David’s a lot more handsome.”

Ellie giggled. “No one’s gonna measure up to David in your eyes.”

Eric was taken from Lady Edith’s company so that Mr. Bates could fit him in a tuxedo for dinner for his second night.

“I’m causing so much commotion,” Eric said as Mr. Bates measured his arm.

“Sometimes this house could use some commotion. Lady Edith seems happy to have you, I wouldn’t worry.”

“I’m so ignorant of how things work in a place like this, plus I’m used to such a different Edith. It’s hard to reconcile the two.”

“What is the Lady Edith you know like?” Mr. Bates asked, measuring Eric’s chest circumference.

Eric laughed. “Well, I know just Edith, not Lady Edith. She’s authoritative but friendly, firm but courteous, focused but patient.”
“You sound like you quite admire her.”

Eric stood up straight so that Mr. Bates could measure his inseam. “Admire has a few connotations. I should say I respect her.”

Mr. Bates smiled. “I forgot momentarily that you work for her.”

“I’m not always the most professional person. It’s probably my surroundings that are keeping my commentary in check.”

Mr. Bates rose carefully from his bended knee. “Everyone walks a fine line here, why should you be any different? I’ll have your measurements to the tailor and we’ll have something for you tomorrow. When you visit in the future, we’ll be able to pull something together for you even more quickly.”

“Thank you so much, Mr. Bates. I appreciate your help.” Yet another person who doesn’t seem as bad as Thomas said, Eric thought.

There was a knock on the door shortly after Mr. Bates left, and Eric opened it expecting to find Lady Edith, but instead found Price.

“Are you behaving?”

Eric smiled. “My word, I sure got off on the wrong foot with you.”

“You look amused. Don’t be.”

“Thomas may be upset at first but he’ll get over it. Can’t we try and make the best out of this situation?”

“How on earth could we do that?”

“We’re all under one roof together, I’m sure we can think of something entertaining over the next day and a half.”

Price’s eyes narrowed. “Under one roof? I’m not even supposed to speak to you.”

The amusement on Eric’s face vanished. “What does that mean?”

“Thomas doesn’t want his worlds entangled. You represent his life outside of here, and I’m his life inside here. Never the twain shall meet.”

“Did he ask you not to talk to me?”

“More like he ordered me not to talk to you.”

“David, he can’t do that.”

Price frowned. “He can do that. You’re his friend, not mine, and he can decide what kind of interaction I have with you.”

“That’s not how friendship works.”

“Thomas isn’t exactly fluent in friendship.”

Eric held Price by the shoulders. “I adore Thomas, but don’t you ever let someone dictate who you
can and cannot be friends with.”

Price stiffened but didn’t pull away. “I’m just trying to respect his boundaries.”

“And my hands on your shoulders in a closed room probably isn’t helping with that.”

Price nodded.

Eric let go. “My mission is to ensure we’re all friends before I leave.”

“Aye, I wish you good luck with that.”

“I will be successful.”

Price’s expression softened. “It would be quite nice if you were.”

“Help me, if you can find a way.”

“If I can, I’ll try.”

Eric watched Price leave and pushed his wavy hair from his forehead, letting out a long sigh before heading downstairs to find Lady Edith.

At the bottom of the stairs, Mr. Carson raised the mallet to the dressing gong. “The family is about to be summoned to dress for dinner,” Mr. Carson told Eric.

“Oh, alright. Thank you. Mr. Bates fitted me, so at least I’ll have something appropriate to change into tomorrow night.”

Mr. Carson rang the gong. “Is there anything we can get for you while the family is dressing, Mr. Weatherbee?”

“No, thank you. Actually, is there somewhere I could make a telephone call?”

“There is a telephone up here, otherwise you could use the one in my office if you require privacy.”

“The telephone up here is fine, if you could point me in the right direction.”

Mr. Carson guided Eric to the telephone, then checked on the dining room before going down to the kitchen. “Now Nora is to be delivered to the drawing room before dinner,” Mr. Carson told Mrs. Hughes. “Lady Edith wants her to have some time to chat with our guest about his travels. Can you imagine, a child joining the adults during their drinks?”

“A child in the drawing room, a suit at the dining table; Mr. Carson, do you think you’ll be able to survive it all?”

“Just barely,” Mr. Carson replied, not sensing Mrs. Hughes’s sarcasm.

Price stopped Anna in the hall and asked her to be on the lookout for Thomas.

“Is anything the matter?” she asked.

“Nothing major, but I really do need to grab him soon as he’s back.”

“You look quite flustered.”

“I’ll be alright.”
“I keep forgetting to ask you. Why don’t you come down to the cottage tomorrow morning and see what we’ve done with the nursery?”

“I’d love to, I can’t wait to see how it’s coming along. I’ll come bright and early.”

Once the family was dressed for dinner, Mr. Molesley led Eric to the drawing room. Lady Edith introduced him to the Lord and Lady, informing them that he had stayed before when several of her journalists visited.

“He’s already apologized profusely for his attire, but I’m the one who asked him to stay when he wasn’t prepared,” Lady Edith advised.

“I heard about that from Mr. Bates,” Lord Grantham replied. “There are much more serious offenses at a dinner table than a suit.”

“We may seem old fashioned,” Lady Grantham told Eric, “but we are a modern family in many ways.”

“I can tell that from what I know of Edith. Lady Edith, beg your pardon.”

Nanny Rebecca brought Nora to the drawing room. Nora’s hair was neatly styled into two french braids care of Anna, and her dress nearly classified as a gown with all of its beading and embroidery. A small jeweled comb was set into the side of her hair, something her mother always let her wear for special evenings.

Lady Grantham greeted Nora at the door. “My goodness, you look absolutely darling.”

“Thank you,” Nora replied, looking at Nanny Rebecca, who nodded as though the two had rehearsed the words “thank you” all afternoon.

“Thank you, Nanny Rebecca,” Lady Grantham said, taking Nora by the hand. She brought Nora to Eric. “I heard you are really Nora’s guest while we have drinks, not Lady Edith’s.”

Eric nodded. “Well, Nora, you’re really putting me to shame in that ensemble.”

Price and Mr. Molesley carried trays with the first round of wine. Eric took his and waited for Lady Edith to take a sip before taking one himself.

“Juice for you,” Price said, offering Nora her own crystal goblet.

Lady Edith mouthed “thank you” to Price as Nora took her glass from his tray.

Nora took Eric’s hand and pulled him to a settee. She jumped up onto it and smoothed her dress, and as soon as Eric sat, she began unloading questions she had bulleted in her head throughout the afternoon.

Eric’s smile grew as they talked. Eventually he turned the conversation to France, filling Nora’s head with tales of his travels across the country.

When it was time for dinner, Nora said goodnight to Eric, and then stood in front of Lady Grantham. “I will give France a try.”

“I’m very glad to hear that,” Lady Grantham said.

“Thank you for inviting me,” Nora said to Lady Edith.
“You’re most welcome.”

“And thank you for allowing it,” Nora said to Lady Mary.

“Oh,” Lady Mary said, startled. “I don’t think I had a choice.”

“You did, and you let me come.”

“Then I suppose you’re welcome” Lady Mary said, forcing a smile.

The wine and unconventional drinking company relaxed Eric a bit, and he felt almost comfortable at the dinner table. The conversation flowed easily, especially with Mr. Branson, who seemed quite entertained by Eric.

Price was still anxious anticipating Thomas’s arrival, but he kept himself composed during dinner service.

“Still not back,” Daisy reported when Price came down collect trays for dessert.

As soon as dessert was served and Price was back on duty in the dining room, the back door opened.

“David’s been on the lookout for you practically since you left,” Daisy told Thomas.

“Everything alright?” Thomas asked, rubbing his hands together to warm up from his walk back from the train.

“He didn’t say. Will you be joining the staff for supper.”

“I already ate. Can you let David know I’ll be in my room?”

Thomas took a cup of hot water and headed to the dorms, passing Anna on his way.

“David is looking for you,” she told him.

“Did he put everyone on alert?”

“I think maybe just about,” Anna said, smiling.

“And you don’t know what it’s for?”

“No, only that he’s looked preoccupied for hours.”

Thomas took off his hat, coat, and scarf. He held the cup in his hands to warm up, blowing on the water, watching little rings form and dance in the wake of his breath. Dinner with his sister’s family had gone well, but he was tired from the trip back and forth and the emotion spent while visiting. It was a relief to finally know he could visit the entire family without incident. Once feeling returned to his hands, he picked up a book Price had lent him and began reading.

Price finally arrived in Thomas’s doorway, closing the door behind him.

“It sounds like you arranged some kind of search party to find me,” Thomas said, rising to greet Price.

Price took Thomas’s hands in his and stood up straight. “Ready?”
“Probably not, but go ahead.”

Price took a deep breath. “Let me say everything I need to say. Then I will say, ‘I’m done’ and then you can speak.”

“Blimey, David, just spit it out.”

“Eric came to visit you as a surprise. He came to the back, and I tried to send him off, but Mr. Carson came to the door, and so I had to say that he was here to visit Lady Edith. Then I brought him to Lady Edith, and she asked him to stay. For two nights. And so now he’s here. They just finished dinner. Please stop squeezing my hands so hard. I’m done.”

Thomas hadn’t breathed while Price spoke.

“My face looked a lot like yours does right now,” Price added.

Thomas let go of Price’s hands and sat on his bed. He picked up the book and threw it at the wall.

Price sat next to Thomas and touched his arm.

Thomas flinched at his touch. “Two nights?” he asked, his voice cracking.

“I couldn’t send him away once Mr. Carson saw him. What if he recognized him, or someone else did?”

“Of course you bloody well couldn’t send him off after that. What is he, soft in the head? What kind of plan is it to show up here looking for me?”

“The good news is that no one knows he was looking for you. They all think he was coming to report his trip to Lady Edith. It’s actually going smoothly, believe it or not.”

“I don’t believe it,” Thomas said, wishing the book wasn’t already across the room so that he could throw it again. “Where is he now?”

“Everyone went upstairs. He’s probably in his room.”

“Well I can’t go now. I’ll go around one, everyone should be asleep then.”

“What will you say?”

“I have nothing to say. I’m just going to hold a pillow over his head until he passes out or passes away.”

Price laughed.

“I’m not joking.”

“I was angry for hours, but it’s not as bad as all that. It may even help your friendship, he’ll actually know a little of all the people here.”

“You know how I feel about that kind of thing.”

“I do,” Price said, rubbing Thomas’s back. “I promise it will be alright,” he added, kissing Thomas’s cheek.

“What makes you so sure?”
“He’s right here and you can find a way to see him. Probably spend more time than if he had stayed in the village.”

“You’re taking this pretty well.”

“I’ve had time to process it. Trust me, your puppy acted like a bit of a guard dog at first. I owe him an apology.”

“You owe nothing of the sort,” Thomas said, holding Price’s hand.

“How was your visit with your sister?”

“Better than I hoped. Her children are so grown up, I still can’t believe it.”

“Did they remember you?”

Thomas smiled. “Yes. In all the time I didn’t see them, my sister and her husband only ever told them kind things about me.”

“That’s wonderful. Stay in that happy mood when you head up to find Eric.”

By one in the morning, Thomas hadn’t calmed down as much as Price had, but he was ready to talk rather than throw things. Price played lookout in the gallery so that Thomas could knock. As soon as Thomas’s hand was up to the door, Price hurried back to his room.

Thomas had stayed in his suit, but Eric was in his undershirt and pajama bottoms.

“I would’ve stayed dressed, but half an hour ago I gave up on you coming.”

Thomas gave Eric a cold smile. “I couldn’t waltz up here while everyone was awake, now could I?”

“Whatever angry words you have, you should know that I’ve heard them all at least once from David.”

“Well he’s not stupid, he knows what a predicament you put me in by coming here.”

“And I am stupid, is that what you’re saying?”

“You said it, not me.”

Eric gave Thomas a conciliatory smile. “I only wanted to see you. I’ve missed you so much, and I’ve been so worried,” he said, stepping closer to Thomas. “I think about you all the time.”

“That’s no excuse for barging into my life like this,” Thomas said, his voice still hard. He was touched by Eric’s words, but refused to show it.

“I know I screwed up. I’m sorry. Very sorry. Let me handle it, I’ll make it up to you.”

“I’m not the only one you have to make it up to, you dragged David into this.”

“I think he and I are alright now, but yes, I plan to make it up to him, too.”

Thomas’s voice quavered. “So you and he are chums now, aye?”

“Since you mention it, he was very uncomfortable talking to me at first, and it turns out you told
him he wasn't allowed. Thomas, you can’t say things like that to him.”

“Why yes, yes I can.”

“No, you can’t, because you have no right. I’m not your possession, nor is he.”

Thomas crossed his arms. “You come here uninvited and now you’re gonna lecture me?”

Eric nodded. “Yes, I guess I am. I seemed to make him nervous when I was really hoping we could all be friends.”

“I can see why you’d make him nervous. I’d be nervous if I were him.”

“That’s an odd thing to say.”

“It’s not.” Thomas’s face fell and he turned his shoulders away from Eric. “I care about you, and if we weren’t so far apart, well, maybe things would have been different between you and I.”

“Thomas, I have a theory about that.” Eric walked to the bed and sat on the edge facing the fireplace, patting the spot next to him. “Sit with me.”

Thomas walked slowly to the bed and sat down. Eric took Thomas’s hand and held it between both of his. “The night I met you, I was drawn to you, and it wasn’t for friendship. I could have spent days on end worshiping your body before either my knob fell off or I died of dehydration.”

Thomas laughed despite himself.

“Really! I turned you into a fantasy of the prim and proper under-butler letting me cater to his needs. That’s still what I wanted when I first wrote to you, but eventually I started seeing you differently through our letters. It was the distance that made me realize you are so much more than a fantasy object. If things were different, and I was here, I may have never seen who you really are and we’d have no lasting friendship. Just an affair that would probably die off because there would be nothing to sustain it.” Eric patted Thomas’s hand. “Compare that to David. It sounds like he figured out with lightening speed that you’re a very special person.”

“I think you’re both crazy for thinking I’m anything special.”

“If I’m crazy then at least I’m in good company.”

“Where did you and he leave things?”

Eric massaged Thomas’s hand. “I told him I’d do what I could to make sure we were all friends before I left. If I can’t do that, at least let’s not be enemies. What say you?”

“We’re not enemies.”

“And you won’t try and stop me from being his friend?”

Thomas spread his fingers so Eric could rub between them. “I don’t want this friendship between you two to turn into something more.”

“How silly. Thomas, you have nothing to fear, and at the end of the day you’re both here and I’m not.”

Thomas looked at the fire rather than Eric. “For now, at least. He wants me to take a job working at his brother’s watchmaking shop.”
“Where? Is it in London?”

“Yes, it’s in London.”

Eric shifted himself closer to Thomas. “Is this a serious offer?”

“There’s no offer, it’s an idea he dreamed up.”

“Then is it a serious idea?”

“You could call it that.”

“Are you considering it?”

“I swore to him that I would.”

Eric blinked. “How incredible would that be? Especially for me, having you so close by. I could run off and kiss him right now.”

“As if I need to think about you kissing him.”

Eric chuckled. “It would be a platonic kiss, but if we’re talking kisses, let’s call a spade a spade. He’s gorgeous. As the one who has access to him daily, I’m surprised you haven’t died from sex-related exhaustion.”

Thomas met Eric’s eyes. “You still don’t really get it about my life. David and I can’t even be intimate in our own beds without fear of noisy springs giving us away.”

Eric squeezed Thomas’s hand. “Not all intimate moments are easy for me, either, but I don’t have that kind of concern. I’m sorry that you do.”

“I still can’t get over you. ‘Worshiping your body until my knob falls off’. Are you sure you’re a professional writer? What kind of prose is that?”

“The true kind. I still find you painfully arousing.”

Thomas raised his eyebrows. “Painfully?”

“Painfully, yes,” Eric smiled, letting his hand travel from Thomas’s hand to his wrist. “Maybe you should escape from my clutches before I can’t help myself from doing something about it.”

“You exaggerate.”

“Don’t forget, I’m the type of man who had my trousers off within hours of meeting you, and was on my knees within minutes the second time. Surely you know I’m not exaggerating.”

“I don’t forget,” Thomas said, running his free hand through Eric’s hair.

Eric wet his lips and rubbed Thomas’s wrist with his thumb. “I accept the reality of our situation, but only when my head's clear.”

“Clear from what?”

“Wicked thoughts.”

“Ooh, ‘wicked thoughts’,” Thomas whispered. “Thoughts like what?”
“Like you bending me over the arm of that chair right there.”

“Naughty tease.”

Eric laughed, then groaned again. “Get out.”

“I can’t, you’re still holding my wrist.”

“I want to hold more than your wrist.”

Thomas looked down. “I see that, Mr. Pajama Bottoms. They don’t hide much.”

Eric crossed his legs. “Stop looking.”

“But I love looking at you,” Thomas said, his eyes still on Eric’s crotch.

Eric grabbed Thomas’s face and kissed his lips, then stood and walked to the door. “Out of here before I put my lips on every other part of you. See me tomorrow when my head is clear.”

Thomas joined Eric by the door. “That’s not a very convincing argument to make me leave.”

“Tell me before you go, are you through being mad at me?”

Thomas played with the two buttons at the top of Eric’s undershirt, then ran a finger down Eric’s neck, tracing the muscles where his throat met his chest. “I’m only a little mad. Now you tell me, how can such a small bit of skin be so alluring?”

Eric sighed. “This is incredibly mean, you realize that?”

“Well, I needed to get my revenge for your visit somehow, didn’t I?”

Eric batted Thomas’s hand away. “I have a gift for you and David as an apology for this whole ordeal. It was already in the works but it seems even more appropriate now.”

Thomas grinned. “Don’t keep me in suspense.”

“Oh, I’m keeping you in suspense. What I can tell you is that I will hand David this gift during dinner tomorrow night, and you have to go along with it.”

“This sounds dangerous.”

“No, no, no. It’s glorious, as long as you play along.”

“You can’t help causing trouble, can you?”

“If you don’t leave right now, we’ll both be in trouble.”

Thomas sighed. “You may be right. I’ll see you at breakfast.”

Thomas walked quickly back to the dorms, eager to get out of his trousers and under his covers. Price’s door opened before he reached his own.

“I’m fine,” Thomas whispered. “Go to sleep.”

“Come in here,” Price whispered back. “I still owe you for... your help with my game of solitaire the other night. It’s your turn.”
Thomas crept to Price’s door. “Just a quick hand, eh?”

“Quick as you like.”

Thomas slid into Price’s room but kept his voice to a whisper. “Why are you offering me a ‘card game’?”

Price smiled seductively. “I thought maybe you could use one. Could you?”

“Desperately.”

“Then that’s all the reason I need,” Price said, studying Thomas’s face. “It seems like things went well?”

Thomas swallowed. “Yes. Yes, it went well.”

“You look distracted.”

“You’re distracting me. I want that card game.”

Price switched off the light and skipped all attempts at romance, dropping to his knees and freeing Thomas from his trousers quickly. Thomas wondered if Price would question why he was so hard already.

Price grabbed Thomas and opened his mouth, but Thomas stopped him. “Sometimes I think I don’t deserve you.”

“I’m the lucky one. Now close your eyes and enjoy.”

“I can’t watch?”

Price took Thomas into his mouth, holding his gaze.

“You charmed him,” Thomas whispered. “I think he’d switch places with me right now if I let him.”

Price licked Thomas and pumped him with his hand. “You can send him in when we’re done.”

“I’m not sure what I wanted you to say, but that wasn’t it.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t bring up another man when you’re in my mouth, then,” Price teased.

“I’m talking about you and him, not me and him.”

“Or me and you and him?” Price asked, licking Thomas slowly.

“That’s the kind of thing that sounds like a great idea in the moment, but I’d never survive my jealousy.”

“And I’d never take you up on it if you offered. Right now though, when it’s just the two of us, I’ll let you imagine it.”

Thomas closed his eyes and gripped Price’s hair, savoring the fantasy Price put in his head. He pictured himself inside Price, bent over the arm of the chair as Eric had teased, with Price’s mouth on Eric. The jealousy he felt over the idea of sharing Price made the fantasy feel more forbidden, and therefore more titillating. He was even more aroused thinking if he really wanted it, Price
would never, but Eric would be willing, and he was just a floor away. Price’s sucking grew wetter and harder, and Thomas was so deep into his fantasy that he didn’t notice how tightly he was holding Price’s hair, or how fast he was thrusting into his mouth.

“Can I bend you over?” Thomas asked, barely realizing he made the request out loud.

Price let Thomas out of his mouth and started to unbutton his trousers, but Thomas was behind him in seconds, unbuttoning his trousers for him, yanking them to Price’s knees. Thomas pushed Price onto all fours and then pushed himself inside quickly. Price yelped, pressing his palms into the floor to avoid falling forward. He struggled to hold his position as Thomas grabbed him by the hips, his thrusting fast and deep.

Price looked over his shoulder, and Thomas looked down at him with the same expression he often had after sharing a juicy piece of gossip. “You’re the yummiest little thing I’ve ever seen,” Thomas panted, “and you’re all mine.”

“Who else’s would I be?” Price whispered, still trying to balance himself.

“Plenty want you.”

Price moaned, finally falling into sync with Thomas’s frenzied thrusting. “Well, I only want you.”

“And a third imaginary friend?”

“You’re the one getting excited about that.”

“So I am, but that’s your fault.”

“What are you imagining?”

Thomas smiled. “Him shutting you up by filling that mouth of yours.”

Price smiled back at Thomas over his shoulder. “Let me lick your fingers.”

Thomas put two fingers between Price’s lips. He closed his eyes as Price sucked them into his mouth, giving them the same kind of attention he had paid to Thomas a few minutes before. Thomas reached around Price and pumped him with his hand. Price arched his back and sucked harder in response, moaning into Thomas’s fingers. Thomas took his fingers from Price’s mouth and switched hands, pumping him with wet fingers.

“I can’t last much longer,” Price admitted.

“Neither can I,” Thomas panted.

Price’s body shuddered as he came. Thomas was only moments behind him with his own climax, causing another little yelp from Price as he buried himself as deep as he could go. As the haze of his orgasm lifted, Thomas carefully slid himself out of Price and pulled up his pants as Price laid on the floor and rolled onto his side.

“Did I hurt you?” Thomas asked, sitting against the wall as he rested.

Price caught his breath before answering. “I’ll be walking funny tomorrow, but that’s probably mostly my knees.”

“Walking funny today, more like. We have to be up in a few hours.”
Price closed his eyes and let his head fall to the floor.

“Are you upset?”

“Why would I be?” Price replied.

“I think you can guess why I’m wondering.”

Price gave Thomas a sleepy grin, opening one eye briefly. “You can have whatever obscene thoughts you want, as long as you’re having them with me.”

“I don’t suppose that extends to obscene suggestions?”

“Don’t press your luck.”

Thomas chuckled. “One at a time is enough, thank you, though it is indeed a lovely thought. Thank you for letting me have it.”

“Oh, you’ve never had more than one at a time? I thought everyone’d done that.”

“You’re putting me on.”

“Am I?”

“Aren’t you?”

Price sat up and pulled up his pants. “I wouldn’t ever with someone I cared about, so don’t get any ideas.”

“You’re just getting me back for bringing it up. You’ve really never done that.”

“Why do you find it so hard to believe?”

“It’s hard enough to find one decent, willing bloke, how did you go about landing two at a time?”

Price shrugged. “I never said they were decent.”

“Quit it.”

“You’re the one who said plenty want me. Sometimes it’s more than one at once.”

Thomas stood and adjusted his clothes. “I still say you’re teasing me.”

“I guess you’ll never know, will you?”

“Was this your aim all along? Pull me in here to punish me for some reason?”

“That’s always my aim, I love punishing you,” Price said, wincing as he stood. “Now, listen, I don’t begrudge you your fantasy, and we can squabble about whether mine was a reality another time, but next time I’d like a little romance, and I’d like a go at you for a change. It’s only fair.”

“I’ve told you, I really haven’t done that in a long time.”

“Well you weren’t with me, and now you are. Now go to bed before the sun rises.”

“I’ll consider what you’re asking if you tell me the God’s honest truth.”
Price kissed Thomas and patted his shoulder. “It’s nice, like ice cream, but you wouldn’t want it for every meal.”

“How many times have you done it?” Thomas asked, his eyes wide.

“I said I’d answer that one question, not others. Goodnight, Thomas.”

“Goodnight, little pervert,” Thomas said, slipping out of Price’s room.
Chapter 20

Price hoped the chilly walk to the Bates’s cottage would help rouse him. He struggled to fall asleep the night before after such a whirlwind day, and knew he probably faced a second hectic day with Eric still in the house.

As Price arrived at the cottage, Mr. Bates was just leaving to dress Lord Grantham early for a morning meeting. He tipped his hat to Price as Anna greeted him.

Anna offered Price some coffee and bread. “I’m afraid I haven’t much in the cabinets, I’ve been too tired to do the shopping as often these days.”

“Don’t worry about me, I should be asking what I can do for you,” Price said, removing his hat and overcoat. “I can do the shopping for you sometime.”

“You’re very sweet,” Anna said, hanging Price’s hat and coat. “Was everything alright with Mr. Barrow yesterday?”

“Oh,” Price said, forgetting he had asked Anna to be on the lookout. “Yes. All set now, nothing to worry about.”

“You look quite tired, are you sure?”

Price shrugged. “Nothing to trouble you with, at least. Why don’t we go have a look at what you’ve been working on upstairs?”

“I fear I made it sound like I’ve something grand to show you,” Anna said as they climbed the stairs. “It’s nothing spectacular.”

“I disagree,” Price said as he followed Anna into the small and narrow room. Morning sunlight streamed through the white drapes. The walls were pale green with white furniture; a cradle, rocking chair, and dresser. A few framed pieces of embroidery hung on the walls in matching white frames, and a mobile of whimsical wooden farm animals hung in the corner. The highlight of the room was a window seat the Bates’s built, just wide enough for them both to sit with the baby. Anna had sewed a yellow cushion for it with green and yellow pillows.

Anna noticed Price admiring the window seat. “Give it a try.”

Price sat down and scanned the room from the new position. “This is so beautiful. He’s such a lucky baby.”
“So you’ve still decided the baby is a ‘he’?”

“Oh yes, I have a sense for this kind of thing.”

Anna chuckled, her hands on her stomach. “Well he’s not the only lucky one, we’ll be lucky to have him.”

“You’re lucky indeed,” Price said dreamily, twisting his torso to check the view from the window.

“David, I’m still not sure you’re alright.”

“Ignore me.”

Anna stepped toward Price and bent to look at his face. “Is that a tear?”

Price turned back from the window. “I came here to celebrate you, not feel sorry for myself.”

“Push over,” Anna said, nudging Price. “I’m big but I can get in there with you.”

Price scooted over, letting Anna fit in next to him.

“What’s troubling you?”

Price looked around the room again and let his eyes rest on the empty cradle. “It just makes me a little jealous.”

“David, you could have this someday, too. We’re so much older than you and we’re just starting, you have plenty of time.”

Price’s eyes fell to his feet. For all of their closeness and friendship, he forgot that Anna was unaware of a big part of who he was.

“No, it’s not in the plan for me.”

“Maybe not now, but don’t say never.”

“I know never. Trust me, you don’t want me to explain.”

Anna touched Price’s shoulder. “Is it something to do with the war?”

Price shook his head.

“You don’t have to tell me, but please know you can trust me.”

“It’s not something I can say directly.”

“Alright,” Anna said warmly, “give me a hint, and then I can guess, and you won’t have to say a word.”

Price shook his head again.

“David, I’ve seen a lot in my life. You can’t shock me.”

Price leaned against the window. “I won’t have a family because there’d never be a right woman for me.”

“David, any woman would want to be with you.”
Price met Anna’s eyes. “Anna, there would never be a right woman for me.”

“Oh. Oh my.”

“If you want me to leave, I understand.”

“Oh, David!” Anna cried, grabbing his hands. “Never! I hope you think better of me than that. And it’s not as if you’re even the only one in the house. I mean we all know Thomas-” Anna stopped herself and looked into Price’s eyes.

Price gave Anna a sheepish grin.

Anna sat up straight. “David, there is absolutely nothing wrong with who you are. Thomas, though, well, you can do better.”

“You’re all so harsh about him, but he’s wonderful to me.”

Anna sighed. “He has his moments, I’ve seen plenty good ones over the years. But his bad moments, well, they can be quite dark, David.”

“Does Mr. Bates have no dark moments? Do you love him anyway?”

“Love?” Anna gasped.

“You think you all know him so much better than I do. He’s spikey because he’s had to be to protect himself. It’s hard being someone like him - someone like me.”

“You don’t act like he acts.”

“It’s not all roses for me either, I just tend to take things out on myself rather than everyone else.”

Anna patted Price’s hand. “I’m not trying to hurt you. I’m so thankful you told me and that you trust me. I just want the best for you.”

Price wiped his eye. “You’ll never look at me the same way.”

“Why should I?” Anna said, giving Price a comforting smile. “Now I know more about you, I should see you in a new light. It’s not a bad thing.”

“I would never ask you to keep anything from Mr. Bates, but I don’t want anyone else in the house to know. They can’t.”

“I would never tell a soul, not even Mr. Bates if you don’t want me to.”

“I won’t make you keep secrets. Maybe, though, don’t tell him the part about Thomas.”

“A fair compromise,” Anna said, still smiling.

“Truth be told, I’m a bit nervous when it comes to Thomas. I’m not his only prospect, and I think I’d about die if he chose someone over me.”

“I’ll try to refrain from saying insulting things about Thomas to you, but he would be an absolute
fool to think there is a better person on this planet than you.”

Price rested his head against the window and looked down at Anna. “I’m out of sorts, and when I’m less groggy later I’m going to sorely regret burdening you with this information.”

“It’s no burden. Don’t look at me like that, it’s not. You’re still my David.”

Price felt his chest constrict with Anna’s last words and he couldn’t stop himself from crying.

“Maybe you need to take a rest today.”

“There’s a good sized dinner party tonight. Mr. Carson can’t be a man down. I’ll be alright.”

Anna put her head on Price’s shoulder and sat with him quietly until he was more composed.

“I should tell you,” Price said, sniffling, “no one who’s loved me and learned this about me has ever said that I’m still their David.”

“Not your family? What about your sister-in-law, you’re close?”

“There’s an understanding, but we’ve never spoken of it.”

“Then I feel that much more privileged you shared it with me.”

Price stood and helped Anna to her feet. “What a gloomy mood I’ve set over my visit. Forgive me, I didn’t sleep much and I’ve a lot on my mind. I really am beyond pleased for you and Mr. Bates.”

“I know you are,” Anna said, standing on her toes to kiss Price’s cheek. “Let’s head up to the house and we can talk about the rest of my plans for the room on our way.”

Thomas awoke to his alarm exhausted from lack of sleep as well as odd dreams, mostly random, but punctuated by intimate scenes with Eric and Price. One replayed itself as he shuffled out of bed and over to his pitcher and basin. In the dream, both men were on their knees before him, kissing one another before putting their mouths on him. Dream was pleasant, but in the harsh light of day it caused questions, and self doubt, to bubble up in his mind.

Price made it back in time to help with breakfast service. With just Lady Edith, Mr. Branson and Eric at the breakfast table, the three were quite chatty. Eric focused on the conversation and tried to keep his eyes from Thomas and Price. It was strange enough having tea and dinner with Price standing silently by the wall, but watching Thomas blend in with the furniture made him especially uncomfortable. He wondered how such a bold personality could be satisfied in a job with a great deal of the time spent being ignored.

After breakfast, Lady Edith and Eric walked the grounds. It had warmed up and the snow was melting, setting a fog over Downton. Thomas watched them from a window until they faded into the haze. He found Price in the boot room and joined him in shining shoes, several pairs lined up for whoever had a free hand to work on them that morning.

“Do you think Lady Edith knows about Eric?” Price asked Thomas.

“What about him? Me and him?”

“Not that, obviously. About how he’s like you and me.”

Thomas glanced at Price. “I don’t know. I hope so, otherwise she may be getting mixed messages from his visit.”
“I feel like she might know. And everyone here knows about you, don’t they?”

“I don’t like this line of questioning. What are you getting at?”

“Blimey, Thomas, I’m not getting at anything. Not like you’re thinking. I just wonder what it must feel like to have everyone know about you. It’s not some big secret you have to keep.”

“It’s not as if they know and accept it with open arms. I’ve had many struggles here because of it.”

“I don’t doubt that, but now at least, everyone knows, and you don’t have to pretend you’re something you’re not.”

Thomas put down the shoe and grabbed another. “Are you bothered because you have to pretend?”

“Very. Though Anna knows now.”

“How?”

“I went down this morning to see the nursery, and I got a bit jealous that I’ll never have a cottage, and a spouse, and a baby. I even cried a bit.”

Thomas rolled his eyes. “David, what doesn’t make you blubber?”

“Don’t make light of this. I should have wanted a family if I were a real man.”

Thomas paused and looked at Price. “I don’t think I heard you right. What did you just say about yourself?”

“Nothing, Thomas,” Price said, brushing the shoe in his hand with force.

“Put that down and look at me.”

Price huffed and looked at Thomas.

“Don’t ever let me hear you say that again. Don’t let other people get in your head,” Thomas said, tapping his own head with his finger. “You’re different, but no less a man.”

Price nodded and resumed his work.

“While we’re talking about jealousy, I’m still having a hard time with the information you shared this morning.”

“What information?”

“About you and other men. Plural. At the same time.”

Price smiled. “Why are you so stuck on this? It’s no big deal.”

“No big deal? I’ve had my fair share of experiences but that isn’t one of them, and you make it sound like it was a regular occurrence for you.”

“You like being older and wiser, and you hate it that I’ve had more experience in certain ways than you have.”

“Not more experience, just different.”

“No, it was probably more, too,” Price said, chuckling.
“Getting a kick out of this?”

Price shrugged.

“How many times were you with more than one person at once?”

Price laughed. “Why would I keep count?”

“You can’t even count off the top of your head?” Thomas asked, dismayed.

Thomas’s reaction only made Price laugh harder. “Do you keep a running list of your conquests?”

“I could count them, yes, plus I’m only asking you to count the ones where you doubled up. Maybe you’re right, you do have me beat on this.”

“And that bothers you.”

“You have a past, I can accept that.”

“But you can’t accept that I’ve had more of a past than you,” Price said as he finished the second shoe. “Meanwhile, I’ve been kind enough to accept your very recent past presently under the same roof.”

“Yes, Saint David, the benevolent. You’re very kind to me indeed.”

“If a recent lover of mine showed up at the back door, you’d have driven him out of here by now.”

“‘Lover’, what a silly word. Whatever he was before, he’s my friend now, that’s why you covered for him and why you do more than tolerate him. You even want to be his friend, so stop with this nonsense.”

“I want to be his good friend,” Price said in a low voice.

“That’s it, I’ve had enough of your cheek for one morning,” Thomas said. He packed up the polish and rags and went off to find other duties.

Later, after lunch, Eric caught Thomas in the gallery and asked him to follow him to his room.

“What would you say if someone caught you in here?” Eric asked.

“That you had questions about getting into your tuxedo tonight,” Thomas answered in his standard under-butler voice.

Eric raised an eyebrow. “My word, I hadn’t even thought of that. I hope I put it on properly.”

“I’ll come back to check that you did.”

“I can’t convince you to help me into it, can I?”

Thomas gave a wry smile. “Maybe David can help you.”

Eric laughed. “You’re funny, Thomas. I didn’t pull you in here to banter, and I’m sure we don’t have much time before one of us is missed. I wanted to ask you about that idea of David’s.”

Thomas was flustered for a moment before he realized Eric wasn’t involved in the menage a trois discussions. “The job in London?”
“Why haven’t you jumped on the opportunity?”

“Even if his brother’s keen on it, who’s to say it would work out? Then I’d have lost this position, which is a very good one.”

“Is it? You spend so much of it still and silent waiting for someone to need you. Most of the time they ignore you, like you’re a lamp or a chair.”

“That’s a very small part of what I do. I don’t want to stand here and defend my job. Sorry it’s not as big and important as a globe trotting journalist.”

Eric’s nostrils flared. “You know damn well that’s not what I meant.”

Thomas hadn’t expected Eric to respond to his jibe with anger, and he was silent as his cheeks grew warm.

“I don’t doubt your title is a prestigious one among servants, in this house or any other, but you have a chance to do something that could be a passion rather than just a position.”

“It’s not just a position. The family is very good to me, and as for the staff, I may not be chums with everyone but I still feel like I’m a part of the group. It’s taken a good long time to feel that way. I’d be throwing it all away on something that’s not even a sure thing.”

Eric put his hands on Thomas’s face. “My dear Thomas, the world is changing. You have a chance to get ahead of it and change with it, rather than watch it change around you. The great homes are falling, and if anything’s a sure thing, it’s that Downton will be among them some time before your retirement. What then?”

“That’s not a sure thing,” Thomas said softly. “Downton has more staff than most.”

“For now. What about twenty years from now?”

“They’d still need a butler, and I’m the best candidate.”

“Anything could change.”

“You just want me to live closer to you.”

Eric chuckled and pulled Thomas into a hug. “There’s that, sure, but even if the shop were in the village I’d say go for it.”

“You smell lovely.”

Eric laughed again. “I’m so tired of you getting dodgy around serious subjects.”

“You’re tired of me?”

“God, never,” Eric said, kissing Thomas’s forehead.

“Have you ever been with two men at once?”

“Goodness, you’re really trying to change the subject, aren’t you?”

“Just wondering. Have you?”

“Why, would David be game? Are you offering?”
“I don’t think I’m the kind of person who could do that.”

Eric pulled back from the hug enough to look in Thomas’s eyes. “Wait a second, have you actually been thinking this over?”

“I think it’s just a selfish thought so I don’t have to choose between you and David.”

Eric held Thomas close again and squeezed him. “Then I’ll make the choice easy. I am in lust with you, and I love you, but David is in love with you.”

Thomas returned Eric’s squeeze and kissed his neck.

“I was trying to make things easy, and you’re making them harder.”

“Harder you say?”

“That’s juvenile,” Eric said, closing his eyes. “And yes.”

“If I had convinced David, would you have joined us in… a little fun?”

“I’d answer that question if I believed for a moment it was an actual offer. Sorry, Thomas, I know it’s not.”

“So that means I can’t know the answer?”

Eric held Thomas’s face in one hand and kissed his lips. “You know the answer.”

“I don’t think I do,” Thomas said with faux innocence.

Eric kissed Thomas’s lips again, softly and slowly. “If you invited me, and you meant it, I’d ravage you both.”

“I - I still don’t follow.”

Eric licked Thomas from his collar to his ear. He whispered, “I’d let you both do whatever you wanted to me, no matter how filthy or vulgar. You could spank me, wank me, suck me, fuck me. Whatever it took until you were both drained of every last drop, which I’d greedily lick from your naked bodies as you kissed and caressed each other in the aftermath of your orgasms. But alas, you’re not the type.”

“…I’m reconsidering,” Thomas said, swallowing.

Eric rubbed his nose against Thomas’s. “I bet he’d do anything for you that I would, and he’d do it with a love I don’t think I’m even capable of giving.”

“Why do you want me to be with him? Don’t you want me?”

“Don’t keep asking just to hear my answer. If things between the two of you change, I’ll always want you. Now, though, I want you to be happy, and I know what will make you happy. Take him, take the job he’s offering, and take my friendship.”

“And if I’m ever willing to take both of you at once?”

“Then you know where to find me.”

Thomas sighed. “I’ll come back after the gong is rung and make sure you don’t embarrass us all in
Eric hugged Thomas one last time before letting him go. “No, send David. I want a chance to lick his neck, too, before I depart for the milk train.”

“You’re leaving that early?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll visit you regularly once you’re employed at the shop.”

“You think you’ve convinced me, just like that?”

“I hope between the two of us, David and I can sway you. Now remember what I said last night, help me at dinner.”

“I’d be a bigger help if you gave me a hint as to what I was helping with.”

“Well where’s the fun in that?” Eric said playfully.

Downstairs, the staff prepared for tea. Thomas joined them after a quick smoke break to gather himself.

“Where were you? I’ve been looking all over,” Price asked, catching Thomas as he came in from the courtyard.

“What do you think I was doing out there, building a snowman?”

“Before that.”

“I was talking to Eric.”

“Talking?,” Price asked, crossing his arms. “Are you sure? Your bowtie is crooked.”

Thomas straightened his tie and looked down at Price. “Talking about you.”

“Nice things, I hope.”

“Very nice, indeed.”

Mr. Carson turned the corner and sighed. “There you both are. Stop chattering and start helping, there’s tea to serve and a sizeable guest list coming for dinner. One of you start serving tea, the other get up to the dining room.”

“Yes, Mr. Carson,” both men replied.

“You can take tea,” Price said, “that way you can make eyes at Eric over the Earl Grey.”

“Or you can take tea, he’d be just as happy to make eyes at you. In fact, he was quite interested in your idea to get us all better acquainted.”

“My what?”

“You know,” Thomas said, putting up three fingers.

“You’re like a child with a new toy,” Price said, laughing quietly.

“Except I don’t have the toy, and I never had the toy. It’s not fair. Both of you have gotten to play.”
“You had to bother him about it, too?”

“Seems everyone but me has had the opportunity.”

“Poor, deprived bloke. You’ll never delight in the pleasures of two at once. Oh, and don’t even get me started about going at it as a group. That’s a real experience.”

Thomas’s face lit up with a smile. “Get to the dining room before I drag you upstairs to Eric.”

“Mmm. Promises, promises, Thomas.”

Miss Baxter watched Thomas and Price in the hallway from her seat at the servant’s hall table, not sure what they were talking about, but noticing their laughing and whispering. Anna was seated with her, both cleaning jewelry. She saw Miss Baxter looking, and turned to look as well.

“It’s nice that they’re friends,” Miss Baxter said to Anna.

“David’s friends with everybody,” Anna said.

Miss Baxter dipped a necklace into a bowl of cleaning solution. “Yes, but Mr. Barrow isn’t. I keep seeing changes in him the longer David is here. I’m thankful for it.”

Anna brushed a gold bangle and kept her eyes on her work. “I’m sure Mr. Barrow is happy to have a friend.”

“You look upset. Did I say something wrong?”

“Oh, no,” Anna said, looking up and smiling. “A happy Mr. Barrow makes things better for all of us. We all know how unpleasant an unhappy Mr. Barrow can be.”

“What’s this about an unhappy Mr. Barrow?” Mrs. Hughes asked, entering the servant’s hall.

“We were just admiring how David seems to have a good way with Mr. Barrow,” Miss Baxter replied.

“How funny, when he first came here I thought he might wind up being a good influence. Now that you say it, I think you’re right.”

“I just hope there isn’t too much of an influence in the reverse direction,” Anna said.

Miss Baxter dipped a pair of earrings. “Let’s be kind, I don’t think we’ve seen any signs of a bad influence on David.”

“I quite agree,” Mrs. Hughes said as she left to check things in the kitchen.

Thomas was waiting for Daisy to restock a tray of sandwiches for tea.

“Were your ears burning, Mr. Barrow?” Mrs. Hughes asked.

“Who’s talking about me now?”

“Nothing bad,” Mrs. Hughes said, “don’t assume the worst. Miss Baxter was just pointing out that you and David are a good pair.”

“We’re a what?” Thomas asked, taken aback by the comment.
“That you’re friends, and that the friendship does you good. I was agreeing with her.”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t sure what you were implying,” Thomas said, making sure the kitchen staff couldn’t hear him. “You know how people can be about me around here.”

Mrs. Hughes patted Thomas’s arm. “You’ll have no accusations from me,” she said reassuringly.

“All set,” Daisy called to Thomas. She handed him the tray and looked curiously at Mrs. Hughes as he left. “What was that about?”

“None of your concern,” Mrs. Hughes replied.

Thomas placed his tray on the table in the library and took his spot beside it. I’m not a lamp or a chair, he thought.

Eric sat by the fire with the younger Crawleys, engrossed in conversation. Lady Edith sipped her tea and smiled at Eric. “I’ve really enjoyed your surprise visit. I plan to spend more time in London after the New Year, so you’ll be seeing more of me.”

“The staff will be delighted,” Eric said, smiling at Lady Edith as well as Lady Mary and Mr. Branson. He stood to get himself a cup of tea.

Lady Mary leaned toward Lady Edith, “The staff will be delighted’ - I bet that wasn’t the response you were hoping for.”

Mr. Branson rolled his eyes at Lady Mary and joined Eric by the table.

“I wasn’t hoping for any response.”

“He’s quite an agreeable chap, are you sure you weren’t hoping for him to say something else?”

Lady Edith looked over her shoulder at Eric laughing with Mr. Branson, then turned back to her sister. “Mary, if any of us has a chance with Eric, it’s probably Tom.”

“Oh,” Lady Mary said, setting her cup in its saucer. “I see.”

Lady Grantham joined her daughters by the fire, running her plans for the servant’s ball by them. Thomas brought over the teapot and perked up an ear, glad to hear details before anyone else downstairs.

After cleaning up from tea, Thomas joined Price in the dining room. The room was nearly set, and he helped with the final touches. “I heard them talking plans for the servant’s ball,” Thomas said to Price and Mr. Molesley.

“What fun,” Mr. Molesley said. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“Don’t have too much fun at this celebration, Mr. Molesley. We don’t want to repeat sins of the past,” Thomas said.

“Daisy was telling me what a good dancer you are,” Price said with a grin.

“I used to be. Maybe.”

“And Mrs. Patmore said Daisy was very fond of your dancing at one time.”

Thomas returned Price’s smirk. “Now she doesn’t need me, she has you to be fond of.”
“Are you fond of Daisy?” Mr. Molesley asked Price.

“Not in that way, but I like her, of course.”

“It’s too bad,” Thomas said, “she’s very keen on you, David. Are you sure you don’t have it in your heart to change your mind?”

“Truth be told,” Price said, delicately sliding a goblet into place on the table, “I do like her a little.”

“Really?” Mr. Molesley asked.

“Yes, but being with someone you work with makes things so complicated. Plus there’s the issue of the other person getting so comfortable with you that they think they can say or do just about anything and you’ll take it, because there’s seemingly no escape working and living in the same place, day in and out.”

“...right,” Mr. Molesley said.

“If only it were different. We could’ve made a go at things, she and I.”

“Uh huh,” Mr. Molesley said, confused by Price’s statements and the looks he and Thomas were exchanging. “Well, things are just about done in here, I think I’ll see what help is needed in the kitchen.” Mr. Molesley left Thomas and Price in the large, quiet room alone.

“You’re a bastard,” Price said, chuckling.

“Takes one to know one. I’m going to run up and make sure Eric’s figured out his tuxedo. Try not to throw yourself at Daisy before I return.”

“She’s a sweet girl, it’s not my fault if I trip and fall in love before you’re finished. Don’t go falling in love up there, yourself.”

Thomas paused by a column in the gallery as he heard Nora’s door open. He waited for it to shut before going to Eric.

Lady Edith was Nora’s visitor. She brought Nora a box of candy that she and Eric had fetched when they walked earlier in the day.

“I know I can’t be with the adults tonight,” Nora said. “There will be too many of them, and it wouldn’t be appropriate.”

“I’m glad you understand, but know that we so enjoyed your company, Mr. Weatherbee especially. I wanted to ask you if I could accompany you to the train on Tuesday. I’d like to see you off.”

Nora opened the box of candies and looked them over. “Yes, that would be fine. Is anyone else coming?”

“Is there anyone else you’d like to come?”

“David and Mr. Barrow.”

Lady Edith smiled and sat in Nora’s chair. “I don’t know if Mr. Carson would give them both permission to be away for a morning. It may be more reasonable if I ask for one of them to come with us.”

Nora closed the candy box and sat on her bed. “Then I think David should come, because he was
my first friend in this house. Please don’t tell Mr. Barrow I chose David over him. They’re both my friends.”

“I wouldn’t dream of telling him, don’t worry.” A piece of paper on Nora’s nightstand caught Lady Edith’s attention. “What’s this?” she asked, picking it up.

“That’s a drawing David did for me,” Nora told her. “He’s given me a few drawings.”

“Can I see them?”

Nora went to her dresser and retrieved papers from the top drawer. Lady Edith sorted through them, studying each under the light on Nora’s nightstand. There was a drawing of a forest with Nora’s rabbit dancing with other animals, one of Nora’s bear, another of Nora’s bear and rabbit having tea in what looked just like the Downton library, and then finally a portrait of Nora in brown and white pencil.

“These are marvelous,” Lady Edith said, giving the papers back to Nora.

“I thought so, too. He could draw a book like the ones I read.”

“He could probably draw a lot of things,” Lady Edith agreed. “I must go, I haven’t left myself much time to get dressed. I’m glad you’ll let me see you off, and I’ll ask Mr. Carson if David can join us.”

“Do you want one of the drawings?”

“Don’t you want to bring them with you to school?”

Nora took her portrait from the pile and gave it to Lady Edith. “I know what I look like, I don’t need this one. Why don’t you keep it?”

“That’s just the one I would have chosen,” Lady Edith said, accepting the drawing and leaving Nora’s room.

Thomas exited Eric’s room as Lady Edith stepped into the hall.

“Is everything alright with Mr. Weatherbee?” Lady Edith asked, walking the length of the corridor to Thomas.

“Oh, yes, m’Lady, he just needed a hand with his tie.”

“He couldn’t figure out a bowtie?”

“He said he’s not used to dressing up.”

“I fear he’s a bit hopeless in that regard. I probably should have asked Bates to help him. Well, thank you for your help, Barrow.”

“Any time, m’Lady.”

“That was too close for comfort,” Thomas told Price after relaying his run-in with Lady Edith.

“Don’t go back to his room, then.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice, David.”
As guests arrived, Thomas and Price helped take coats and hats. Price loved the chance to get so close to so many aristocrats and other important people. He enjoyed seeing what they were wearing and how it compared to the Crawleys, from the hairstyles down to the shoes. He always brought the details to the kitchen staff, who only ever saw guests under unusual circumstances.

“What they talk about is much more interesting than what they’re wearing,” Thomas chimed in as Price described a baroness’s gown to Ellie and Daisy, which revealed more of the woman’s back than anything Lady Mary had worn to date.

“Well if you hear any good gossip, bring it back down with you,” Ellie countered.

“No one is talking gossip, nor should you be talking at all. Shut it and get to work,” Mrs. Patmore scolded. “Hors d’oeuvres. Upstairs. Now,” She told Mr. Molesley and Price.

Mr. Branson was glad to have Eric’s company, giving him an excuse not to spend much time chatting with the other guests. Lady Edith borrowed Eric to introduce him to the Dowager Countess, and Lady Mary took Eric’s spot next to Mr. Branson. “Are you enjoying the journalist?”

“I am. He’s pleasant company.”

“From what Edith says, he may think you’re quite pleasant yourself.”

“I’m not certain I know what you’re saying, but if I’m right, then I should be flattered.”

Lady Mary laughed, surprised. “Really, Tom? I didn’t think you were the type.”

“Wouldn’t you be flattered if he thought you were pleasant?”

Lady Mary looked across the room at Eric in his tuxedo, fitted perfectly to his body thanks to Mr. Bates. “I suppose I would be.”

When dinner was ready to be served, Lord Grantham welcomed the guests to the dining room. Eric was seated between Lady Edith and Mr. Branson, and was thankful for it after what felt like an interview from the Dowager Countess.

“I think she liked you,” Lady Edith informed Eric.

“Then I should hate to see how she speaks to someone she doesn’t like.”

“Oh no, you would enjoy that. It’s quite entertaining.”

Thomas went through the motions of dinner service, but he was distracted, waiting for whatever Eric had in store for Price. He was anxious something would be embarrassing or inappropriate, as he couldn’t imagine a surprise during dinner being anything but.

Four of the courses were served, and enough wine made the rounds to make the room cheerful. Mr. Molesley and Price served the fifth course. As they came to Lady Edith, Eric gasped. “God, I completely forgot.”

“What? What’s the matter?” Lady Edith asked, laying serving utensils back on Price’s tray as he stood between she and Eric. Price looked at Mr. Carson, who was watching the interaction from a two yards away.

“Two of the bags made it back from the inn, but the third is still there. I’d have them send it to London, but it has medication I was really supposed to start taking after leaving India.”
“David, you missed a bag?” Lady Edith asked.

“No. No, m’Lady. There were two bags, like Mr. Weatherbee said, I got them both.”

“It’s my fault, I forgot to tell you of the third.”

“I checked the room, there were two.”

Thomas approached the trio. “Don’t argue with Mr. Weatherbee. He says there were three, so there were three.”

“We’ll have to fetch it for you before you leave,” Lady Edith said.

“Oh, you wouldn’t mind going back, would you?” Eric asked Price.

“No, he would not,” Thomas answered.

Mr. Carson stepped to the table. “Is there a problem, my Lady?” Guests and family glanced at the interaction.

“I’m making things difficult again, Mr. Carson,” Eric explained.

“David wasn’t aware Eric had a third piece of luggage,” Lady Edith advised, “and it contains something he needs before he departs in the morning. Can David go to the inn and fetch it?”

“My lady, I can’t relieve a man in the middle of dinner.”

“Afterwards is fine, it’s not an emergency,” Eric said. “Thank you, I’m sorry to be such a bother.”

“Nonsense, David doesn’t mind,” Lady Edith said.

“Of course not, m’Lady,” Price said, bending so that Lady Edith could take her serving from his tray.

“What was that?” Mr. Molesley asked Price as they headed down for the sixth course.

“I honestly have no idea. He’s a strange one,” Price replied.

Thomas fetched more wine per Lord Grantham’s request, and passed Price on the stairs. “Are you daft?” he asked.

“There were definitely two bags, not three.”

“So what if there were? You’ll go there tonight. But don’t go until I say so.”

“Why?”

“Just don’t.”

Price spent the rest of dinner service confused and frustrated. He looked at Eric and Thomas for some kind of silent explanation, but received none.

When dinner was finally over and coffee served, the staff gathered for supper.

“David, you should head to the inn for Mr. Weatherbee,” Mr. Carson told him. “Daisy can keep a plate aside for you when you get back.”
“Yes, Mr. Carson,” Price replied.

“Mr. Carson, may I have a word?” Thomas asked.

“Now? When we’re about to eat?”

“Yes, very quickly in the hall.”

Mr. Carson followed Thomas. “What is so important that it requires urgent discussion?”

Thomas leaned toward Mr. Carson as though he were about to let him in on something secret. “Mr. Carson, do you remember the day my hand was injured, and you asked me why and I made up an excuse?”

“I do. What does that have to do with tonight?”

“Well, my hand was injured due to an altercation.”

“I gathered as much.”

“Only it wasn’t on my behalf. You see,” Thomas began, his voice dropping to a whisper, “the altercation was with Sean Moore. He was bothering David in the village, and I tried to put a stop to it, but I’m sure he’s still out there looking for trouble. I believe that’s why David isn’t keen to go out in the dark, alone, to fetch Mr. Weatherbee’s luggage.”

“I see,” Mr. Carson said, his stomach turning over Moore’s name.

“I could go with David,” Thomas offered.

“Or you could go yourself.”

“Well Lady Edith asked David to go, not me.”

Mr. Carson considered Thomas’s words as Mrs. Hughes stepped in the hall to make sure everything was alright. “I suppose Daisy can keep something warm for you both.”

“Are you going with David?” Mrs. Hughes asked Thomas.

“Yes, Mr. Carson was just giving permission.”

“Well Daisy doesn’t have to keep anything warm. Get something while you’re out.”

Thomas looked to Mr. Carson. “Is that alright?”

“I suppose,” Mr. Carson said, perplexed by Mrs. Hughes’s suggestion.

“Thank you, I’m sure David will appreciate it,” Thomas said, leaving the two in the hallway so that he could find Price.

“Why did you suggest they spend time doddling in the village?” Mr. Carson asked.

“Because friendship does Mr. Barrow good, and we all benefit from that.”

Thomas found Price in the dorms. “Don’t ask questions, just get out of your livery and into your coat and hat. I’m going with you.”

Thomas went to his room and put on his overcoat, flipped up the collar, and tugged on his hat. He
arrived in Price’s room as Price tucked something into his coat pocket.

“What’s that?”

“It’s nothing. Wait here while I get the key, and then we’re off.”

“Are you glad you listened to me?”

“Aren’t I always?”

Price found Eric in his room. Eric pressed the key into Price’s palm and smiled.

“Is there actually a bag?” Price asked.

“Yes, because I arranged for one to be there.”

“And are you disappointed you’re not invited to take this trip with us?”

Eric chuckled. “Disappointed doesn’t begin to cover it.”

Price put the key in his pocket and shook Eric’s hand. “Thank you, Eric.”

“Thank me when you get back. Don’t forget, you need to get that bag back to me.”

“It might look rather odd if I came back empty handed.”

“It might,” Eric said, letting go of Price’s hand. “Have fun, David.”

“I promise I will.”

Price collected Thomas in his room, and began to run ahead before Thomas stopped him. “Don’t walk out of the house with that look on your face,” Thomas warned Price.

“I haven’t a look on my face.”

“You look like a boy who just discovered a secret stash of biscuits. Put on your poker face, Davey.”

“Ech, don’t call me that.”

“I thought that’d snap you out of it.”

Price and Thomas bid a quick farewell to Mr. Carson. “Back by eleven,” Mr. Carson told them.

“Oh, don’t be a fuddy duddy,” Mrs. Hughes tskd. “Come home whatever time pleases you, boys.”

Miss Baxter smiled down at her lap. Anna shook her head and pushed a potato around her plate.

Thomas pulled out a cigarette as soon as his feet touched the path outside.

“How do you have to? I like how you taste, not those.”

Thomas lit the cigarette and took a drag. “I’ll get a drink at the inn to cleanse my palate.”

Price spun in a circle as they walked. “This is perfect, now we have lots of time to go slowly.”
“You’ll probably need it since it’s been so long for you.”

“Hold on there, this isn’t the time to try something different. Let’s go with what we know and make sure we enjoy the time we have.”

“This is exactly the time to try. At the very least, you will be romantic. Quick and rough has its time and place, but I love you, and I want to make love to you.”

“God almighty,” Thomas groaned. “You act like I’ve never been romantic with you.”

“Name a time.”

Thomas waved his hand in the air, trying to recall an occasion when he’d been romantic, but came up with nothing. “It’s not like our situation much allows it.”

“Tonight it does, and tonight you will be. Well, I will be, and you’ll let me.”

“Whatever you say.”

“There, that’s what I like to hear.”

The bar at the inn was more boisterous than it had been when Thomas met Eric there months back. Thomas felt pulled in by the energy. “I’m gonna grab that drink,” he told Price.

“If it takes the edge off, by all means,” Price said, following Thomas through the crowd.

“What am I ordering for you?” Thomas asked. Price felt a little jolt at the idea of Thomas buying him a drink, as though they were a couple like any other in the bar.

“Um, a sidecar.”

“A cocktail? Well, whatever my man wants, my man gets,” Thomas said, waving the bartender over.

Price soaked in the scene around him, and decided no matter what might happen upstairs, this little moment with Thomas was a gift in itself.

“The look is back on your face,” Thomas told Price.

“I’m sure it is. I’m ridiculously happy right now.”

“And you haven’t even had your drink.”

The bartender served the men, and Thomas held his glass of whisky up for a toast. “To my beloved, and whatever he has in store for me tonight.”

Price clinked his glass against Thomas’s and sipped his drink.

“How is it?” Thomas asked.

“Quite a deal better than drinking from a flask behind closed doors. Thank you.”

“The pleasure’s all mine,” Thomas said, swigging his drink. He coughed and laughed.

“Palate cleansed?”

“Cleansed with fire. I’m getting another while you finish your pretty drink,” Thomas said, waving
to the bartender again and pointing at his glass.

“Just one more, we do have to walk back tonight.”

“I’ve handled drunk David, at some point I’ll make you handle tipsy Thomas.”

“Save it for the servant’s ball, I want to watch you dance with the Dowager while half under.”

Thomas watched as a second man joined the piano player, the duet getting a roar from the crowd.

“There’s a bar in London,” Thomas told Price, “where everyone’s like us.”

“I’ve heard of places like that.”

“Well I’ve been there, and someday I’m taking you.”

“Sneaking off here for a few hours is playing with your head. I don’t see us both stealing away to
London for a night out.”

“If I took that job with your brother, you could come visit.”

“So the whiskey is already getting to you?”

Thomas finished his drink. “Do you think I’d have until Valentine’s Day to make a decision? A
couple months would give me time to think it over.”

“This night keeps getting better. Yes, I think that should be fine. And now, shall we head
upstairs?”

“Lead the way.”

Thomas followed Price upstairs. Price felt giddy sliding the key into the lock, and giddier still
locking the door behind them. They could hear the faint din of the noisy bar downstairs even with
the door shut. “Good,” Price said, “it will cover any noises I may make.”

“Preparing to be noisy?”

“Very, I should say.” Price took off his overcoat and pulled a small tube from the pocket before
tossing the coat on a chair.

“What’s that?” Thomas asked, looking over Price’s shoulder.

Price clicked on a lamp by the bed and twisted the top off the tube. He slid it into the glass shade
near the bulb. “I thought a few licks wouldn’t be enough for you like it is for me. This’ll make
things easier. When it’s warm and ready, it will drip. You know, like I do when I’m warm and
ready.”

Thomas frowned deeply. “That was an ugly string of words. I thought you wanted to woo me
tonight, not turn me off.”

“You’ll be thankful. Forget it’s there for now. I want to undress you in front of that mirror,” Price
said, nodding to the bureau.

“You’re really losing me right now,” Thomas said. “I don’t need to look at myself disrobed.” He
put his coat and jacket on top of Price’s and let Price lead him by the hand to the dresser.

The dresser was low with a large, round mirror on it that let Thomas see from his knees to his head.
Price stood behind Thomas and wrapped his arms around Thomas’s chest. He put his chin on Thomas’s shoulder and met his eyes in their reflection. “Sometimes, when you’re setting out cutlery or dishes in the dining room, your sleeve rides up a little and I get a peek at your wrist. The tendons flexing, the thin blue veins just below your skin, it’s all I can do not lick it.”

Thomas laughed and looked at his wrist. “I’m sorry, I don’t see anything special.”

“Well that’s my point. That’s why we’re standing here. I want you to look at yourself through my eyes.” Price kissed Thomas’s neck and loosened his tie. He pulled Thomas’s braces over his shoulders and let them fall against his thighs, and then unbuttoned his shirt. “You’re so handsome.”

Thomas gave Price’s reflection and bashful smile. “Not next to you.”

Price removed Thomas’s shirt and ran his fingers up Thomas’s back and down his chest and stomach. He held Thomas’s shoulders. “You’re a monument to manliness.”

Thomas laughed and looked away, his image making him self conscious. “I wish I was half as fit as you.”

“Young body does things to me like no one else ever has,” Price said, undoing Thomas’s trousers. He didn’t remove them, just let them sink low on Thomas’s hips so that he could admire Thomas’s bare torso.

“As long as it makes you happy, I suppose.”

“It makes me very happy,” Price said, pressing his hardening cock against Thomas’s backside. “Can I look at the rest of you now?”

Thomas nodded. Price pulled Thomas’s trousers to his ankles and helped him out of his remaining clothing.

Thomas wiped his face with his hand and cleared his throat. “Is this what you wanted?”

“Yes, my love. All of this,” Price said, letting his hands roam over Thomas’s body and he climbed back up and stood behind him again. He let out a little “mmm” as Thomas’s cock twitched with his pulse. “How can you deny you’re God’s gift to men?”

Thomas rubbed his lips together and relaxed beneath Price’s hands. Price stepped in front of Thomas, his back to the mirror, and removed his own tie and shirt. Price kissed Thomas’s collarbone and neck as Thomas admired Price’s back in the mirror. “At least one of us is God’s gift,” Thomas said.

Price rubbed his lips together and relaxed beneath Price’s hands. Price stepped in front of Thomas, his back to the mirror, and removed his own tie and shirt. Price kissed Thomas’s collarbone and neck as Thomas admired Price’s back in the mirror. “At least one of us is God’s gift,” Thomas said.

Price rubbed his cheek Thomas’s, then kissed his lips tenderly. Thomas undid Price’s trousers and pulled them down past his hips, eager to hold him skin to skin. Price pulled his trousers down the rest of the way, then kissed his way back up; up Thomas’s thigh, hip, stomach, and chest, finally kissing his lips again as their bodies came together. Price opened his mouth, but Thomas pulled back, leaving Price’s hungry, pink tongue reaching between his parted lips.

“What?” Price asked, breathy.

“Shouldn’t we make use of the bed?”

“Oh, you’re right,” Price said. He jumped onto the bed on his hands and knees, then sat back and waited from Thomas to lay down. He jumped again, landing next to Thomas, the bed shaking beneath them both. “I could pound you straight through to the springs and no one would come
knocking,” Price said, grinning.

“That’s not very romantic,” Thomas laughed.

“I like the idea of romance, but at heart I guess I’m still a horny little scoundrel.”

“Yes, but that’s how I like you.”

Price rubbed the inside of Thomas’s thigh, then climbed between them. He supported himself with a hand on either side of Thomas’s shoulders. Thomas looked up into Price’s green eyes, half covered by hair that had escaped its careful styling. Price leaned down for a kiss, finally getting his tongue between Thomas’s lips. He lowered his hips so that his cock grazed Thomas’s. Thomas moaned into Price’s mouth and raised his hips to try and touch him again.

Price looked at the lamp, the little tube oozing as he’d promised. Thomas followed his eyes, then looked away. “I’m just not fond of things like that,” Thomas admitted.

“You can be a prude, you know.”

“I’m naked with my legs spread beneath you. That’s prudish?”

“What’s wrong with me making sure things are properly smooth and slippery this evening?”

“It’s always seemed like a bit of a mood killer to me. Stopping to slather on some slop?”

“Thomas, sex isn’t always like they depict it in romantic novels, I know you know that. It should be a little sloppy now and then, should it not?”

“Just get your little marital aid and get back to it,” Thomas complained, slapping Price’s behind.

Price reached over Thomas and plucked the little tube from the lamp. He let it dribble onto two fingers, then smiled at Thomas as he ran his fingers down Thomas’s shaft. Thomas squirmed and let out an “ahh” as the wet, warm liquid made contact with his skin.

“See? It’s nice, isn’t it?”

“Mmm,” was all Thomas could manage to say as Price wrapped his entire hand around him, drawing it slowly from base to tip. He took his hand from Thomas’s cock and trailed it up his thigh.

“Where are you going with those fingers?” Thomas asked, looking down his body at Price.

“I told you what I was planning to do tonight.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“Well, let’s see.”

Price parted his lips and let them hover above Thomas. Thomas raised his hips to try and make contact. Price’s warm breath against his wet skin made him shiver as if he’d been tickled. He raised his hips again, and Price let his fingers continue from Thomas’s thighs between them, massaging him without pressing inside.

“Does that feel alright?”
“Yes,” Thomas moaned, still trying to reach Price’s lips.

Price pushed a finger lightly, at the same time lowering his mouth so Thomas could pass himself across Price’s lips. “And that?”

“Yes,” Thomas breathed.

Price pushed his finger into Thomas up to his second knuckle while sucking Thomas into his mouth, until the head of Thomas’s cock touched the back of his throat. Thomas cried out and grabbed the sheets, the pleasurable sensation of Price’s hot mouth making up for the little spark of pain. Price felt Thomas relax around him and slid his finger in the rest of the way, massaging Thomas from inside. He let Thomas slide out of his mouth and in again, deeper still, his lips all the way to Thomas’s base.

“I’m so glad you have no gag reflex,” Thomas whispered.

Price pulled off briefly to call Thomas cheeky, then licked him and sucked him back into his mouth again. He moaned as Thomas tensed and relaxed around him, imagining it was his cock inside Thomas rather than his finger. Thomas gasped and bucked his hips, and Price let him out of his mouth to avoid the evening coming to too quick an end.

“Doesn’t that stuff taste funny?” Thomas asked, adding a pillow to the one behind his head for a better view of Price.

“Didn’t bother me,” Price said, kissing Thomas’s hand. He rubbed Thomas’s cock with an open palm to the same rhythm he rubbed his prostate. “How are you doing?”

“The stuff helps, I’ll give you that.”

Price slipped his finger out of Thomas, and was surprised by Thomas’s disappointed groan. He climbed up Thomas’s body, parting Thomas’s legs and settling in between them. He hooked a hand under Thomas’s knee to spread his legs further. Thomas looked up at Price with expectant eyes, almost eager, Price thought. Price kept the little tube out of view and covered himself before positioning the head of his cock just outside of Thomas’s entrance. He rubbed more of it onto Thomas as well, stroking him between their bodies. “Tell me to stop at any time, and I will.”

Thomas pulled his thighs up higher and gave Price a half smile. “Don’t stop now.” Price laid his body across Thomas, but Thomas pushed him up. “No, I want to see the look on your face the first time you’re inside me.”

Price smiled bashfully as Thomas had done earlier. “Feels like I’m taking your virginity or something.”

“Might as well be.”

“I love you, I can’t tell you enough times,” Price said, drinking in the look of Thomas below him.

“I love you, too,” Thomas said simply, without deflecting the words or saying something in jest.

Price braced his cock with his hand and rubbed it against Thomas. Thomas held Price’s rear, digging his fingers into Price’s skin as Price closed his eyes and pushed. Both men groaned, but Price’s voice rose above Thomas’s as he made his way inside. Thomas was tighter and warmer than any man he could recall, and his head spun so much he didn’t realize he was all the way inside until his hips came to rest against Thomas. He pulled out slowly and slid back in, panting as Thomas tensed and released around him.
“I want to spend the rest of my life in here,” Price moaned.

Thomas pulled Price down and wrapped his arms around him. His slick cock slid between their stomachs, the friction helping him relax even more. Price bit his lip and moaned softly.

“You don’t have to be quiet, remember?” Thomas said.

Price opened his mouth and let out the moan that had been sitting in his throat.

“Am I too tight?” Thomas whispered into Price’s ear.

Price laughed. “No such thing. Unless I’m hurting you.”

“No. I like it.”

“I hope you do, because I bloody love it,” Price said, letting himself go a little deeper. He kissed Thomas and went deeper still, then picked up his pace. Something about the soft sounds of their flesh meeting made things more arousing for Price, and Thomas let out a little cry as Price grew harder inside him. Price repeated to Thomas over and over how much he loved him and loved being inside him, kissing and licking Thomas’s neck and jaw, his words becoming a jumbled mess between grunts and groans.

Thomas arched his back to ensure his cock would make contact with Price’s stomach as Price thrust in and out with building speed. There was a spot Price hit with every few thrusts that made Thomas tingle, and he adjusted his position so Price could find the spot again.

“Do you want to switch?” Price asked. “I’d love to watch you ride me.”

Thomas let Price turn over with him, Price letting out the disappointed groan this time as he slid out of Thomas. Thomas climbed on top of Price and reached behind himself, positioning Price’s cock. Thomas’s stomach and thigh muscles flexed as he sat down and let Price back inside him.

Price held Thomas’s hips in his hands and guided him up and down, moaning with each bounce of Thomas’s body. He looked behind Thomas at the mirror on the dresser and watched Thomas ride him in the reflection. “Jesus Christ, you are the sexiest thing on two legs,” Price said, squeezing Thomas’s hips.

The new position hit Thomas exactly in the spot he liked so much. He enjoyed controlling the speed and the angle, circling his hips a few times before riding Price up and down. He stroked himself, a few drops of precum dripping over his fingers. Price relished the look of Thomas’s pink cock sliding between his nimble, pale fingers, and licked his lips as he looked on. Thomas smiled at the wanton look on Price’s face and pumped himself harder, twisting his hand as he went up and down.

“Will you come on me?” Price gasped.

Thomas grinned at the request. “There’s my horny little scoundrel.”

Price patted the sheets to find the tube again. He held it above Thomas’s cock and squeezed a generous amount of liquid onto him. Thomas shook his head and smiled, but didn’t complain as his hand slid easily up and down his shaft. Price hummed between his lips, trying to stave off his own orgasm until Thomas had his. Thomas’s cock grew from pink to red, and harder still, as he bounced against Price’s hips.

“Do you want me to come for you now?” Thomas asked, squeezing Price inside him.
“Yes, please, yes, yes, yes, please,” Price begged.

Thomas let out an open-mouth gasp as his orgasm took over his body, forcing his eyes to stay open so he could watch. With Price inside him, it was stronger than usual, and he shot across Price’s torso, a few drops landing in Price’s waiting, open mouth and on his tongue. Price ran his hands over his body and moaned, barely able to catch his breath. He licked his fingers and looked up at Thomas. His eyebrows knitted together as he finally let himself finish, looking into Thomas’s lust-filled gray eyes as he came inside him. He cried out, making up for all of the stifled orgasms he’d had with Thomas up until that night.

Price softened and eased out of Thomas, helping Thomas roll onto his back. He nuzzled up beside Thomas, still feeling the aftereffects of his orgasm in his legs and toes.

Thomas wrapped an arm around Price, Price’s head finding a comfortable spot between Thomas’s shoulder and chest. They both melted into the sheets, Price letting his eyes close as Thomas kissed his forehead.

“I’d say this makes up for the trouble Eric put us through,” Price said.

“More than makes up for it. I feel like I owe him something now.”

“Not something lewd, I hope.”

“You’ve squeezed all the lewd out of me for the next while, I think.”

Price kissed Thomas’s chest and sighed. “I want to fall asleep here with you. I wish we could stay ‘til the morning.”

“First you wanted to make love in a bed, then you wanted to be inside me, now you want to spend the night sleeping next to me. There’s no satisfying you, is there?”

“Oh, I’m quite satisfied, trust me.”

“Well, you wanted those other things, and now you’ve had them, so I’m sure we can find a way to spend a night curled up together someday.”

“I’m not complaining. This has been an incredible night, I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“Except these poor sheets. What a sticky mess we’re leaving behind.”

“When you’re crass it makes me feel better about the things I say.”

“It’s your influence on me, I didn’t say such salacious things until you came ‘round.”

The two cleaned up as best they could, laughing and teasing one another as they fumbled their way back into their clothes. Price nearly forgot the bag, but remembered it just as he remembered to return the key to the desk. He felt like he could skip back to Downton, high on his joy from a night well spent.

The back door had been left unlocked for them, and Price went straight from it to the kitchen, looking for something to pillage before heading upstairs. “I’m so hungry!” he whispered to Thomas.

“I’m sure you worked up quite an appetite. I have a few things to nibble, I’ll leave them in your room while you bring Eric his bag.”
“Do you think he’s still awake?”

“I’m sure, but if not, just kiss him awake like Sleeping Beauty.”

Price wrinkled his nose at Thomas. He ran ahead of Thomas and dropped his overcoat and hat in his room, and picked up something else, before heading to Eric.

He knocked on the door, and moments later a sleepy Eric turned the knob.

“What time is it?” Eric croaked.

“Two in the morning. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, not at all. How was your night?” Eric asked, accepting the bag from Price through the doorway.

“The very best ever. I put a thank you gift in the bag.”

“But this was a thank you, you don’t owe me anything.”

“It’s a gift I had for you anyway. Take it and remember what a nice thing you did for me, and for Thomas. You’re a good friend.”

Eric gave Price a tired smile. “I’m glad I can call you my friend now.”

“Now and forever. I’ll be up before you, so I’ll be there to see you off in the morning. Get back to sleep.”

“It was hard enough falling asleep, regretting I wasn’t there with both of you.”

Price grinned. “If you were, you would have had quite the show.”

Price stole back to his room and found a tin of walnuts and a box of crackers from Thomas sitting on the bed. He devoured both, then drank down a glass of water from the bathroom in three big gulps. His head hit the pillow for three blissful hours of sleep before his alarm woke him to start the next day.

Thomas was also up early to see Eric off. Price packed Eric’s bags on the back of the waiting car, and Thomas opened the car door, but all three stood still as Lady Edith walked out onto the driveway.

“I was up early anyway, so I thought I would come say goodbye,” she explained to Eric.

“I should like to crash your home again,” Eric said with a smile. “Though I’ll be glad to see you more often at the office.”

“I fear our editor isn’t long for the magazine, so yes, you will probably see me much more often.”

“Maybe it’s the early hour so I’m happy to speak out of turn, but good riddance, I say. He doesn’t respect you like he should.”

Lady Edith blushed slightly at Eric’s candor. “Thank you, Eric. And you have all of your bags?” Lady Edith said, looking at Price and the car.

“He does, m’lady,” Price answered.
“Then you should be off, I don’t want to make you miss your train.”

“Please thank your family for their hospitality,” Eric said, stretching out his hand to shake Lady Edith’s. Thomas caught a glimmer on Eric’s wrist, and looked over to see the same kind of two-faced watch he had seen once in Price’s room. Eric climbed in the car and met Thomas’s eyes as Thomas shut the door. Thomas gave Eric a little smile, then patted the top of the car to signal the driver to leave.

“What was that on Eric’s wrist?” Thomas asked Price as they headed back into the house.

“A thank you for his thank you.”

“For when he’s traveling?”

“Precisely.”

“Was the watch always intended for him?”

Price chuckled. “Are you jealous that I haven’t made you a watch from scratch?”

Thomas raised his eyebrows. “A little bit, yes.”

“Well, Christmas is coming,” Price said as they passed through the great hall. “A little patience and you can have one even more splendid than his.”

“Good, because I want to be the man who receives the fanciest gifts from you.”

Price opened the door to the servant’s stairs. “Only the fanciest things for my fancy man,” he whispered as they headed down.
Mr. Carson allowed for Price to join in Nora’s send off at the train station. A light snow filled the air as the family and servants escorted Nora outside and bid their goodbyes.

“Remember,” Thomas told her, holding her hand, “it’s only just about a fortnight and then you’ll be back. And remember what you promised?”

“That I’ll try to be kind and make friends,” Nora said, monotone, as if she were reciting a line from a piece of paper.

“Not ‘try’. You will be kind, and you will make friends,” Thomas said reassuringly.

Nora said her goodbyes to the other children and Nanny Rebecca, then was helped into the car by Price. Price held one door for Lady Edith as Mr. Molesley held the other for Lady Grantham, and then Price climbed into the front of the car with the driver. Miss Baxter rode in a separate car, which Price would have taken if Nora hadn’t insisted he drive with her.

On the ride to the station, Lady Grantham and Lady Edith chatted with Nora about exciting and fun things she could expect in France, and all the activities she would come home to for the holiday. Price turned to see Nora’s expression, which looked unconvinced.

“Lady Grantham and Lady Edith are right,” Price said to Nora over his shoulder. “I was thinking you could write down all the nice things that happen and useful things you learn, and then we can talk about them when you’re back.”

“I think that’s a lovely idea,” Lady Grantham said cheerfully. “Don’t you, Nora?”

“As long as David writes things down that I miss while I’m gone.”

“Of course, I was already planning to do that,” Price said, turning back to face the road.

The train station was busy with morning commuters. Price and the driver carried the luggage to the platform and then Price stood with the women to wait for the train. He felt privileged to stand with them as the driver returned to the car.

“There’s still ten minutes,” Nora said, checking a large clock near the platform.

“How should we spend the time?” Price asked.

“Will you walk up and down the platform with me? Just you and me?”

Price looked to Lady Grantham, who nodded. “Just don’t walk too far, ten minutes can pass quickly.”

Nora took Price’s hand and led him away. They passed man after man dressed for business, with some business women mixed in, too, and then the occasional passenger who looked dressed for a trip. Nora stopped in front of a cart selling nuts.

“Are you hungry?” Price asked, watching Nora press her face against the cart’s glass side.

“I will be, and who knows what they’ll serve on the train.”

Price took a coin from his pocket and handed it to the vendor. The man handed back a little, folded
paper bag, which Price held above Nora’s head.

“What do you say, Miss Grabby-hands?”

“Thank you, David,” Nora said, giggling, hands outstretched.

“Where do you think he’s going?” Nora asked, pointing at a young man who sat on his suitcase as he waited for the train.

“He’s on the run, and his accomplice is hiding in the luggage.”

Nora laughed and kept walking. “What about her?” she asked, nodding at a woman in a fur coat and feathered hat.

“She’s an animal trainer, but she overslept and missed the circus train. Where’s he going?” Price asked about a young man with a stern face, holding a briefcase.

“He’s going to work to make money,” Nora said, “and he's upset that he gambled away too much of it last night.”

Price laughed and spun Nora around by the hand as if they were dancing. “Time to head back.”

“I don’t want to,” she said, but complied.

“Just two weeks. We’ve barely even known each other longer than that, so you won’t miss me too much.”

“That’s enough time to become good friends.”

“Well, exactly. So you should have no trouble making at least one before Christmas.”

Miss Baxter, Lady Grantham, and Lady Edith all smiled as Price and Nora approached them.

“What do you have?” Lady Grantham asked.

“David got me a snack,” Nora said, rattling the bag.

“David, you didn’t have to do that. We’ll make sure you’re paid back.”

“Not at all, your Ladyship,” Price said, “the pleasure is all mine.”

The conductor stepped onto the platform, and Price handed the luggage to him past the waiting ladies. “I remembered all of the bags this time,” he said to Lady Edith.

Nora put out her arms and let Price lift her into a hug before helping her onto the train. She rested her hand on his shoulder and kissed his cheek. “Will you survive without me?” she asked him.

“Only just barely,” Price replied. He helped Lady Grantham and Miss Baxter into the train car, then stood by Lady Edith. As soon as the remaining passengers were inside the train, the whistle blew and the train rolled away. Price and Lady Edith watched and waved until the train was out of view.

“It’s amazing how much she likes you,” Lady Edith observed as the two walked back to the waiting car. Price opened the door for Lady Edith, and as he opened the front for himself, she said, “Why don’t you sit back here with me, David?”
Price and the driver exchanged a confused glance, and Price joined Lady Edith in the back seat. “It’s easier to talk if you’re seated next to me,” Lady Edith explained.

“Did you have something you needed to talk to me about?”

“First, I’m curious if the staff downstairs had anything to say about my visitor.”

Price wasn’t sure what kind of response Lady Edith sought. “Well, they thought it was amusing that he came through the back door, m’Lady. Of course the kitchen staff loved that, they only get to see a visitor under unusual circumstances.”

Lady Edith smiled. “And that’s it? No other talk?”

“What kind of other talk? I can’t recall any.”

“Nothing else, I was just wondering if they had. It’s not everyday someone arrives unannounced and then stays two nights.”

Price was careful with his words, gathering that Lady Edith worried the staff suspected an affair between she and Eric. “That’s true, but the staff knows how courteous the family is to guests, it’s not surprising he would be asked to stay.”

Lady Edith nodded. She folded her hands neatly in her lap. “The second reason I asked you to join me is about Nora. Well, not about her - about you. I saw one of your drawings in Nora’s room, and she showed me the others you gave her. They’re quite something, David.”

Price could feel his face changing color. “Thank you, m’Lady. I didn’t consider that anyone in the family would see them in her possession.”

“Don’t be embarrassed, I’m glad I saw them. I’m getting to know the illustrators and artists at the magazine, and some aren’t even as good as you. I was curious how you wound up a footman rather than doing something in art.”

Price chewed his lip as he thought about a response. “There’s probably a million reasons.”

“I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“You’re not, m’Lady.”

“I am,” Lady Edith chuckled, “I see it on your face. I didn’t mean to prod or pry. I’m getting to know more ordinary people than I ever knew before, and it’s opened my eyes that you lead such interesting and complex lives.”

Price laughed nervously and looked at his lap.

“Heavens, I think that was the most snobbish thing I’ve ever said.”

Price laughed genuinely, and looked up at Lady Edith. “We’re all snobs in our own way. Plenty of ‘em among servants, I can tell you.”

“See, there’s a whole world happening in my own house that I know absolutely nothing about.”

“Maybe you could write about it in your magazine.”

“And then you could illustrate the story,” Lady Edith said, returning Price’s smile.
“Do you write? If I may ask, of course.”

“You can ask any question you want after what I just said to you. Yes, that’s how I wound up in this world. We’re nearly back,” Lady Edith said, looking over the driver’s shoulder through the windshield. “I never did get your answer. I may bother you again about it.”

“You’d never be a bother, m’Lady. You can ask me any question, any time.”

The staff wanted to know all about Price’s ride back and forth, especially after Mr. Molesley reported Price had arrived in the back of the car with Lady Edith. Price relayed the events, making sure they didn’t sound overly interesting, but Daisy was fascinated by every detail.

“I’ve never heard of one of the ladies taking an interest in a servant,” Daisy said later when Price came down before tea service.

“No? Then how did Mr. Branson make his way upstairs?” Mrs. Patmore asked.

“David, are you the next Mr. Branson?” Ellie asked, giggling.

Price gave Ellie a stern look that rarely came across his face when talking to the other staff. “You shouldn’t say such things. You could start a rumor. A false and baseless one, I should add.”

“I’m sorry, David,” Ellie said, her shoulders shrinking.

“Well, then,” Mrs. Patmore said with reverence, “I think we’ve learned there’s a line you don’t cross with David when it comes to the Crawley family. You’re like a miniature Mr. Carson.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Patmore. I can’t recall being paid a better compliment.”

Lord Grantham was away for the afternoon, and with Lady Grantham en route to France, the younger Crawleys were the only ones home for tea. They waited for service in the library.

“I feel lonelier without a companion,” Lady Edith confessed to Mr. Branson.

“According to Mary, Eric wasn’t exactly a companion,” Mr. Branson replied, exchanging a smile with Lady Mary.

“I only meant that I liked having someone to do things with. I know it seems silly, and he was only here two days, but it was so nice to have someone to walk and talk with, especially about work and things going on in the world.”

“You’re planning to spend more time in London, aren’t you?” Mr. Branson asked. “You’ll have all the companions you can handle when you’re there.”

“I still think he had a special place in your heart,” Lady Mary said.

Lady Edith looked to the door. The servants hadn’t arrived with tea, but she lowered her voice. “I thought he may have had a special place in someone else’s heart. I saw Barrow leaving his room yesterday.”

Lady Mary raised her eyebrows.

“He said he was helping him,” Lady Edith continued, “but that seemed rather odd, as if a grown man couldn’t tie his own bowtie.”

“I once needed someone to show me,” Mr. Branson noted.
“Well Bully for Barrow if he was in Eric’s room for less than respectable reasons,” Lady Mary said. “Who could blame him with easy access to a man like that?”

“Mary!” Mr. Branson laughed, “if your parents could hear you right now.”

“Well they can’t, so I can say whatever pleases me.”

“When exactly do you refrain from saying whatever pleases you?” Lady Edith asked.

The door to the library opened and Thomas led Mr. Molesley and Price in for tea service. Lady Mary covered her mouth as a laugh started to rise to her throat. The trays were set down and Thomas stood by the table.

“Is everything alright, your Ladyship?” Thomas asked Lady Mary as she approached the table, curious why she was looking at him as she smiled.

“Everything’s quite alright, Barrow,” she replied. “So,” Lady Mary said, turning to Lady Edith. “How was Nora when you sent her off? Did she come out with any new insults or set any small fires?”

“She was pleasant, actually,” Lady Edith said, taking her tea, “but I think we have David to thank for that. He kept her occupied while we waited to board the train.”

“She does love her men,” Lady Mary said, looking at Thomas. “Are you sad to see her go, Barrow?”

“Truth be told, I am, my Lady,” Thomas said. “She has a hard exterior, but she’s a nice little girl, deep down.”

“That sounds like someone else I know,” Mr. Branson said, looking at Lady Mary.

Lady Mary took her place on the sofa. “My exterior isn’t quite that hard, thank you very much, Tom.”

“It is interesting how the children take to the staff,” Lady Edith said, joining her sister, but speaking more to Thomas than Lady Mary. “Barrow, you get along easily with all the children.”

“Who wouldn’t get along with them, my Lady? They're all good little souls.”

“We’ve had more than one member of staff who didn’t,” Lady Mary replied.

“And you, too, David,” Lady Edith said across the room to Price, standing by the door.

“What about you, Molesley?” Mr. Branson asked.

Mr. Molesley straightened his back and cocked his head as he thought. “Older children tend to connect better to me than little ones, but the children here are wonderful, of course.”

Lady Edith swallowed a bite of fig cake and looked thoughtfully at Lady Mary. “I suppose it’s nothing new. To this day, you hold a special place in Carson’s heart.”

Lady Mary looked into her teacup with a warm smile. “And he in mine.”

“I have a question, if I might ask. Since we’re all chatting so openly,” Thomas said.

“What is it, Barrow?” Lady Mary asked.
“Nora’s away for school, but it seems like she will still stay a member of this household. Should the staff not start calling her Miss Nora?”

“A member of this household,” Lady Mary sighed. “Yes, you’re right. Please make sure everyone calls her Miss Nora when she returns, though it might go to her head.”

“You just don’t like the competition for haughtiest girl in the house,” Lady Edith teased.

Lady Mary finished her tea and narrowed her eyes. “Really, Edith, stop comparing me to her.”

“She’s probably more like me,” Thomas said, taking liberty that the conversation still extended to him.

“How do you figure?” Mr. Branson asked.

“She wants to be friendly, but gets in her own way. She ends up pushing people away instead of drawing them toward her.”

“Is that how you see yourself?” Lady Edith asked.

Thomas smiled politely. “I know I can be my own worst enemy, my lady.”

“Who among us can’t be guilty of that time to time?” Mr. Branson said.

Mr. Carson entered the library, and all heads turned toward him. “There’s someone downstairs for Mr. Barrow.”

“Too bad, we were enjoying his company,” Lady Mary said to Mr. Carson over her shoulder.

“Really, my Lady?” Mr. Carson asked quizzically.

“Yes, and we were also talking a little about you.”

Mr. Carson looked at Thomas. “I suppose Mr. Barrow can fill me in on the details of your conversation after he sees to his visitor.” He took Thomas’s place by the table and watched Thomas as he left the room.

Thomas dashed downstairs. No one ever came calling for him, and now two surprise visitors had arrived within the week.

In the servant’s hall, Thomas’s brother-in-law Paul stood waiting for him, wringing his hat in his hands. He had been an athletic man in his youth, with a physique that filled a doorway. Even in middle age, he was still a large and imposing figure, with a full head of greying brown hair and brown eyes, now framed by a few wrinkles. A few of the servants were also in the hall, going about their duties as Paul stood among them. He had politely declined an offer for tea from Mrs. Hughes, and she stood near him, not sure what else to say while they waited for Thomas.

Thomas slowed to a trot as he laid eyes on Paul.

“What brings you here?” Thomas asked as casually as possible.

“Is there somewhere more private we could talk?”

“You can use my sitting room,” Mrs. Hughes offered merrily, smiling at both men in the hopes of eliciting a smile from at least one of them. She led them to the room and gestured to her small table. “Please, sit. You must let me get you something. If not tea, then water perhaps?”
“Water would be fine, thank you,” Paul said, accepting the offer out of guilt for creating the situation rather than thirst. He didn’t sit or acknowledge Thomas until Mrs. Hughes had come and gone. He sipped the water as he pulled out his chair, and motioned for Thomas to sit.

“I’m guessing this isn’t a social call?” Thomas asked.

Paul smiled. “I wish it were.”

“I hope whatever news you bring isn’t too dire. I suppose if it were, I would have received a telephone call or telegram rather than a visit.’

“No one’s been maimed or died, I guess I should’ve started with that.”

“That’s a good start, no hospital visits or funerals to attend. So what does bring you here?”

Paul tapped his heel on the ground and leaned forward in his chair. “I’m sure you think I snubbed you all these years because of… what you are, but that’s not what upset me.”

“You probably felt like I abandoned you all,” Thomas said, his lips jerking into an uneasy smile. “I pushed you away before you had a chance to reject me.”

“No one would have rejected you.”

“I see that clearly now, but a little too late.”

Paul shook his head. “No, it’s not too late. That’s why I’m here. I really could’ve used your help all these years, and I need it now.”

“Help? From me?”

“With your sister.”

“Why? What’s wrong? Is she ill?”

Paul rested an arm on the table. “She’s in one of her… moods… that she gets in. I can’t shake her from it, none of us can. You know what I mean, don’t you?”

“I have an inkling.”

“Not quite like your father’s.”

“I should hope not.”

“But they’re not far off.”

Thomas played with his hands in his lap. “How often does she get like that?”

“Used to be every few years when the boys were younger. You remember, don’t you? I can handle every few years. Maybe ten years ago, it started happening more often. The last five years, I’d say once every six months. I was bitter with you for not being around to help me.”

“How could I have helped?”

Paul shrugged. “She’s your sister. She loves you, maybe she’d listen to you. At least you could’ve helped me pull her off the bleeding ceiling when she was at her worst, or helped with the boys when I was trying to help with her.”
“It’s that bad?”

“Like I said, not far off from your father. I came close many times to just dropping her at the hospital, but I know what they do with people like her in places like that.”

Thomas struggled to keep his eyes on Paul’s, looking down frequently at his hands. “If I’m being honest, I didn’t even remember she had times like that until just now.”

“I don’t blame you for allowing yourself to forget them. I’m glad the boys are out of the house and don’t have to bare witness, but still, I can’t do this alone anymore. Can you see her?”

“I can ask for a day. I’ll say it’s her health, they don’t need details. You came in person so that adds credibility.”

“That’s not a lie, it is her health.”

“I still don’t think there’s much I can do to help, but I’ll try. I owe that to the both of you.”

Paul sipped his water and exhaled. “Thomas, even just being there for the day helps me. It means I can go to work and not worry about what may have happened to her while I was gone.”

“Let me ask while you’re still here so I can tell you before you leave.”

“I’d appreciate that. I’m sorry to come and disturb you in the big house, I hope I don’t get you in trouble. I’m just at my wits end, and I couldn’t think of anything else to do with myself besides maybe jump in the river.”

“Well a soggy husband won’t help Jennie much, will it?” Thomas said with a smile. “I won’t get in trouble. It might make the butler grumpy, but that will be about the worst of it.”

Thomas excused himself and found both Mr. Carson and Mrs. Hughes not far from the sitting room. He explained his sister was ill and Paul had asked for a day of Thomas’s help.

“Is a day enough?” Mrs. Hughes asked.

Mr. Carson grumbled. “A day is fine. If things are grave, of course we can discuss a longer absence.”

“A day is generous,” Thomas said. “Thank you, Mr. Carson.”

Thomas told Paul he would come the next morning and spend the night, heading back first thing the following day. “The servants are having tea soon, if you wanted to stay,” Thomas offered.

“I should get back to her.”

“Will an extra hour change things much? And when’s the last time you ate?”

“It probably wouldn’t. And, last night, I think.”

“Good, then you'll stay.”

The servants were curious about the strange guest, doubly so when they learned he was a relation of Thomas’s. Paul gave Miss Baxter a hug when he saw her, whispering the reason for his visit after he kissed her cheek. “I’m so sorry,” she said, holding his arm. “I’ll visit as soon as I can.”

They all gathered for tea. Paul sat between Thomas and Anna, looking especially large seated next
“I’m sorry to hear your wife is ill,” Mrs. Hughes said to Paul. “I’m glad you’re staying for a bite before you head back. It can be very taxing taking care of others.”

“IT is, ma’am,” Paul said, “so I’m thankful you can spare Thomas for a day to help me.”

Mr. Molesley passed a tray of bread to Paul. “I don’t think I’ve ever met any of Mr. Barrow’s family.”

“There’s not much of a Barrow family left,” Paul said, “Plenty on my side, but Thomas is mostly all my boys have when it comes to Barrows. That’s why we named our youngest after him.”

“Isn’t that lovely?” Anna remarked. “You have a namesake.”

Thomas sat quietly. He hadn’t considered that Paul might share personal information with the rest of the staff.

“Are you close with your nephews?” Mr. Molesley asked.

“The boys grew up very fond of him,” Paul answered for Thomas. “One of our middle boys entered service to be like his uncle.”

Thomas took a sip of his tea and looked at Price, who was staring in his direction.

“Mr. Barrow doesn’t talk much about personal things,” Anna told Paul.

“Am I saying too much?” Paul asked Thomas quietly.

Thomas shook his head. “Some of them have known me for fifteen years, maybe it’s time they knew a thing or two about my life.”

Anna looked across Paul at Thomas. “It certainly makes you seem more mortal.”

“I’ve never been accused of such a thing in this house before.”

“I’ve seen you be mortal plenty of times,” Mrs. Hughes said.

Paul chuckled and sipped his tea. “So what else does everybody want to know about Thomas?” he asked, looking around the table.

Daisy was hovering by the other end of the table, hoping for a chance to participate in the conversation. “I’d like to know where he learned to dance,” she said, finally placing her tray of bread down. “Some of us were just talking about it.”

Paul put his arm across the back of Thomas’s chair. “You still dance, do you?”

“No, not so much anymore.”

“What about singing?”

“Never.”

“He learned from his mother,” Paul said, looking back down the table to Daisy. “She was a beautiful dancer. Talented in many ways. From pianist to painter, quite the artist in her spare time.”
Thomas looked up from his cup at Miss Baxter, who was staring at him as much as Price was.

“How old was Mr. Barrow when you met him?” Daisy asked.

“Daisy, don’t you have work in the kitchen to tend to?” Mr. Carson asked.

“She’s enjoying herself. Stay, Daisy,” Mrs. Hughes said.

“I don’t want to be a bother,” Paul said, taking his arm back from Thomas’s chair.

“You aren’t at all,” Mrs. Hughes assured him. “So, how old was he?”

“Hmm, math isn’t my strong suit. You had to be thirteen, maybe fourteen?”

“Thereabouts,” Thomas said, swirling his tea in his cup.

Anna smiled. “Thirteen year old Thomas. What kind of mischief did he get into?”

“At that age? None that I can remember. He had a lot of responsibility and took it all seriously, I remember a lot less shenanigans than other boys his age.”

“I have a hard time believing that about our Mr. Barrow,” Mr. Bates said with a chuckle.

Paul leaned back in his chair, thinking. “Well, there was that friend of yours, what was her name? The little curly-headed blonde attached to you at the hip.”

“Esther,” Thomas said wistfully.

“Esther,” Paul laughed. “What a card that girl was,” he said, patting Thomas's back, “and so were you when you were with her. Now that I think of it, you two got in trouble plenty. Nothing too serious, trouble is a strong word. Hijinks is more fitting.”

“I’d like to hear an example,” Mr. Bates requested.

“Hmm. Ah, here’s one,” Paul said, putting his arm around Thomas’s chair again. “There was some sort of social event that the school was putting on, I don’t know what exactly, but it involved dress up and dancing. Tommy and Esther - I’m sorry, Thomas and Esther, wanted nothing to do with it, but their parents insisted they go. Instead of fighting it, they planned to dress up, get dropped at the school together, and then sneak off and do something else. I’m sure you wouldn’t have been caught if you chose a less conspicuous activity instead.”

Thomas smiled and played with the handle of his cup. “Oh Esther, she was so much fun.”

“First, they drank sweet wine she stole from her sister. Then, they broke into the stable at the house where her mother worked and stole two horses.”

“We borrowed two horses,” Thomas said, turning his smile from his cup to Paul.

“They borrowed two horses, and they galloped around the roads of Ripon, drunk, dressed in their finest, laughing and screaming their fool heads off. Their biggest mistake was taking a path by the constable’s office, though I’m sure they could have heard you halfway across the city.”

“How much trouble did they get in?” Anna asked.

“Esther always negotiated her way out of anything, and Thomas’s mother handled his father’s temper over the whole affair. They were the heroes at school for the next little while, I remember
Two bells rang on the wall behind Mr. Carson, but the staff was slow to rise and end their tea with Paul.

“I take it that means it’s time to go?” Paul said to Thomas.

“I can’t wait to see what kind of grief I get from everyone now,” Thomas said, rising with everyone else.

“Thank you,” Paul said to Mr. Carson. “This was a very nice distraction today.”

“I’m sorry Mr. Carson,” Thomas added. “I didn’t mean to turn tea into a spectacle.”

“On the contrary,” Mr. Carson said, eyebrows raised. “It’s nice to know you’re a human being afterall.”

Thomas saw Paul to the door and said goodbye, then turned to find Price behind him.

“That was very interesting, wouldn’t you say…”

Thomas cringed. “Please don’t say it.”

“…Tommy.”

“I hope that’s out of your system, I don’t want to hear it again. You know, I expected you to ask questions, but you were silent.”

“I assume you share what you’re comfortable sharing. If you wanted me to know those things, you would’ve told me yourself. I’d like to know, though, did you keep in touch with Esther?”

Thomas’s expression softened. “She died of scarlet fever just before her twentieth birthday.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Not as sorry as me. She was my champion. I think losing her was how I ended up staying in service. She never would have let it happen. I wasn’t allowed to be mediocre.”

“You’re not mediocre.”

“I am now, David,” Thomas said, with a look that told Price not to argue. “There’s work to do and I have to pack, and you should get on with your business.”

“You never mentioned her, but it sounds like she was very important to you. I’d like to hear about her sometime.”

“Sometime, maybe. I did a good job trying to forget her.”

“Sounds like she deserves to be remembered.”

“Not now, David,” Thomas said, the look of warning back in his eyes.

Price squeezed Thomas’s hand quickly, before anyone could walk by. “Sorry. Go pack.”

Thomas put a cigarette between his lips and headed upstairs. His thoughts were occupied by Jennie and Esther for the rest of the evening. During dinner service, Lady Grantham asked Thomas if he
was ill, to which he replied, “No, your Ladyship,” while Mr. Carson glared at him for being so
distracted.

In the morning, he hoped Price would be up to say goodbye, but Price’s door was shut and he
wasn’t downstairs. He thought a kiss would give him courage, and was disappointed that Price
hadn’t read his mind and woken up early to see him off.

Thomas had done more than a good job of forgetting Esther. He’d buried away memories of his
father’s struggles, and that his sister shared them. Jennie seemed happy with every visit, phone
call, and letter. It was hard to imagine her behaving like she used to years ago, and impossible to
picture her like their father.

Thomas arrived at his sister’s house early, but Paul had already left for work. Thomas let himself
into Jennie’s house. The dog, a hound of mixed heritage, gave Thomas a lively greeting, then
whined and walked in circles. Thomas put down his suitcase, hat, and coat, and kneeled by the
dog.

“Is everyone sad in this house?” he asked the animal, putting his palm out for the dog to inspect.

The dog licked Thomas’s hand, then ran halfway up the stairs and turned back to Thomas.

“I’m coming,” Thomas said, following the dog up the stairs.

There were two empty bedrooms, and a third with the door closed. The dog scratched a paw at the
door and looked up at Thomas.

Thomas knocked. “Hello in there. There are two of us out here eager to see you. I’m coming in.”
He turned the knob and opened the door a crack, and the dog snuck her snout through the opening
and pushed into the room. The dog hopped on the bed and nudged herself under Jennie’s arm.
Jennie lay on her side, dressed in day clothes but covered with a blanket, her back to the door.

“Will you come downstairs and let me make you breakfast?” Thomas asked.

“I can’t believe he dragged you here,” Jennie said into her pillow.

Thomas approached the bed. “I came of my own free will.”

“A waste of your day. Please go spend it on something worthwhile. I’ll write to you when I’m out
of this mess.”

“I’m not leaving until tomorrow.”

Jennie wiped her face, her back still to Thomas. “Please, I don’t want you to see me like this, it’s
embarrassing.”

“If you don’t come downstairs, I’ll just lie with you in the bed all day.”

Jennie stroked the dog and didn’t reply.

Thomas kneeled on the bed, and when Jennie didn’t turn to face him, he propped a pillow up
against the headboard and sat on the bed next to her. “I’m on my feet all day so this isn’t such a bad
way to spend a day off. Really, you’re doing me the favor.”

The dog jumped over Jennie and laid between the two Barrows, rolling onto her back, presenting
her stomach for petting.
“At least one girl in this house will acknowledge me,” Thomas said, patting the dog’s stomach.
“I’m so tired of talking or being talked at about this. You can’t talk me out of how I’m feeling.”
“Then let’s not talk about that. What are you getting the boys for Christmas?”
Jennie was silent. The dog wiggled until Thomas petted her again.
“Well, I already know what my boyfriend is getting me.”
Jennie lifted herself onto her elbow and looked over her shoulder at Thomas.
“A watch,” Thomas continued. “He makes them. Not by trade, though he should’ve, but that’s another story.”
Jennie rolled over and faced Thomas. Her eyes and cheeks were hollow, the same look Thomas saw in the mirror when he wasn’t taking care of himself. “You have a boyfriend?”
“His name’s David.”
“How do you know him?”
“He works at Downton.”
“What’s he like?”
“Attractive?”
Thomas laughed, the question taking him by surprise. He looked down at Jennie. “He makes Rudolph Valentino look like a heap of rubbish. And there’s another man who’s sweet on me, too.”
“Ooh, the scandal. What’s man number two like?”
“Golly, sounds like David should be nervous about your other man,” Jennie said, smiling. “You’ve never talked about boyfriends with me, not even when you were younger.”
“I didn’t talk to anyone about that sort of thing. I still don’t, not really. You’re special, though, and I know I can trust you.”
“You’ve no idea what it means to hear you say that.”
“Does it mean you’ll come down for breakfast?” Thomas asked with a sunny voice.
Jennie pushed herself up from the bed and joined Thomas in her kitchen. She dragged a chair from the table to the window to enjoy the light, and looked on as Thomas attempted to navigate her kitchen. He poked through cabinets and boxes, trying to figure out what he would make and how he would manage to make it.
“Do a lot of cooking at Downton?”
“They trust me to chop things when they need an extra pair of hands. I haven’t been allowed to
crack an egg in years, and I wouldn’t even try to get near the stove. That’d end with a wooden
spoon coming down hard on my hand.”

“Then shove over, you, and I’ll make it.”

Jennie quickly pulled out butter, bread, sausage, onions, and herbs. She gave Thomas a few tasks
and did the rest.

“So you’ve forgotten all you learned about cooking as a lad?”

“Not all, but I’ve been out of practice. I guess I ought to learn, I may be on my own in future.”

Jennie placed a slab of butter on a heating iron pan and pushed it around with a knife as it melted.
“Wait,” she said, distracted by her work, “out on your own? Are you being laid off or fired?”

“No, not that I’m aware of, at least,” Thomas said as he minced garlic. “I might pursue a different
kind of work. David has an idea that would put me in London.”

“Oh, I always wanted to live in London. So much more happening than in this little city. When will
you decide if you’re leaving for London?”

Thomas watched as Jennie cracked eggs one-handed and dropped them into the smoking pan. “I
said I’d give it until Valentine’s Day to decide, but I’m thinking that if an offer really stands, I’m
going to take it.”

“I didn’t even ask, what would you be doing?”

“Helping run a watchmaking shop.”

Jennie laughed and her face looked almost like her normal self. “You can’t escape clockwork,
Thomas. It’s in your veins.”

“Watches are quite different, but yes, it doesn’t get much closer to the family business than that.”

Thomas completed his tasks for Jennie and watched over her shoulder as she finished making their
breakfast. He helped her plate their food and brought it to the table. Neither had eaten since the day
before and both dug into their plates greedily.

“Reminds me of Saturday morning breakfast with mama,” Jennie said between bites.

“I haven’t thought of those mornings in a long time,” Thomas said. Once his hunger was satiated,
he felt brave enough to venture onto the topic at hand. “You look quite a lot happier than when I
arrived.”

“I always look happiest when I see a plate of food coming,” Jennie joked as she slathered jam on
her toast.

“Well, I know you haven’t been happy in general these days. Paul’s worried about you.”

“Clearly, if he barged in on you at work and made you rush to my bedside. He exaggerates. I go
through this, and I always come out the other side eventually. I tell him everyday he needn’t worry
when he’s at work, but he still does. Though I’ve no clue what he’s so worried he’ll come home to.”

“Don’t you?” Thomas asked. He pulled his cigarettes from his vest and put one between his lips.
“Did you come here to give me a hard time? Don’t smoke those in my kitchen.”

“Fine,” Thomas said, putting his cigarette away. “I like a good fight, but I’m not going to come all the way to Ripon for one. I came because it sounds like things have gotten worse over time, not better.”

“Are you a doctor now?”

“Have you consulted with one?”

“God, Thomas,” Jennie complained, hitting the table with her fist, “what will a doctor do, hmm? I’d end up the same as I am here, but instead of my bed I’ll be on a mattress in some institution, probably on some sedative, though I feel like I’m drugged all the time, anyhow.”

“It’s not always like that anymore,” Thomas said steadily. “There are other kinds of treatments, I’ve read about them.”

“Ahh, you’ve read about them, now you’re the expert,” Jennie said with a sneer. Her chin trembled and she squeezed her fist, still pressed into the wooden table top. “Maybe in a big city, but I’m in little Ripon, and there are no new kinds of treatments here for the likes of me.”

“The Crawley family has connections in medicine. I can ask them for ideas.”

Jennie laughed. “So what, you’ll tell your employer you’re worried that your crazy sister will end up hurting herself or worse, and ask for their help to avoid putting me away under lock and key?”

Thomas put his hand over Jennie’s fist. “It doesn’t do you any good to put yourself away under lock and key, either. Let me see if there’s anything they can do. They can be quite helpful and generous when they want to be.”

Jennie shook her head. “Don’t trouble them. Don’t trouble yourself. I always get past it.”

“But you shouldn’t have to go through it in the first place. Let me try at least? It would be one little step toward making up for all the years I turned my back on you.”

The dog had been waiting for scraps from breakfast, and her patience began to wane. She put her paw on Jennie’s lap and yipped.

“Everyone’s whining at me this morning,” Jennie said, telling the dog to sit before giving her a piece of egg. “I’m tired of talking about this. Why don’t you go back to work? You can go ahead and ask, but I know it won’t do any good, Thomas. Though I love you for caring.”

“Are you kidding? I have an entire day off now. I saw a room at the top of your stairs with a pretty large bed. I’m not heading back to my rinky dink little room when I can spend a night up there.”

“Then go visit some friends while you’re here. Come back when Paul gets home and we can scrape something together for supper.”

“You are my sole reason for coming, so accept it and let’s move on. Do you still have a backgammon set?”

“Grandpa’s? Yes.”

“Go get it. Best three out of five.”

“What do I get if I win?” Jennie asked, a small smile creeping over her lips.
The same smile grew on Thomas’s face. “I brought a big bag of penny chews, and I’ll share them with you if you win.”

“Oh goodness, Thomas, penny chews and backgammon. It warms my heart that you remember those kinds of things.”

“All the best memories from my childhood are because of you, how could I forget?”

“You better share even if I lose.”

“Stop yammering and get the board, and I’ll consider it.”

Jennie set the board on a table, but they eventually moved to the floor in front of the hearth, laid out like they played when they were younger. Over their games of backgammon, Thomas and Jennie chatted about things from their shared past, things that happened during the years they didn’t speak, and then of things to come. Thomas felt his visit was worthwhile when Jennie spoke about positive things the future could hold.

“Can I give you my diagnosis?” Thomas asked after Jennie won the final round.

“As long as you share your candy.”

“You don’t have anything to occupy your mind, no work or real hobbies. There aren’t little boys to chase around and take up all your time. You need to find something meaningful to do with your time.”

Jennie grabbed the bag of candy from Thomas and unwrapped a piece of licorice. “I think your diagnosis is too simple and there’s much more to it than that.” She sifted through the bag to take the pieces she wanted.

“We’re splitting fifty fifty, you don’t get to pick out the best bits,” Thomas said, picking pieces back from the pile Jennie made in her lap. “Of course there’s more to it. I was raised by the same man, don’t forget, but while I look for some way to help you, you should find something to do with your time other than laying in bed and staring at the wall.”

Jennie stole a piece of taffy from Thomas, unwrapped it quickly, and put it in her mouth. “I will try.”

“I can’t understand you with your mouth full.”

“I will try!” Jennie laughed, struggling to speak with taffy stuck in her molars. “Thank you, Thomas.”

“For what? You stole that piece.”

“You know for what.”

The two packed up the game and climbed back to their feet, more slowly than they would have as children.

Thomas noticed a picture of himself on the wall from when he was younger. “Do you think Esther would have been disappointed in me?”

Jennie followed Thomas’s eyes, but remained confused by his question. “Where did that come from?”
“I haven’t thought of her in ages, but Paul mentioned her yesterday and now I can’t get her off my mind. She had big ideas for me, and look at me now. I’ve been in service my entire adult life, I’ve made nothing else of myself.”

“Then make something of yourself now.”

Jennie’s response caught Thomas off guard. He expected something reassuring, comforting, maternal. He laughed lightly. “So you agree I’m nothing?”

“Would you like my honest opinion?”

Thomas looked at Jennie with wide, uneasy eyes. “Not really, but please say it.”

“I think you can do better.”

Thomas ran a hand over his hair, then let his hands come to rest on his hips. “Well I didn’t make nothing of myself. Under-butler is something.”

“You were looking for me to disagree with you and make you feel good about your job, eh? Well I’m sorry, but this is how I feel. I think you settled for something that comes easy for you. You made something of yourself, don’t misunderstand me, but it’s obviously not the something you wanted. Esther would be disappointed that you let your dreams fall by the wayside.”

Thomas stood silently, hands still on his hips. His breathing quickened and his chin quivered like Jennie’s had over breakfast. “I don’t even know what my dreams are anymore.”

“Then you need to figure it out, love. You can always talk to me, but I will be brutally honest, because I think you’re strong enough to take it.”

Thomas clapped his hands together. “So now what?”

“Well, I feel badly that I made you nearly cry, so I’ll let you smoke in the kitchen while I make tea.”

“Alright, but I wasn’t going to cry.”

“Sure you weren’t, little brother.”

The two avoided serious subjects for the rest of the day, enjoying each other's quiet company until Paul returned from work. Paul made supper and kept conversation going until bedtime, relieved to have another person in the house to help engage Jennie. Thomas kissed Jennie goodnight before he turned in, telling her he would be up well before she would. However, in the morning she was dressed and downstairs waiting for him, with a sandwich for him to take for breakfast and hug to last until she would see him next.

Thomas arrived back at Downton while breakfast service was in progress. There was little activity downstairs, so he took his time unpacking and getting into his uniform for the day. As he bent to put his empty suitcase under his bed, he saw that his post from the day before had been left on his bed. There was a little red envelope with Eric’s return address. Thomas opened and unfolded it quickly. The handwriting was looser than Eric’s usual penmanship, the ink bleeding a little where the letter was folded.

*My dear Thomas,*

*I attempted to write this letter three times with no success, so here’s hoping this one doesn’t end up
in a crumpled ball in the bin. Perhaps absence does make the heart fonder, or maybe distance gives clarity? - oh hell, I don’t know. I should say it plainly. I’m throwing my hat back in the ring.

I know, after everything I told you that you should do, I feel nothing but regret over it since returning to London. I pushed you toward David because I thought you would be there with him, and I would be here alone, and it was the best thing for us. Now I picture you coming to London, and it changes everything.

I’m drawn to you like no one else, and I know you’re drawn to me. I wasn’t lying when I said I want what’s best for you, but now I realize that maybe I’m what’s best for you. We could have a real go at things if you move here, don’t you think? I am in love with you after all, I’m just sorry I didn’t see it when I was there. David is a lovely person, and I see clearly why you love him. However, you and I are better suited.

I completely understand if you don’t want to stay my friend after I wrote all of this, but I had to write it if there’s even the slightest chance that you could be mine. I want to crumple this up, but I won’t. I’ll post it and then probably regret it, but then it’s done and you’ll know how I feel. I have to try or I’ll never forgive myself.

-E

“Hey handsome, how’s your sister?”

Thomas looked up from the letter to see Price leaning against his door frame.

“Oh, I thought you were serving breakfast,” Thomas said, folding the letter quickly.

“I was. You look pale, are you getting ill?”

“No, it was just a long day yesterday.”

Price closed Thomas’s door. “I’m sorry you had a hard day. Would a kiss make it better?”

“No,” Thomas said, putting his hand up as Price approached. “I’m just not in the mood right now. I should let Mr. Carson know I’m back.”

“You’re not in the mood because of your sister, or because of whatever’s in your hand?”

Thomas squeezed the letter. “I need a little space today, David. Can you manage to respect that?”

Price gave Thomas a flirty smile. “I just wanted to give you a warm welcome. One night away and I’m pining for you, what can I say?”

“I’d like space for the whole day, please.”

“Oh,” Price said, as if Thomas’s words struck him physically. “I see.” He swallowed and walked backward to the door. “Then I’ll bother you no more today.”

Thomas didn’t look up as Price left. When he was sure he was alone again, he unfolded the letter and read it again twice over. He put it back in it’s red envelope and put it in his jacket pocket, as no space in his room seemed safe, and headed downstairs.
Chapter 22

Thomas’s one day of space grew to four days. Price treaded lightly at first, but became more frustrated and withdrawn with each passing day. Lady Edith noticed Price looked less cheerful than usual, assuming Nora’s absence caused the change in mood. She thought a diversion might be nice for him, and came up with an idea that would benefit them both. She pulled him aside in the great hall after tea service.

“I was wondering if you could do me a favor.”

“Of course, m’Lady, what can I do for you?”

“You might have heard that my editor quit, which is why I’m headed to London tomorrow. I will need to play editor until I find someone suitable to take the job. I want my readers to become familiar with me. I wondered if you could draw something like you did for Miss Nora. Realistic, but somewhat like a sketch. I think it would print well and reflect the kind of image I want to portray. I’ll compensate you fairly, of course.”

Price thought Lady Edith was going to ask for a glass of water or a bite to eat. He replied when his tongue finally untied itself. “I would be honored. But, of course, if you don’t like it, please don’t feel that you have to use it. I’d understand.”

“I’ll like it very much, I’m sure. So, how does it work? Do I sit for you while you draw?”

Price smiled at the idea of Lady Edith posing for him. “It would be best if I could at least draw the sketch with you present, but I can finish it on my own.”

“We can use the drawing room, it seems fitting. I’ll tell Mr. Carson I’m borrowing you. How long do you need?”

Price glanced up at the gallery and saw Thomas looking down. “Not much time, fifteen minutes? Thirty?”

“You’re fast! Well, get your things, I’ll find Mr. Carson and then meet you in the drawing room.”

Price followed Lady Edith’s direction and collected his supplies from his bedroom. Thomas caught up with Price just as he stepped back into the hall.

“What were you and Lady Edith discussing?”

“You think you can ignore me for days and then pounce when there’s a promise of gossip?” Price scoffed.

“The two aren’t related.”

Price rolled his eyes and adjusted the sketchbook under his arm.

“So now you’re the one not talking to me?” Thomas asked crisply.

“It’s not a game” Price snapped. “My heart is breaking over this.”

“Because I needed a few days to myself? Really, David, come on.”

“Do I seriously have to explain this to you? You go away for a day and suddenly you want nothing
to do with me. I had the best night of my life with the love of my life, only to have you snuff me out like one of your cigarettes. I’m tired of this same thing over and over. Pull me in, push me away, pull me back. Make up your bloody mind.”

Thomas had no good response, and looked down at Price silently rather than saying something he might regret.

“She’s waiting for me,” Price said flatly, turning on his heel to go to the drawing room.

Price left his frustration behind and let himself into the room. Lady Edith sat by a window. Pink light from the setting winter sun fell across her profile.

“Should I sit here, or somewhere else.”

“There is perfect,” Price said, pulling up a chair to sit across from her.

Lady Edith waved her hands in little circles. “What do I do with these?”

“You can lay them in your lap, elbows out to the side. No, more relaxed. Yes, like that. Tip your chin down.”

Lady Edith attempted to follow Price’s direction.

“Not that far, up just a little.”

She tried and failed again. Price reached out his hand and almost touched her chin before remembering himself. He pulled his hand back and opened his sketchbook.

“No, I want it to be right, you can pose me.”

Price smiled timidly and held Lady Edith’s jaw, turning her face and tipping it down slightly. He adjusted the hair around her face with a finger and then sat back.

“Better?” Lady Edith asked.

“Yes, m’Lady. I won’t take long,” he said, sharpening a pencil.

“Take whatever time you need. You’re doing this for me, not the other way around.”

Price sharpened another two pencils, then sketched three quick images before turning the page and sketching another three. Lady Edith nearly looked downward to look at the sketchbook, but she resisted and stayed still, meeting Price’s eyes each time he looked up.

“Do you draw people often?”

“I think I’ve drawn everyone downstairs at least once,” Price said, finally settling on how he wanted to draw Lady Edith. He turned to a clean page and spent ten quiet, focused minutes drawing. Lady Edith spent the ten minutes studying Price, intensely curious how he found himself employed by her family when he clearly had other gifts.

“Are you sure that was enough time?” Lady Edith asked as Price closed his book.

“Plenty, yes. I can do the rest tonight. I should get back downstairs.”

“Can I take a look?”
“No, no peeking,” Price said, putting his hand over the cover of the book.

“Is tonight really enough time? You can always send it to me, or I can get it when I come back for Christmas.”

“Don’t worry, I never make promises I can’t keep. I’ll have it to you first thing. May I be dismissed, m’Lady? The Christmas decorations will be here shortly and I need to help.”

Lady Edith blinked, snapping back to reality where Price was a footman and not her personal portrait artist. “Yes, you may. Thank you, David.”

Price put his things away and went down to the kitchen. He was eager to share his experience with the kitchen staff, but Thomas was hovering by Daisy, watching her make truffles, and so Price stayed quiet.

“All done with Lady Edith?” Thomas asked, loud enough for Daisy and Ellie to look up from their work.

“What were you doing with Lady Edith?” Daisy asked, taking Thomas’s bait. Thomas sucked the inside of his cheek to avoid smiling.

“She needed help with something, so I helped her.”

“Why so vague, David?” Ellie asked, a hint of teasing in her voice.

“It was nothing of consequence, and I suppose nobody’s business.”

“Testy, testy,” Thomas said, smiling at Ellie.

“Pay them no mind, David,” Daisy said, stirring a pot of melting chocolate. “You don’t have to share if you don’t want to.”

The back door opened and Lee came in, followed by several of the outdoor staff hustling in with crates of holly and branches of evergreen. Even the staff from the stables helped, as there were crates upon crates to carry inside. Price got to know the groom when he visited the stables and greeted him with a wide smile. Thomas was suddenly too focused on sizing up the other man to give the rest direction.

Lee shifted a box in his arms and cleared his throat.

“Hello,” Thomas said, dragging his eyes away from the man. “Bring those to the hall. I’ll round up the others and everyone will meet you there.”

Price began to follow the outdoor staff, but Thomas grabbed his shoulder. “Help me find everyone, won’t you?”

“I think you can manage that yourself,” Price said, jerking his shoulder away.

Thomas looked back at the kitchen. Daisy was watching from her spot at the stove. “I’m not sure what’s gotten into you,” he said, fixing his sleeve, “but the correct response is, ‘yes, Mr. Barrow’.”

Price looked at Daisy and she returned her eyes to her pot. “Yes, Mr. Barrow,” he said through his teeth.

Thomas led Price through the halls downstairs, telling each person he found to head up. When the halls were cleared, he turned to Price. “You seemed especially pleased to see that man. Who is
“Owen, the groom? Don’t you know the men outside?”

“I know the gardener, but I have no reason to know the rest.”

“Ah yes, that’s right, because being friendly isn’t reason enough for you to know somebody.”

Thomas clenched and unclenched his jaw. “Why did that look come across your face when you saw him?”

“What look? A friendly smile?”

“That was more than a friendly smile.”

Price smirked and crossed his arms. “You know what I wonder? I wonder why you’re so quick to accuse me of something improper. Are you hiding something improper yourself?”

“I’ve done nothing improper.”

“Your behavior says otherwise.”

“There you are,” Mr. Molesley said, turning the corner to find Thomas and Price. “Mr. Carson sent me to look for you.”

“We were just on our way up,” Thomas said. He followed Mr. Molesley, with Price trailing behind.

The front doors were wide open, and through them several men helped ease the Christmas tree inside. Mr. Carson handed over supervision to Thomas and turned his attention to decorating the hall. He asked Price to help, then pointed to three members of the staff to help as well, including the groom. Mr. Carson assigned Price and the groom to work together wrapping garlands around the banisters of the main stairs.

As the tree was raised into position, Thomas found himself watching Price instead. Price chatted and laughed with the other man as they passed the garland over and under the banisters. The groom whispered to Price, and then Price whispered something back that earned him a playful elbow to the ribs from the groom. Price caught Thomas looking and took a step back from the groom, continuing to wrap the banisters.

When the two finished, they walked together down the stairs to find the next task in need of some hands. Price fell back and let the groom approach Thomas for the next assignment.

“You can start separating the holly,” Thomas told the groom. “And you,” he said to Price while looking at his clipboard, “help Miss Baxter unpack the ornaments.”

“Fun’s over,” the groom said to Price before they parted ways. “See you Thursday?”

Price felt Thomas’s eyes staring a hole straight through him. “Yes,” he replied merrily, “I can’t wait.”

Downton was coming together for the holiday, and it was quite a sight to behold. Staff from every corner of the abbey floated in and out of the hall between tasks, and something about all of it made Price feel like he truly belonged among them. He joined Miss Baxter and handled each ornament with great care, unwrapping and laying them on a table for the family to hang that evening. It was
challenging not to stop and admire each one. Some looked more than a hundred years old, and he wondered how many generations of Crawleys had held them in their hands.

The vibrant setting had the opposite effect on Thomas. Price’s little scene on the stairs crept right under Thomas’s skin, making him realize how quickly he could lose Price to someone else if he kept pushing him away. He cursed himself for possibly poisoning the healthiest and happiest relationship he ever had with any man, or any person for that matter.

Price was summoned for tea service. He hummed Christmas carols and smiled at everyone, determined not to let the afternoon be ruined by his grievances with Thomas. Christmas had never felt as exciting and he wanted to revel in it as long as possible.

Price stood by Ellie as he waited for trays of sandwiches, rather than standing in his usual spot by Daisy. “Psst. Psssst,” he whispered, trying to get her attention.

“What are you making that noise for, you silly beggar?”

“Someone asked me if you already had a beau, because if not, they might like to be yours.”

“Who?” Ellie squeeked, her eyes twinkling.

“Someone who was here to help today, not a person who’s usually in the house.”

Ellie ran through a list in her head of all the men who passed through downstairs that morning. “Give me a hint.”

“He’s good looking and charming, funny and kind.”

Ellie shrugged, “I don’t know. A few of them are good looking.”

“Which is the best looking?”

Ellie laughed, “This is silly, just tell me!”

“Make one guess, and if you’re wrong, I’ll tell you who it is.”

Ellie placed sandwiches on a tray and passed it down for Daisy to inspect. “Is it the one from the stables?”

“There’s three in the stables.”

“The better looking one,” Ellie said, still laughing.

“Owen?”

“Yes, that’s his name.”

“I’m glad you said him, because he’s the one.”

“David,” Mrs. Patmore interrupted from down the counter, “you’d better get these upstairs.”

Ellie pouted. “You’re teasing. He wouldn’t be interested in me.”

Thomas entered the kitchen, and Price glanced at him and took the tray from Mrs. Patmore. “You
know I’d never do that, Ellie. I speak only the truth.” He avoided Thomas’s eyes on his way upstairs.

Thomas stood next to Daisy. “What kind of truth is he speaking?”

Daisy didn’t lift her eyes from her work. “Not any of mine to share.”

“Ellie?”

Ellie put her hand on her hip and posed. “Someone fancies me.”

“Uh oh, is David playing matchmaker again?”

Ellie returned to her sandwiches. “I don’t know, maybe. If he’s matched me with who I think he has, I’ve no complaints.”

“He’s a regular Cupid, isn’t he?” Thomas said as he left to check on things upstairs.

The family would have a light and early dinner so they could decorate the tree with the children before their bedtime. Dessert would be served once the tree was decorated. Price had Lady Edith’s drawing on his mind, and asked Mr. Carson if he could head to his room before dessert service. “It was Lady Edith’s request,” he told Mr. Carson, “I want to make sure I complete it before she leaves tomorrow.”

Mr. Carson permitted Price to go upstairs early, and asked Thomas to help Mr. Molesley while Price was otherwise detained.

“What’s so important that he can’t wait another hour?” Thomas griped.

“Something Lady Edith requires, so I didn’t ask further questions, and neither should you.”

Dessert service would have been easy for Thomas if his only task was to bring around the wine, but with Price absent, he had to run up and down the stairs with Mr. Molesley like a footman. The confusing letter from Eric and his visit with his sister both weighed heavily on his mind. Between the groom, and now the extra duties dumped on him because of Price, Thomas felt he might be nearing his boiling point.

The moment dessert service ended, Thomas went to the courtyard without even fetching his coat. His hands shook as he flicked open his lighter, and he took a heavy drag to ensure his nerves would calm quickly. He fought off visions of Price with the groom, laughing and teasing in some hidden corner of the stables, their playing turning into something more.

After finishing his first cigarette, he realized that if the hint of flirtation between Price and another man touched him so deeply, Price must have truly struggled to accept, and even welcome, his friendship with Eric. Whatever Eric might be feeling, Thomas thought, it couldn’t be nearly as strong as what Price felt for him.

Time in the chilly air and two cigarettes later, he felt like he could at least make it through the servant’s supper without picking a fight with the other members of staff.

Price didn’t come down for supper, too determined to finish his drawing to eat. Thomas struggled to eat his own supper across from Price’s empty spot. He wanted an excuse to see him, talk to him, perhaps even touch him. When supper was over, Thomas asked Daisy for a plate for Price and brought it to his room. He opened the door without knocking.
“I’m busy,” Price said without looking up. He sat on his bed leaning back against the headboard, his knees pulled up, sketchbook resting against his thighs.

“I brought your supper,” Thomas said, putting the plate at the foot of Price’s bed.

“You didn’t have to. I don’t have much of an appetite, anyway.”

“Can I see what you’re drawing?”

“No.”

Thomas imagined sitting on the bed next to Price, sliding his hand up Price’s thigh while Price licked his lips and waited for a kiss. Instead, Thomas stood at the foot of the bed feeling like a trespasser.

“Don’t stand there and stare at me,” Price said, finally looking up. “I’ll talk to you another time.”

“When?”

“When I’m good and ready. Now, please close the door on your way out.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“It is,” Price said, drawing again.

When Thomas was gone, Price tried to finish the last details, but was too agitated. He closed the book and stretched across the bed for the plate Thomas left. He ate with his fingers, suddenly feeling hungry after the first few bites.

With a little more energy, Price finished the last touches, paced his room a few times to build up his courage, and went to Thomas.

He let himself into Thomas’s room and found Thomas sitting on the edge of his bed in silence. His eyes weren’t focused on anything in particular, and it took him a few moments to look up at Price.

“Have a seat,” Thomas said, looking at the bed next to him.

“I’ll stand for now if that’s alright with you.”

“Whatever you like.”

“I’d like you to tell me what’s going on.”

“It would be easier if you sat with me.”

Price sat at the foot of Thomas’s bed, about as far as he could get while still being on the same piece of furniture.

“David, what becomes of us if I go to London and you stay here?”

Price shrugged. “We’d figure it out.”

“We’d almost never see each other.”

“Well, who says I’m staying here forever?”

Thomas played with his glove. “You love it here and they all love you, why would you leave?”
“Because I love you the most,” Price said, as if it were the most obvious answer in the world.

“You can’t uproot your life for me.”

“Not for you, for us. And, well, you’re not the only one considering other options.”

“Why, what are you considering?”

“Nothing, really,” Price said, searching Thomas’s face for something more. “Is that all this is? You’re afraid of what might happen if you left?”

Thomas shook his hair loose from it’s careful styling. By the end of the day, it always started to irritate him. “That’s part of it. My sister, she’s having some kind of break down.”

“I am sorry to hear that. But why would you push me away because of that, instead of turning to me for help or comfort?”

Thomas pulled Eric’s letter from under his mattress held it out to Price. “Because there’s something else, too.”

Price looked at the letter skeptically. “You want me to read this?”

“I don’t want you to, but I don’t want to hide things from you, either,” Thomas replied, pushing the letter in Price’s hand.

Price held the letter, still folded, between his fingers. “Did something bad happen?”

“Just read it, please.”

Price unfolded the letter and began reading. Thomas expected some kind of emotion to come over Price’s face, but his expression was blank. He finished the letter and put it on the bed between them.

After a minute passed, Thomas thought his heart might burst if Price stayed silent any longer. “Please say something.”

“This is my fault,” Price said simply.

“How?”

“I encouraged him to visit, I encouraged you to go to his room, and I even indulged in your fantasy about him. You’ve called me naive, and you were right. I’m an absolute fool.”

“No, David,” Thomas said, reaching his hand out to touch Price’s face.

Price rose from the bed. “Clearly I am. What were you thinking showing me that letter, anyway?”

“I wanted to be honest with you,” Thomas replied, letting his arm fall to his side.

“I would’ve preferred you kept that letter to yourself. Unless you’re planning to do something about it.”

“I’m not planning anything.”

Price looked at the letter on the bed and winced at the thought of Thomas with Eric. “I’m so, so tired of him coming between us. You know, Thomas, he’s not in love with you. He’s in love with
the chase. If you think for one moment that he’d actually dedicate himself to you, then I’m not the only fool in this room.”

Thomas ran his tongue across the back of his teeth and stared off into nowhere again.

“He didn’t think he was in love with you when he was here,” Price continued, “but now suddenly he is? What kind of game is that? I’ve never played games with you. I wear my heart on my sleeve, and it bleeds for you and no one else.”

“Then why were you flirting with that… man… earlier today?” Thomas asked, his eyes downcast.

“We weren’t flirting. He was whispering to me because he wanted to know if Ellie might be interested in him. But yes, I let you think it was something else because I wanted you to hurt like I was hurting.” Price leaned against the wall. “I suppose if we’re being honest, especially about Eric, then there’s something you should know, too.”

Thomas’s eyes shot up to meet Price’s.

Price crossed his arms. “The day he left, I went to his room to thank him again and make sure the watch band fit. It needed a small adjustment, and I fixed it while he was wearing it. That small bit of contact was enough to excite him, and he kissed me. I don’t mean a little peck, Thomas. He had his tongue halfway down my throat while his hand reached for my trousers.”

Thomas swallowed hard and exhaled through his nose. “Did you kiss him back?”

“No. I pulled away. He tripped over himself to apologize, saying he thought there might’ve been a chance for a relationship between the three of us. I told him he was mistaken, and I only had eyes for you. I actually felt badly for him at the time.”

Thomas ran his hand through his hair. “I’ve created such a mess. It’s not your fault at all, it’s all mine.”

“It doesn’t matter whose fault it is. I wonder, though, if I had kissed him back, whether I’d be the one receiving the love letter.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Thomas said, his mouth dry.

Price walked to Thomas’s door. “If you love him, then by all means, write him back and tell him so. If that is the case, I hope I’m wrong about him.”

Thomas stood and walked toward Price, but Price put up his hand. “No. Goodnight, Thomas. Now I’m the one who needs some space,” he said, letting himself out of the room.

Price held himself together long enough to get back to his room. He ripped off his clothes and threw pajamas on hastily. He shut off the light and curled up in bed facing the wall, pressing his forehead and knees against it. He pulled his arms into his body and let himself cry, hoping it would take the last of his energy to shed tears and he’d somehow fall asleep. Just as he felt sleep start to pull him under, he heard his door open and close.

“Can we talk?” Thomas asked.

“No, you can get out,” Price said into the wall.

Thomas sat and rested his hand on Price’s hip. Price batted Thomas’s hand away and sat up with a start. “I don’t want to be your plaything,” he hissed, finding Thomas’s eyes in the dark. “You can’t
use me when it’s convenient, then toss me aside for a new toy.”

Thomas was taken aback by Price’s temper and waited a beat before speaking. “That’s not what this is at all.”

“I can’t believe how stupid I am,” Price said, his tears returning. He squeezed his eyes shut. “He’s probably right, you are better suited. Why would you ever want me when you could have him?”

“I don’t want him.”

“Yes you do,” Price grabbed Thomas’s shirt in his hand. “You want us both.”

“No, I was just confused,” Thomas said gently, hoping to calm Price.

Price tightened his grip on Thomas’s shirt and pulled him forward, their faces nearly touching. “Not again, Thomas.”

“You should let go.”

“Or what? You’ll find a way to somehow hurt me more than you already have?”

Thomas tried to pull away, but Price grabbed him with both hands.

“Just say the truth,” Price demanded.

“Alright, David,” Thomas said as calmly as he could manage, his throat starting to feel tight. “The truth is, there’s something that tantalizes me about him and I can’t shut it off.”

Price let go of Thomas. “And it’s not just physical attraction.”

“No, it’s not. But you know that.”

Price nodded, settling down from his outburst. “I know. We keep coming back to this. I think we should stop.”

“I don’t want to fight, either.”

“No, I mean stop. I need a break.”

“A break?”

Price pulled his legs up to his chest and hugged them. “If everything we’ve had up until this point isn’t enough, then I will never be enough for you. Maybe not even a break, maybe it's just over.”

“Please don’t say that,” Thomas said, petting Price’s cheek.”We’re just both a little out of our heads. Forget it for tonight.”

“Nothing will change between now and the morning, Thomas.”

Thomas kissed Price’s lips, but Price was stiff and unresponsive. “I’ll end things with him, I promise. I won’t even write him back.”

“That’s not what I want,” Price said, his tears returning.

“What do you want?” Thomas asked, his eyes growing watery. “I’ll do whatever you want.”

“I want you to admit to me, right now, what kind of life you want and who you want to spend it
“I don’t know,” Thomas answered, a sob lodging in his throat. He took Price’s hand in his. “If I did, we wouldn’t be sitting here like this right now.”

“Then tell me, where do you see things going with Eric?”

Thomas looked away while thinking. “I want to be his friend. I see him in my future, if you’d allow it.”

Price squeezed Thomas’s hand, then lifted it to his lips. “Can you keep these off of him?”

“I can,” Thomas promised, watching Price’s lips on his knuckles. “But can you accept that a part of me may always want to put my hands on him?”

“It’s hard to say. I never, ever want to have to worry that you’d do something behind my back.”

“You can trust me,” Thomas said resolutely, his grey eyes glimmering. “You trust me, don’t you?”

Price let go of Thomas’s fingers. Barely audibly, he whispered, “I don’t know.”

“So there we have it,” Thomas said, his voice not much louder than Price’s. “I’ve ruined everything if you can’t trust me.”

“I want to.”

“But you don’t.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Fine,” Thomas said, swallowing the lump in his throat. “So where do we go from here?”

Price fixed Thomas’s shirt, still rumpled from when he grabbed him. “Let’s take a break and be friends for a little bit while you figure out what you want.”

“What does ‘being friends’ mean?”

“It means I still love you, and want you, but no sex,” Price said smoothing down Thomas’s collar. “It complicates things and you need to think clearly. I know that I’m ready to do anything and everything to be with you, but only if that’s what you want, and only if I can believe that you want it.”

“That’s stupid.”

Price smiled at Thomas’s bluntness. “You said you wanted until Valentine’s Day to think about working for my brother, so take that time to think about everything. I’m not going anywhere. No horse grooms, I promise,” he said with a little laugh. “But clearly whatever we’re doing right now isn’t helping. It isn’t even healthy. I hate how I’m acting.”

Thomas closed his eyes. “I really don’t see how a ‘break’ is the answer.”

“Maybe not, but I know it can’t be like this anymore or I’ll end up crying myself to death.”

“So dramatic,” Thomas said, opening his eyes. “So, you won’t be with me in February?”

“Yes.”
“And no horse grooms in the meantime?”

Price put his hand over his heart. “Not even one.”

Thomas shrugged. “Well, I suppose I have no choice. You’ve already made up your mind.” He rose from the bed. “I still think this is stupid, and I hope you wake up tomorrow and realize the same.”

After breakfast service, Thomas and Price set off on separate missions, but both to find one of the Crawley women; Price went to find Lady Edith in her room, and Thomas found Lady Grantham in the hall.

“My Lady,” Thomas said, standing by a column, “may I have a word?”

“Yes, what is it Barrow?”

“It’s about my sister, your Ladyship.”

“Your sister?”

Thomas took a step closer to Lady Grantham. “She has an illness that I don’t think any doctors in Ripon are suitable to treat. With your connections in the medical community, I wondered if you might be able to help me find a doctor who can help her. I wouldn’t know where to begin to look for one.”

“Oh, my. Well, I don’t know how strong my connections are, but I may be able to try. What kind of illness is it?”

Thomas hesitated, not sure how sympathetic Lady Grantham might be to his sister’s type of illness. “It’s her mind, not her body,” he said, less nervous as soon as the words were out of his mouth. “I don’t know a better way to say it. Lifelong troubles, but getting worse. I’m worried she’ll give up altogether.”

“My goodness,” Lady Grantham said softly. “It would help to know more about it before I really know if I can help. Why don’t you come to the drawing room after tea this afternoon and we can talk further? Mrs. Crawley is coming for dinner, she may be able to help as well.”

“That’s perfect, my Lady,” Thomas said, his smile broader than the polite servant’s smile he usually gave the family.

“You’ve been so loyal to this family for so many years, I’m glad for the chance to help a member of your family in return.”

Thomas beamed, then quickly tamed his smile and tipped his head to Lady Grantham. “Thank you so much.”

“You can thank me if I manage to find a way to help,” Lady Grantham said, returning Thomas’s smile, “but I will do my best.”

Upstairs, Price brought his drawing to Lady Edith’s room between two clean pieces of paper. “Like I said, if it’s not what you want, I will understand.”

“Show me, show me, I’m dying to see it,” Lady Edith begged, clasping her hands together.
Price removed the drawing from its protective sheets and handed it to Lady Edith. She held the paper carefully by the edges and soaked it in before speaking. "It’s perfect. Is that the top I was wearing?"

“No, but you wear it often on the days you go to London, and I always think it looks very smart. I hope you don’t mind.”

Lady Edith smiled at Price, more curious about him than ever. “You remembered exactly what it looked like.”

“Close enough, I hope.”

“I can’t say enough good things about it. Thank you so much, David,” she handed the drawing back to Price. “Let me get your payment before I forget.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that.”

“Of course I do,” she said, fetching an envelope from her writing desk. “Since you wouldn’t give me a rate, I made a call to find out what the magazine would have paid for a comparable illustration. I hope this is fair compensation,” she said, handing Price the envelope.

“I’m sure it’s more than fair. Thank you, m’Lady,” Price replied, trading the drawing for the envelope.

Price tucked it into his waistcoat and excused himself from Lady Edith’s room. The servant’s stairwell was empty, and Price pulled out the envelope and opened the flap. He counted the contents three times, then ran back to Lady Edith.

“I can’t accept this,” he said, holding the envelope out to Lady Edith.

“Why on earth not?”

“My Lady, it’s too much. That’s... that’s almost a week’s salary for me.”

Lady Edith pushed Price’s hand toward him. “It’s what you’re worth. I won’t hear another word about it.”

“But real artists earn this kind of money, I have no right-”

“Not another word,” Lady Edith said, putting up her hand.

Price put the envelope back in his waistcoat. “You win, m’Lady. ‘Thank you’ doesn’t seem sufficient, but thank you just the same.”

Price and Thomas came across one another in the stairwell. Price ran down the steps to Thomas, meeting him on a landing. He grabbed Thomas’s shoulders and exclaimed, “the best thing just happened to me!” forgetting all of his hurt and heartache, wanting only to share this moment with the person he cared about most.

“Something nice just happened to me, too,” Thomas said, not sure whether he was happier about Lady Grantham’s kind words or Price’s exuberant greeting.

“You go first.”

Thomas relayed his story, quoting her words about his loyalty and her willingness to help in exchange.
“That must feel so validating,” Price observed.

“That’s a good word for it. What’s your news?”

“I drew something for Lady Edith, and it’s going to be published in her magazine,” he explained enthusiastically. “I’ve never been paid for anything artistic, let alone the amount she paid me.”

“How much did she pay you?”

“Just about a week of my salary,” Price replied. “Can you believe it?”

Price’s bubbling joy was infectious, and Thomas wanted to pull him into his arms and kiss his smiling lips. Instead, he gazed down at Price and said evenly, “I can believe your work deserves that kind of payment.”

“You’re so sweet,” Price said, feeling the silent tug of Thomas’s lips in return. “We should… probably get back downstairs.”

Thomas sighed. “Right. Well, go put your loot somewhere safe before you get back to work.”

“Somewhere safe? Like someone would pick my pocket while I’m serving luncheon or something?”

“Where were you going to put it?”

“In a drawer? Under my mattress?”

Thomas sighed again. “My suitcase locks, why don’t you go put it in there?”

“That’s probably a better idea. At least I can’t spend it in there.” Price ran up to the dorms, feeling pressure to get back downstairs and back to his duties.

Thomas headed down to the kitchen, and just before he reached it, realized what a bad idea it was to let Price look in his suitcase. He doubled back up the stairs to his room.

As Thomas reached his room, Price was locking the suitcase, sliding it back under the bed. Price looked up at Thomas from the floor. “Naughty, naughty,” he said, rising to his feet.

“I forgot that was in there. I’m sorry.”

Price bit his bottom lip and smiled. “Let me just say the following,” he began, walking to Thomas. He looked up into Thomas’s eyes. “If Valentine’s Day comes and you decide it’s me you really want, then I expect a picture of you like that as my Valentine’s card.”

Thomas smiled, relieved. “I expected you to be angry, or at least unhappy to find it.”

“All’s forgiven the day I get my special picture of you. Now if you’ll excuse me,” Price said, running his finger down the buttons on Thomas’s shirt. “I have work to do.” He pressed his body against Thomas’s as he passed through the doorway, and walked quickly down the hall.

“I’m never going to make it til Valentine’s Day,” Thomas called after him.

“Oh well!” Price called over his shoulder. “I guess the picture can keep you occupied until then!”
Price woke up to the sound of his door opening, and then felt the mattress sink down next to him.

“Can I sleep in here tonight?” Thomas whispered.

Price laughed and settled into his pillow. “Right. Goodnight, Thomas.”

“No, really. I won’t try anything.”

“Wait, you’re serious?” Price asked, rolling over to face Thomas. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I want to wake up beside you.”

Price sat up. “Don’t be daft, what if someone found out?”

“I’d handle it.”

“How would we even fit? This is the world’s most narrow bed.”

“We’ll fit.”

“I barely fit by myself.”

“Push over.”

Price groaned and laid on his side. He scooted until his back was pressed up against the wall.

“No, lay the other way.”

“And you thought my idea was stupid,” Price said, rolling over to face the wall.

Thomas pulled the covers back and laid down behind Price. He put a leg between Price’s and wrapped an arm around him. “See, we fit just fine,” he said, resting his chin on Price’s shoulder.

“I won’t change my mind by the time we wake up, you know,” Price said over his shoulder.

“But I can stay here until then?”

Price rubbed his feet against Thomas’s and closed his eyes.

“Is that a yes?”

“Shh, I’m trying to sleep.”

Thomas settled in behind Price and held him tighter. He pressed his palm against Price’s chest. He spent a few minutes feeling Price’s heartbeat beneath his hand before falling asleep. Price was up much longer, torn between wanting to push Thomas away and wanting to turn around and embrace him. He finally fell asleep, Thomas’s hand still on his chest.

Thomas awoke in the middle of the night. He sat up and nudged Price, telling him to roll over. Price complied without waking fully. Thomas settled into bed with his back to Price. He reached for Price’s arm and tucked it beneath his own. Price pulled Thomas into a hug, nuzzling his face between Thomas’s shoulder blades.

“Are you awake?” Thomas whispered.

Price threw his leg over Thomas, holding him tighter still. His breathing slowed and he fell back into a deep sleep quickly, attached to Thomas like a knapsack. Thomas thought maybe he should
stay awake, enjoying lying with Price as long as possible, but Price’s rhythmic breathing was too soothing and it lulled Thomas back asleep.

They both woke before Price’s alarm, each stretching and grunting.

“Good morning,” Thomas whispered.

“Good morning,” Price replied with a sleepy smile. He hid his eyes in the crook of his elbow to block out the rising sun. “So what’s your excuse if someone asks what you were doing in here?” he asked with the rasp of the morning’s first words.

“I’d think of something, but no one’s awake besides us. I’ll be fine if I go now.”

“Mmm, true.”

Thomas looked down at his bare hand. “You know, I think you’re the only man I’ve shown my hand to since the war.”

Price lifted his arm and opened an eye. “Really?”

“Well, without showing it for effect. Are we ‘being friends’ today?” Thomas asked, still looking at his hand.

“I still think it’s a good idea.”

“I still think it’s idiotic, but whatever you say. See you at breakfast, I suppose,” Thomas said, rising from the bed.

Price watched Thomas leave and then rolled onto his stomach. He nestled into his pillow, and when he inhaled, he could still smell Thomas on the pillowcase. He ran his hand over the pillow and pictured a fictional life where he could wake up to Thomas every morning, a life where he never had to worry if Thomas wanted to wake up next to someone else.
Eric was restless the moment he posted his letter. He couldn’t eat or sleep, and writing was impossible. He wanted to cancel his week-long trip to Scotland, not sure he could survive the trip spending the entire time wondering if a reply from Thomas was waiting for him at home. He turned to Kait for support, but as he explained his story she lost sympathy, telling him his impulsive love letter might put Thomas off him completely. She wasn’t pleased that by association, Thomas might put her off as well.

As one of the few employees trusted with keys, Eric let himself into the magazine offices at two in the morning. If he couldn’t sleep, he would at least try to write. He sat at a typewriter with his fingers poised over the keys, but nothing came to him. Not a paragraph, not a sentence, not a single inspired word. He flipped through his journal from his trip to India, but still, nothing. He went home for a nap at five o’clock and came back mid-morning. He knew Lady Edith would arrive later. Maybe seeing her would spark some kind of motivation to write, he thought.

He let Lady Edith settle in, knowing she was quite busy trying to coordinate the impending publication of this month’s magazine while interviewing for a new editor. At tea time, he knocked on her door casing with her tea in hand. She stood over several pages of copy, reviewing each carefully.

“Sorry you’re back under these circumstances,” Eric said, setting Lady Edith’s tea down on the desk, “but it’s nice to see you again.”

“Since when do you serve the tea here?” Lady Edith asked with a grin.

“I can’t manage to write anything today, so at least I could serve our interim editor her tea. That’s some kind of accomplishment, isn’t it?”

Lady Edith waved to him to shut the door. “Why can’t you write today?”

“I’m distracted by a personal matter,” he said, closing the door “How unprofessional of me.”

“Take the day off to deal with it, then. You’ve met the deadline for today, and that’s all I care about at the moment.”

“I appreciate that, but there’s nothing to attend to. I just have to find a way to push through it.”

Lady Edith sipped her tea. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Yes, Eric thought; go back to Downton, find out what Thomas thinks of my letter, and then telephone me immediately. Instead, he thought it might be helpful to focus on something else. “We could go out to dinner. A night out would do me good.”
“I’m afraid there’s too much to do here tonight,” Lady Edith said apologetically, “but tomorrow, let’s get dinner.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

Lady Edith turned back to her copy and held up one of the sheets. “What do you think of this?” she said, pointing to one of the columns.

Eric stood next to Lady Edith and bent down to look at the paper in her hands. She held it up higher so that he didn’t have to stoop. He read the short piece and nodded. “I love that you’re inviting the readers to get to know you. Does this mean you’re more than just the interim editor?”

“I haven’t decided. I may share the duties. What do you think of the illustration?”

Eric looked over Lady Edith’s shoulder again. “It’s splendid. I like it very much.”

“One of the footmen drew it yesterday. Isn’t that a hoot? I didn’t include that part in the column. It may not make me seem very accessible to the reader if I talk about my footman,” she said, chuckling.

“Which footman?”

“That’s right, you saw them during your stay. He’s about my age.” Lady Edith shrugged and set the copy back down on the desk. “I don’t know how else to differentiate him for you since they all dress the same.”

“It doesn’t matter, I suppose. I was just curious. I’ll let you get back to business.”

“So, dinner tomorrow is acceptable?”

“It sounds perfect to me,” Eric said, collecting Lady Edith’s empty tea cup.

The day didn’t become any more productive, and by sundown Eric had enough. He packed his briefcase, waved to Lady Edith before leaving, and headed home. On the way, he obsessed over the image of Thomas with the letter in hand, angry with him for complicating things. He found himself following a familiar route that diverted from the one back to his boarding house. He reached his destination and held his finger above the buzzer. Don’t press it, he told himself. There are other ways to handle your feelings. But it was too late, his finger was already pressing the button.

Eric followed his host upstairs; a young, impish man nearly a foot shorter than himself named Jacob. Jacob was more cute than handsome, with blue eyes and pink lips, both a little too large for his face. Eric answered the question, “What d’you want tonight?” with “The usual,” and then added, “but more rough.” He hadn’t visited the flat in at least two months, but Jacob always remembered what he liked. Jacob asked what brought Eric to him this time, and as Eric undressed he explained that he may have ruined an important friendship, and so he needed to be punished. Jacob asked him to describe his friend, and Eric became more and more aroused as he listed everything he found provocative about Thomas.

Jacob grabbed Eric’s growing cock unceremoniously and led him by it to the bedroom, smirking at Eric’s whimpers of discomfort as he pulled him in tow. He pushed Eric into the middle of the room. He disappeared, and returned a moment later, grabbing Eric’s hands from behind. Eric interlocked his fingers, and Jacob bound him from his elbows to his wrists. He kicked Eric’s foot, spreading his legs apart further. Jacob disappeared again, returning this time with a riding crop. Eric shivered at the sight of it and smiled. Jacob promptly smacked the smile off his face.
Jacob nodded to the bed, and Eric bent over it. Jacob hit him lightly with the crop. Eric raised his backside, waiting to be hit again.

Jacob leaned over Eric and purred into his ear, “You really want it tonight, don’t ya?”

“I need it,” Eric breathed.

Jacob hit him harder the second time. Eric groaned and buried his face in the mattress. Jacob ran his fingers lightly over the backs of Eric’s thighs, then between them, and then cupped his balls in his hand, tugging lightly. Eric spread his legs, giving Jacob better access. Jacob spanked him and tugged again.

Eric rocked his hips. “Harder. Please.”

Jacob hit Eric with force, his hand landing with a loud slap. Eric bit the sheets, a combination laugh and moan escaping between his teeth. He pictured Thomas behind him, telling him his letter was a waste of time, and that all he was good for was his mouth and his arse. He thrust himself into the mattress, aching for more contact than he was getting pressed between his stomach and the bed.

Eric was so caught up in imagining Thomas that he jumped when he felt Jacob’s tongue licking his backside. Jacob dropped to his knees and licked Eric in long, smooth strokes. Eric grunted and pushed back against Jacob, waiting for him to probe him with his tongue. When Jacob finally did, Eric sighed with relief, mumbling, “yes, yes, yes,” into the sheets. Jacob stood and pulled Eric upright by his bound wrists. He kicked Eric behind the knee, dropping him to the ground.

“Open your mouth.”

Eric tipped his head back and parted his lips. Jacob grabbed Eric’s hair, holding Eric’s head steady as he fucked his mouth. Eric imagined Thomas in his mouth instead, with Price watching, telling him he would never be anything more to him than a good time. He whimpered as Jacob petted his cock with the crop, bracing himself for strike. When no strike fell, he raised his hips.

“You want me to hit you?”

“Mmm hmm,” Eric answered, his mouth full.

“Why?” Jacob asked, pulling himself out so Eric could answer.

“Because I deserve it,” Eric panted. He doubled over when Jacob finally struck him.

By the end of their session, Eric had welts in the shape of the crop from his chest to his ankles. Eric had climaxed twice over the course of two hours. The first time, he was disappointed when his orgasm snuck up on him, dribbling pathetically on the floor when Jacob slid two fingers inside him. The second time, he was on his knees, his face pressed into the ground while Jacob mounted him from behind. With each orgasm, it was Thomas he pictured inside of him, and heartache washed over him as he told himself Thomas may never be inside him again.

When Eric was finally untied, he groaned and shook out his arms, thick red rope marks up and down them like tiger stripes. Jacob kicked him down again, pointed to the ground, and told him to clean up his mess. He threw a towel next to Eric, and Eric obeyed, cleaning every drop before Jacob would allow him to get dressed.

Eric took his wallet from his jacket and gave Jacob his rate plus a sizeable tip. Jacob counted the bills and smiled, always pleased by Eric’s reward for a job well done. Eric declined when Jacob offered him tea, but stayed long enough to tell Jacob exactly why he needed to be punished that
evening.

“Why don’t you send him a telegram and ask him to telephone?” Jacob asked.

“What good would that do?”

“It sounds better than waiting around for a letter that might never arrive.”

Eric thanked Jacob and left the flat. He could feel his welts swelling as he walked home, made worse by his clothing rubbing against them. It didn’t matter. It never bothered him. In fact, it was exactly the reason he liked to visit Jacob; he could leave the pain in his heart up in the flat, trading it for the pain in his body. This time, however, the pain in his heart followed him home, too.

Eric took Jacob’s advice, sending a telegram early the next day. He went to the office and was able to write the beginning of article, but couldn’t push further. He thought about backing out of dinner with Lady Edith to wait for Thomas’s telephone call, but he wanted the company and decided to go forward with their plans.

He felt bold at dinner, and spoke to Lady Edith like they were friends, leaving their manager/employee relationship back at the office. His visit at Downton had already started to break down that wall.

“You seem so much happier when you’re here,” Eric told Lady Edith while they waited for their meal to arrive.

“That’s because I am,” she said with a smile.

“Then why do you stay there?” Eric asked.

Lady Edith straightened her utensils with a finger. “I think I’ve been waiting for a man to come and sweep me off my feet. But he’s never coming.”

“Then stop waiting,” Eric said. He scooted closer to the table and rested his forearms on it as he spoke. “Let the magazine be your love. Move into your flat full time. Throw yourself into your work. Maybe a man will come, maybe he won’t, but in the meantime you’ll be much more satisfied than you are at Downton.”

Lady Edith stared at the candle on the table as she reflected on Eric’s words. “That’s not what my family expects of me.”

“It’s hard to go against other people’s expectations for you, especially when it’s your family. But it’s your life, Edith,” Eric said softly. “Nobody else’s.”

“You say that like you have experience,” Lady Edith said, looking up from the candle.

Eric smiled, but there was a wistful look in his eyes. “I haven’t met a single one of my family’s expectations.”

Dinner arrived, and Eric sat back in his chair. He waited for Lady Edith to begin eating before he took a bite. He watched the delicate way she held her knife and fork, and it reminded him that she was a ‘Lady’ and he was no one of note. “I hope I haven’t crossed the line by saying any of this.”

“Of course you haven’t. I’m thankful, really. I feel like no one in my life even notices me, so it’s
encouraging to know you’ve been paying attention. Sorry to be so dreary.”

Eric sighed and finished chewing his bite of salmon before speaking. “No apologies. These days I feel like I have a little raincloud over my head. I’m the definition of dreary.”

“Well you brighten my day, if that matters.”

“It does, tremendously,” Eric said brightly.

“Perhaps I will take your advice. I’ll live here full time and we can be sad sacks together.”

Eric covered his mouth with his napkin, a laugh about to escape while he chewed. “My misery would love your company.”

Lady Edith took a sip of wine. “Golly, Eric. You really might have me convinced. If there were any time for me to make a move, it’s now, when the magazine really needs me.”

“Cheers to that,” Eric said, raising his glass.

“Cheers to you,” Lady Edith said, raising her glass as well.

Eric’s evening with Lady Edith thoroughly distracted him, but as soon as they bid farewell, his anxiety came back full force. He rushed to his boarding house, but there were no messages for him. He undressed for bed and stood in front of his mirror. He ran his fingers across the darkest welts on his chest and abdomen, then turned in the mirror to look at the ones on his backside. A knock on his door startled him, and he grabbed for his trousers.

“Someone on the telephone for you,” a voice advised.

Eric threw on his trousers, undershirt, and slippers, bursting through his door as though he were escaping a fire. He galloped down the stairs to the small phone room off of the front hall. He shut the door, but paused before picking up the receiver. He swallowed and held his breath. “Hello?”


Thomas’s voice traveled through Eric’s ear and straight to his heart. He wanted to pull the rest of Thomas through the phone and into his arms. “No,” he admitted. “I’m not.”

“I got your telegram this morning, but I had to wait for everyone to go to bed before I could phone. What’s the matter?”

“I sent it because I couldn’t wait for a response in writing. I need to know what you’re thinking.”

“Oh,” Thomas said, as though he expected news of some emergency. “I don’t quite know what to think. If you were really in love with me, why wouldn’t you have realized it sooner?”

Eric squeezed the telephone base in his hand. “Because I’ve been trying to convince myself I’m not in love with you. Our lives were too different for me to ever consider it. But if you’re here—”

“I don’t think you’re in love,” Thomas cut in. “Like you said when you were here, you’re in lust.”

“That’s just it - it’s different with you. I’m often in lust, but I’ve never felt this way before.”

“What way?”

Eric closed his eyes, tears gathering in his lashes. “I think of you constantly. What you’re doing,
what you’re thinking, what you’re feeling. I see something in a shop and wonder if it’s something you might like. I eat something and wonder if it’s the kind of flavor you enjoy. Every book I read, I get distracted from the pages wondering what you’ll think about it when I send it to you. When I close my eyes and imagine you, it’s not just a visual experience. I know your taste, your smell, your touch. I carry you with me everywhere even though we’re almost never together. You’re the first thing on my mind when I wake up and the last thing I think about when I go to bed. I realize now that it’s why I rushed to you after India, before even coming home. I’m not adept at understanding my emotions, or my behavior, but this much I know is true; I love you, Thomas.”

The other end of the line was silent.

Eric wiped his eyes with his undershirt. “So there you have it. How do you feel about me?”

There was another pause before Thomas spoke. “I feel something for you that I can’t quite explain. It’s not just desire, though there’s certainly plenty of that.”

A small bit of hope bubbled up in Eric. “I can’t describe how relieved I am to hear that.”

“But you know I have feelings for David that I have no trouble describing,” Thomas said, popping Eric’s bubble.

“Yes. I know that all too well. I told you to pursue him, after all.”

“Then what was your aim writing that letter? In sending the a telegram, in telling me any of this?”

“It’s just as I wrote. I had to try. If there’s even the smallest, most infinitesimal chance that you love me back, it was worth trying.”

“Is it really me you want? David told me about your kiss.”

“Did he?” Eric laughed uneasily. “Well, what can I say? Your flirting, his flirting, both of you teasing me about the three of us being together. The enticing little look he gave me when he was fitting the watch on my wrist. What would you have thought if you were in my shoes?”

“Enticing little look?” Thomas asked skeptically.

“It was there in his eyes, I wasn’t seeing things. But I didn’t kiss him because it’s him I want. I thought he was giving me a sign that I could be part of your relationship. Clearly, I was mistaken.”

“Tell me something else, then. You say you realized you loved me after you left. Since you got back, have you been with anyone else?”

Eric searched for the right words to say. “Not romantically,” was the best answer that came to mind, which was met with another period of silence from the other end of the line. “He’s just someone I go to when I need to clear my head,” he added.

“I have a smoke when I need to clear my head. You go out and get buggered?”

“You can’t be too surprised, can you? Copulation is my comfort and my crutch. It’s sick, isn’t it? Hell, if I told you the details you’d probably hang up at once.”

Thomas’s tone mellowed. “The details aren’t my business.”

“Any of my business is your business, if you want it to be.”

Thomas’s tone was softer still. “If there was no David, you know I would.”
“Yes, you’ve said that. I think you love me, but I know you love him more.”

“It’s different.”

“Either way, I have no chance,” Eric said, sniffing. “I’ve ruined our friendship, haven’t I?”

“No, no,” Thomas said soothingly. “You don’t have to wonder about my friendship. You’ll always have that.”

“Could you say it? If you feel it, even if it’s ‘different,’ can I hear the words just once?”

“Eric…”

“I won’t push again or do anything to interfere. I know where we stand. I know I’m not invited into what you have with him. But him aside, I’d feel more sane if we both acknowledged what there is between us before this call is over.”

Eric heard Thomas exhale deeply through his nose. “Yes,” Thomas whispered. “I love you.”

Eric pushed the phone receiver against his ear, as if it would help hold the words in longer. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry I can’t give you what you want.”

“I might have had a chance, but I missed it. I’m the sorry one.”

“Are you coming this way any time soon?”

Eric smiled. “Do you want me to?”

“If you can make up another good excuse.”

“You just want me to come so I secure another hotel room for your own night of buggery.”

Eric could hear Thomas’s smile in his reply. “I mean I wouldn’t turn it down.”

Eric sighed. “We’ll see each other, one way or another. And I’ll write. I’ll always write.”

“I’ll write back.”

“I’m saying it again, and then I’m hanging up. I love you, Thomas,” Eric said, replacing the handset to prevent hearing Thomas say ‘goodbye’ without retuning his ‘I love you.’

Eric returned to his room, avoiding curious stares from his housemates in the parlor. He packed for his trip, tossing a new set of stationary into his suitcase. He sat on his bed and kicked off his slippers, but his typewriter caught his eye. He inserted a new piece of paper, pushed the carriage to the right, and typed away at the keys, the words finally flowing easily.
Thomas caught first site of Nora’s car approaching in the distance. He asked Mr. Molesley to tell Mr. Carson that Nora was arriving, and then for Mr. Molesley to join him outside to fetch the little girl’s bags. Thomas crept past the boot room where Price was shining shoes alongside Miss Baxter. David got to see her off on the train, Thomas thought, it’s only fair that I get to welcome her back.

Thomas made it outside before Mr. Molesley. He stood at attention, a light snow falling around him just as it had when Nora departed. As the car circled around, Thomas saw Nora’s little gloved hand waving to him furiously from her window. She began opening her door before the car even came to a complete stop.

“Careful, little lady!” Thomas cautioned as he sprinted to Nora’s door.

“Mr. Barrow!” Nora squealed. She stretched her arms out, reaching for Thomas. He let her wrap her arms around him and gave her a tight hug before putting her down on the ground.

Nora turned back to the car and strained to reach for her stuffed rabbit and bear. Thomas reached over her head and pulled them out for her. Mr. Molesley finally arrived outside and unstrapped Nora’s luggage from the car.

“You were right,” Nora said, taking her bear and rabbit from Thomas.

“What was I right about this time?”

Nora tucked both animals under one arm and held Thomas’s hand in the other, leading him to the house. “I was nice to people, and guess what? I made a best friend!”

“That’s wonderful! What’s her name?”

“Her name is Ruby. She has a mother, but no father, and no brothers or sisters either. I taught her how to skip rope and she taught me how to play marbles. She’s smarter at math than I am, but I’m better at reading and writing, so we help each other with our school work.”

Thomas stopped Nora before they reached the great hall. “It sounds like you made a good choice for a best friend. Now, are you ready to see the Christmas tree?”

Nora jogged in place. “Yes! Let’s go, let’s go, let’s go!”

“It’s in the hall.”

Nora tossed her hat off her head and ran, leaving Thomas to catch it. He snatched it in the air with one hand.

“It’s incredible!” he heard Nora yell before he even turned the corner.

Lord and Lady Grantham descended the stairs, smiling at Nora, who was walking in circles around the tree.

“Welcome home,” Lady Grantham said as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

Nora took another long look at the tree and then turned her attention to Lady Grantham. “Thank you. I’m pleased to be back.”
“Did you see the special ornament?” Lord Grantham asked.

“I don’t think so,” Nora said as Thomas took her animals from her momentarily to take off her overcoat. “Will you show me?”

Lord Grantham took Nora to the tree and bent down, searching for one ornament in particular. “Ah, here it is,” he said, dropping to his knee. “This one.”

Nora took the ornament from the tree carefully and held it out, twisting it in her fingers. It was made of silver glass, with Nora’s name and the year in pink and gold paint. She held it higher so that the light glittered off the iridescent glass.

“Do you like it?” Lord Grantham asked.

Nora hung the ornament back on the tree. “Very much. Can I hang it in my room when Christmas is over?”

Lord Grantham looked up at Lady Grantham. “Do you have any objections?”

“None at all,” Lady Grantham replied. “You can hang it up all year if you like.”

“Thank you. It’s the best one on the whole tree.”

Nora followed Lady Grantham on a tour of the other Christmas decorations, and Nora chattered away while they walked. Lady Mary and Lady Edith joined their father in the hall, watching Lady Grantham stroll the perimeter with Nora.

“I think they bonded on the trip to France,” Lord Grantham explained in response to Lady Mary’s baffled expression.

Nora saw the two women looking at her and waved.

Lady Edith smiled and waved back, and Lady Mary raised her hand in the air slowly.

“Are you certain they returned the same little girl we sent two weeks ago?” Lady Mary asked Lord Grantham.

“If not, I’m happy to keep this one,” Lord Grantham replied.

When Price was finally able to see Nora in her room later in the day, as promised he brought his list of things she missed while she was gone. In exchange, she handed him her list, twice as long as his.

“I will read this and write down my questions,” Nora advised, “and then we can discuss things in detail. You will do the same with the list I gave you.”

“Yes, Miss Nora.”

Nora laughed and hugged Price around his waist. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” Price said, bending to return the hug.

Price went from Nora’s room to find Thomas. Thomas sat by the fire in the servant’s hall, reading the paper, a cigarette pressed between his lips.

“Working hard?”
Thomas rolled his eyes upward to glance at Price, then set them back on the paper. “I’m allowed a break,” he said without taking the cigarette from his lips.

“Can you give me the key to your suitcase, or open it for me? I need some of my money.”

“For what?” Thomas asked, exhaling through his nose. “I thought you were saving it.”

“Right, I am. I saved some for Christmas. I need to buy my niece and nephew their gifts.”

Thomas shook out the paper and turned the page. “Key’s in the top left-hand drawer of my dresser. Help yourself, you can’t find anything more embarrassing than the last time you were in that suitcase.”

Miss Baxter looked up from the needle and thread in her hand. “Where’s he running off to?” she asked as Price left the servant’s hall swiftly.

“I held onto some money for him so that he didn’t go out and blow it. Now he's digging into it to buy gifts for his brother’s children.” Thomas thought for a moment, then folded his paper. “I should make sure he doesn’t take too much. He needs to save it for himself.” He stood and snuffed out his cigarette in the ashtray on the mantle, then headed up to find Price. Miss Baxter smiled to herself and returned to her sewing.

“How much of it did you take?” Thomas asked Price as Price replaced the key in the drawer.

“Half.”

Thomas shut the door. “Half? Your nephew won’t even remember this Christmas, why are you spending so much?”

“What’s better to spend it on than the two of them?”

“You yourself. Save it. You may need it one day.”

Price groaned and hung his head. “You are so boring. Fine.” He took one of the bills from his pocket and slapped it on Thomas’s dresser.

“Come on. At least one more.”

Price took another from his pocket and slapped it down on top of the other.

“Stop sulking, this is for your own good.”

“Where’s your Christmas spirit?”

Thomas flicked Price’s bowtie with his finger. “You killed my spirit when you refused a kiss the last time I went for one.”

“Not this again.”

“I’m going to complain at least daily until you give up on this ridiculous scheme of ‘being friends’.”

“How do you figure it’s a scheme?”

Thomas took the key and Price’s two bills and brought them to his suitcase. “I haven’t figured that out,” he said, kneeling, putting Price’s money back, “but it’s some kind of scheme.”
“It’s almost our tea time,” Price said, changing the subject. “I’m headed down.”

“Right behind you,” Thomas said as he pulled himself to his feet.

Mr. Carson handed out the second post of the day as the servants had their tea. A small box arrived for Price. Per usual, his sister-in-law was proactive in her gift-giving, and inside the box were two Christmas gifts. One was a jigsaw puzzle, which he promptly asked Mr. Carson if he could set it up in the servant’s hall later (“Yes you may,” Mrs. Hughes replied for Mr. Carson.) The second was a small box with an envelope tied to it. Price opened the letter, and after reading just the first few words, the color drained from his face. When he finished reading, he stared at it a few moments longer, then folded it up and put it back in the larger box without opening the other gift.

Thomas waited for tea to clear and the servants to disburse before asking any questions. Price remained in his seat, looking down at the box.

“Not a welcome gift, I take it?” Thomas asked.

Price slid the letter across the table. “No, it is. You can read it.”

Thomas opened the letter and checked with Price again for permission before reading.

Dear Davey,

The doctor says I won’t be around come Christmas, and so I’m writing this now while the weather’s still warm. How strange to write a Christmas letter with the birds chirping and the sun shining. Even stranger that you will read this after I’m gone. I’m going to seal this so your eyes are the only ones that read it. Marie promises to give this to you, along with my gift.

We’ve had our troubles, you and I. I hope you know that despite them, I’ve always loved you. You were a good lad and you are a good man. You’ve conquered quite a lot in your short life. I’m proud of you for how far you’ve come.

It’s no secret that your brother will take over the shop, and yet I still haven’t truly accepted that I won’t pass it down to you. You’re my first born and my special boy. I should have been able to hand the reigns over to you. It’s neither of our faults that it can’t be that way, but I’m still heartsick about it. I worry about Sammy’s ability to keep things afloat, but I never would have worried if it were you. If things got hard, I know you’d never give up and shutter the windows.

I only say this so that you know I believe in you. Don’t feel guilty for one second. I’ve felt enough guilt for the both of us. If I could do it all again, I would do everything to make sure you inherited the shop. I love your brother dearly, but this should have been your rightful path.

That aside, what I’m leaving you is more important than the shop. Plenty of shops exist, but your mother was one of a kind and so was our love. I’m leaving her engagement ring and both of our wedding bands to you. No worldly possession could mean more to me. Do with them what you will, they’re yours now.

I wonder if I’m a coward for not saying these things to you directly or giving you these rings while I’m still alive. Just know I did the best that I could, and that I never stopped loving you, not for a moment.

All of my love,

Papa

Thomas folded the letter and slid it back across the table to Price. “You don’t want to open the box
and look at them?"

“Not here or now. I’ll save it for Christmas.”

Thomas nodded. “That sounds like a good idea. If you want company when you open it, come and find me.”

“I might. Thank you, Thomas.” Price took the box under his arm and headed to his room.

Thomas realized he was tensing his shoulders and relaxed. He smoked a cigarette, then went to check on the what the kitchen staff was up to.

“What is it?” Daisy asked Mrs. Patmore, holding a handwritten recipe.

“Instructions for a bûche de Noël,” Mrs. Patmore replied.

“Right, like I know what that means.”

Thomas looked over Daisy’s shoulder. “It’s a yule log cake.”

Daisy looked up at Thomas. “How do you know that?”

“My mother made them for Christmas.”

“She did?” Mrs. Patmore asked, taking the recipe from Daisy. “That sounds like a lot of fuss for a family’s Christmas pudding.”

“Well she was a cook,” Thomas said, helping himself to some candied cranberries that had rolled away from a larger pile on the counter.

Mrs. Patmore brushed the other rogue cranberries back into the pile. “What kind of cook?”

Thomas made a sweeping gesture with his arm. “In a kitchen like this before she had us. After that, she would still go to work when they needed her help. Mostly holidays or special celebrations.”

“I find it odd that in all this time, you never mentioned that your mother was a cook,” Mrs. Patmore said.

Thomas shrugged. “I didn’t figure anyone would care.”

“Why wouldn’t we care?,” Daisy asked, handing Thomas a piece of candied orange peel.

Thomas answered while chewing. “I’ve always been more pest than pal ‘round here.”

“Because you behave like a pest,” Mrs. Patmore said. “When you’re pleasant, it’s no trouble having you around. Except for when you eat my food and stand underfoot,” she added, nudging Thomas out of her way.

“Then don’t make such delicious food,” Thomas replied. He stole one last cranberry before going upstairs to help set the dining room for dinner.

Thomas was halfway through setting the table when Mr. Carson joined him.

“No David or Mr. Molesley?” Thomas asked, placing a fork on the table with a light hand.

“David had an errand, Mr. Molesley has his half day. We’ll make due. David will be back before
Mr. Carson put on gloves and helped Thomas with the silverware. “Thirsk.”

“For what?”

“He said Christmas errands.”

“What would he need in Thirsk that he couldn’t get in the village?”

Mr. Carson sighed. “I don’t know. Why don’t you save the line of questioning for David when he returns?”

Thomas did, in fact, save a line of questioning for Price, but was first distracted by one of Price’s obvious errands; a haircut. His hair was much shorter, styled with barely any pomade to hold it in place, unlike his former look.

Thomas pulled Price aside in the hall before supper. “I like the new style. I can’t wait to run my hands through it.”

Price ran his own hand through his hair and smiled. “Sorry, you’ll have to wait.”

“So what were your other errands this afternoon?”

“Remember that money I took, and how I was going to spend it? Hold onto your hat, Thomas, but I was out spending it.”

“All of it?”

“What is your obsession with my finances?” Price asked with a little laugh.

“I just want to make sure you look out for yourself. What if your situation were to change, and you needed to break into your piggy bank?”

“You’re cute,” Price whispered. “Nothing in my world is changing imminently. I have savings, and I’ve been saving all of my watch repair money. Have you?”

Thomas chewed the corner of his lip and waited for a hallboy to pass before speaking. “I would if I weren’t paying down debt with it.”

Price’s heart skipped with sudden guilt for flaunting his small windfall. “Do you need to borrow some from me, then? No strings attached.”

“No. God, no,” Thomas said with chagrin.

“The offer wasn’t meant to be insulting.”

“My point,” Thomas said, taking a step forward to close the gap between them, “is that I don’t want to see you in the same position I’m in. Don’t squander your savings.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

Thomas looked up and down the hallway, and certain no one could see them, ran his hand through Price’s hair. “So soft,” he whispered.
“Don’t pet me in the hallway.”

“Can I pet you in the bedroom?”

Price ducked as Thomas raised his hand to touch his hair again. “I’m going to eat before someone turns a corner and catches you behaving badly.”

“Blame yourself for putting me off,” Thomas said quietly as they walked to the servant’s hall.

After supper, Thomas went up to his room to work on watches. His conversation with Price in the hallway reminded him that he hadn’t delivered any in the last week, and he could use the money. After hours of frustration, he went to Price’s room.

“I can’t do it,” he complained as he barged in through Price’s bedroom door.

Price looked up from his novel. “Did I miss half a conversation? You can’t do what?”

Thomas dragged a chair next to the bed and and tossed a gold pocket watch onto Price’s open book. “I’ve been working on this bloody thing for hours. I’ve tried everything. I can’t fix it.”

Price picked up the watch and closed his book. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and held the watch to the light. He opened the back and took a quick look inside. “Nothing looks broken.”

Thomas pulled his chair closer for a better look. Both men hunched over the watch. “Yes, but it’s not working.”

Price tried to wind the watch, but it wouldn’t budge.

“See? See, I told you.”

“Settle down. There’s no trouble inside the watch, but it doesn’t work. What else do you think could be the problem?”

Thomas sighed and met Price’s eyes. “Well I don’t know, Professor Price. Can you just tell me instead of instructing me?”

Price turned the watch over in his hand. “Can you grab tweezers?”

Thomas grumbled something Price couldn’t hear as he fetched tweezers from Price’s supply of tools. He handed them to Price and sat back down.

“Thank you.”

“If you fix this in less than a minute, I swear I’ll scream.”

Price chuckled and opened the glass front of the watch. He handed the tweezers back to Thomas and held the watch out in his open palm. “Poke the minute hand.”

Thomas grumbled again and leaned closer. He tapped the watch’s minute hand lightly with the tweezers. Price tried to wind the watch again, and the watch’s stem turned easily. When Price finished winding it, it began ticking.

Thomas grabbed the watch from Price’s palm and clapped the glass front shut. “Hours, and that’s all it was.”

“There, there,” Price said, patting Thomas’s thigh. “You should have come to Professor Price
earlier.”
“You’re not helping things.”
“Thomas, I’ve seen hundreds of stuck minute hands. You learn by doing. You haven’t seen one, so you didn’t know. Now you know, and it won’t trip you up next time.”
“What a stupid little thing. I looked at every other blessed part.”
“Sometimes we overlook the easy answer. You won’t overcomplicate it next time.”
Thomas’s patted Price’s thigh, higher up than Price had patted his.
Price smiled. “What do you think you’re doing?”
Thomas rubbed Price’s thigh. “Oh, I thought when you touched my leg we were moving on to other activities.”
“Didn’t I say no ‘activities’?” Price asked as he held Thomas’s hand steady. “That means no rubbing, too.”
“Come on, this is ludicrous.”
“Less than two months, you can make it.”
Thomas lifted Price’s hand and kissed the back of it, an amorous smile playing on his lips. “My head's clear, I clearly want you, there’s no need to wait any longer,” he said, kissing Price’s knuckles softly.
“If I’m your one and only, than it shouldn’t be a problem waiting, because you’ll have me forever after.”
“Yes, but I’m feeling randy *now*.”
“Then it will be that much sweeter later,” Price said with a smile, taking his hand back from Thomas’s.
Thomas held Price’s other hand. “Later is now. I already told Eric I can’t be with him.”
The smile faded from Price’s lips. “I’m sorry, what?”
“I spoke to him about his letter. I told him I’m yours, and yours alone.”
Price took his other hand from Thomas’s as well and looked at Thomas uneasily.
“Why are you looking at me like that? You don’t believe me?”
Price shook his head. “No, I believe you said it. I just don’t believe you meant it.”
“Stop this,” Thomas snapped. “If I didn’t mean it, why would I say it?”
“I should have said; I believe you think you meant it.”
Fire rose in Thomas’s chest. “I ended things, isn’t that what you wanted?,” he asked sharply. “I professed my love for you and told him that he and I will never be together. He hung up brokenhearted. Is that not enough? Should I have cut out his actual heart and brought it back to you
Price shrunk away from Thomas, sitting back further on the bed. “I wanted you to take time to really think about it. Now you’ve acted impulsively. What if, a few weeks from now, you realize I’m the one you should ended things with?”

“That’s not gonna happen.”

“You can’t say that for certain.”

“What’s done is done, now what?” Thomas asked with wide-eyed exasperation. “I can’t travel through time and unsay what’s been said. What do you need in order to believe me?”

“I don’t know, maybe I need time.”

“Time to keep waiting, to keep being together while not being together? What do you gain by continuing to put me off?”

Price looked down and played with his cufflink. “If you can’t wait a few weeks then you don’t really want me.”

Thomas stood up and took a firm hold under Price’s arm, pulling Price to his feet. He held Price’s face up to his in both hands and stared into Price’s eyes. “I love you, I want you, I need you, David. Of course I could wait, but there’s no reason to, unless you can give me a good one right this minute.”

Price tried to look away from Thomas, but Thomas held his face steady. “Alright. Let go and I’ll tell you.”

Thomas dropped his hands, but kept his hard stare.

Price looked down and closed his eyes. “I want you to long for me the way you’ve longed for him.”

“What are you talking about?”

Price opened his eyes, looking up without lifting his face. “I’ve been the one pursuing you all this time, begging you to choose me. I suppose I wanted to be pursued. Then I’d know you’ve really chosen me.”

“That’s not true, this relationship flows in both directions.”

“I had to all but attack you the first time we were intimate.”

“I had good reason not to come onto a man in this house.”

“What reason?”

Thomas loomed over Price, the fire still in his chest. “Because the last time, it nearly got me fired without a reference.”

“Oh, Thomas,” Price whispered, reaching up, pulling Thomas’s face down to his. He laid a tender kiss on Thomas’s lips. “How could I have known?”

Thomas was disarmed by the kiss. He rested his forehead against Price’s. “It was pathetic, pining after someone who would never have me.”
“Why wouldn’t he?”

“Well he wouldn’t have any man,” Thomas said, placing his hands on Price’s hips.

“Then you’re certainly not pathetic,” Price said, sliding his hands from Thomas’s face to his shoulders. “Hasn’t everyone like us gone through that at least once?”

Thomas swayed with Price as if music was in the air around them. “More than once for me,” he said, pulling Price closer.

“Me, too.”

“Back to the topic at hand. You want to be courted, is that it?”

Price tipped his face up to Thomas’s, a serene smile on his lips.

“Is it?”

Price gave a little shrug.

Thomas slid his hands up to Price’s waist. “Is it?”

Price bit his lip and looked away.

Thomas pressed his fingers into Price’s sides. “Don’t make me tickle it out of you.”

“No, don’t,” Price said, wiggling. “You shouldn’t tickle me.”

“Because…?”

Price gave Thomas his puppy pout. “It, uhm. It kind of…”

Thomas pressed his fingers harder.

“No! No. Yes, I want to be courted.”

“It kind of what? Tell me,” Thomas said, a gleam in his eye.

Price rubbed his lips together and looked up at Thomas. “It kind of turns me on,” he admitted.

“Does it now?” Thomas asked, cocking his head. “That’s a bit naughty. I’d love to know the origins of that little fetish.”

Price tensed his muscles instinctively. “I don’t know, I just-”

Thomas squeezed Price’s sides, shutting him up mid-sentence. Price struggled to contain a squeal as he writhed and tried to pull away. He held Thomas’s wrists, trying to pull Thomas’s hands off, but it only encouraged Thomas to squeeze harder.

“That’s not fair!” Price whined, squirming.

“Never said it was.” Thomas ceased pinching Price’s sides and put his teeth lightly against Price’s neck, below his ear.

“Oh god, please don’t.”

Thomas let out a low growl and nibbled Price’s neck. Price laughed and tried again in vain again to
escape. Thomas walked Price backward to the bed. “Lay down or I’ll bite again.”

Price laid down. He flinched and covered his sides as Thomas sat next to him.

“Are you ticklish there?” Thomas asked, pointing at Price’s inner thigh.

Price pressed his knees together and nodded.

Thomas jammed his hand between Price’s thighs just below his groin and squeezed. Price tried to yank Thomas’s hand out from between his legs, pressing his lips together to stop his giggles from bursting out. Little tears appeared in the corner of his eyes and he covered his mouth with his hand as a giggle escaped.

“You weren’t joking,” Thomas said, taking his hand from Price’s leg to grab Price’s crotch.

Price kept his hand over his mouth, his body still twitching from Thomas’s tickling.

Thomas squeezed Price beneath his hand, and Price moaned into his palm. “Well,” Thomas said, rubbing Price, “I guess we can explore this more come February.”

“What?” Price asked, the word muffled by his hand.

“Nothing until Valentine's, your words, not mine,” Thomas replied, taking his hand back from Price.

Price sat up quickly. “You’re a bastard.”

Thomas lit up with a wicked grin. “It will be that much sweeter later. Isn’t that what you said?”

Price grabbed Thomas’s hand it put it back between his legs, but Thomas pulled away and stood up. “Ah ah, no no. I’m following orders that came from your very lips.”

“My lips are sorry. My lips were wrong.”

“Your lips can see the rest of me in what, eight or so weeks?” Thomas asked, walking to the door.

Price crawled to the end of his bed and sat up on his knees. “My lips are ready and willing!” he said, holding out his hand dramatically. “Come back to them!”

Thomas raised his eyebrows, the grin still on his face, and left the room.

------------------------------------------------------------

In the days leading up to Christmas, Thomas tuned out much of the holiday activity in the house, instead preoccupied with his supply of watches in need of repair. At first, he was most concerned with fixing them quickly to earn as much as possible. Shortly after, he forgot about the money and became more concerned with honing his skills. Price was so certain Thomas would receive an offer from his brother, but Thomas remained unconvinced that it would be so easy. He barged through Price’s door multiple times with one watch-related conundrum or another, irritated each time that Price could solve the problem in minutes.

“Your frustration isn’t helping. In fact, it’s only hurting you. Would you attack a clock like you’re attacking that watch?”

Thomas loathed when Price was so obviously right. “No, but clocks come easier to me.”
“So will watches. A little patience goes a long way.”

“I’m allergic to patience.”

Price tuned out much of the holiday activity as well, but for different reasons. The letter from his father had awoken feelings he thought were left in the past. He eyed the package on his dresser each morning, not certain that he wanted to open it at all let alone so soon. Nora’s excited countdown to Christmas made him feel foolish by comparison. Here was a little girl who also lost her father recently, too, he thought, and yet she was still able to find joy in the holiday.

The night before Christmas eve, the staff was occupied with final touches: cooking, baking, polishing, scrubbing, gift wrapping. Price took advantage of the empty dorms to take a leisurely bath. He filled the tub far past the point he normally would and submerged himself. He tipped his head back, his ears under water, and closed his eyes. He focused on the amplified sound of his pulse in his ears, the steam in his lungs, the warm water covering almost all of his body. He stayed nearly still, other than occasionally streaming handfuls of water through his fingers. By the time the water was cool, he finally felt relaxed for the first time in days. He sat up and drained the water, staying in the tub until the final drops disappeared down the drain.

He dried himself, then used the towel to wipe the steam from the mirror. He frowned at his reflection as he applied shaving cream to his face. The haircut hadn’t helped. Despite updating the hairstyle he had modeled after photographs from his father’s younger days, he was still almost identical to the man in those pictures. When his father was alive, it was a comfort to look in the mirror and see the man from his childhood. In light of the letter, it felt like he was summoning a spirit by looking at his own reflection. He finished shaving, then dressed and left without looking back at the mirror.

“Why so mopey?” Thomas asked as they passed in the hall.

“I wish Marie never sent that letter. It’s like reliving my father’s death, but somehow worse.”

Mr. Mosley overhead the conversation from his open door. “It isn’t usually a straight path from grief to healing,” he said from the doorway. “Sometimes you dip down again before you come back up, especially around the holidays.”

“Well I’ve certainly dipped,” Price said. He wished Thomas and Mr. Molesley goodnight and went to his room.

Price shuffled out of bed early the next morning, avoiding looking at the box on his dresser or the mirror above it. He dressed and went to the great hall. The maids hadn’t even built the morning’s fires, and so the house was nearly silent. He stood in the shadow of the Christmas tree, looking it up and down, willing it to spark something inside him that would allow him to enjoy the coming festivities. Neither of his parents would have wanted him to stand there feeling numb and hollow, but telling himself that over and over wasn’t enough to ignite the spark, either. He gave up and went downstairs.

To his surprise, he saw from down the hall that Thomas was already up and helping in the kitchen, apron on and hands busy. He watched through the glass as Thomas joked and laughed with Daisy and Ellie, all of them boasting smiles as they worked. Thomas saw him and waved him into the kitchen, pointing at his own apron and then to Price. Price removed his jacket and put on an apron, and took a spot at the counter next to Thomas.

“You still look glum,” Thomas said as he passed Price a knife and cutting board.
Price took both items, then some celery from Daisy. “I’m glum about being glum. Maybe I’ll perk up this evening. It’ll be fun watching the village children open their gifts.”

“It’ll be more fun when we open ours tomorrow,” Ellie said.

“My last employers weren’t very generous,” Price said, slicing into his celery stalks. “I don’t expect something extravagant, but a token gift would’ve been appreciated. You work your life away for them, at least one day a year they could give you something thoughtful in return.”

Thomas, Ellie, and Daisy all exchanged glances.

“That doesn’t sound much like you,” Daisy said.

Price shrugged. “It’s the glum talking.”

“Well they’re generous enough here,” Thomas said cheerfully. “I’m sure you won’t be disappointed.”

Price couldn’t help smiling at such a bubbly Thomas. “No, you’re right. Why am I worrying about my past employer when I now work for one of the best?”

“Precisely,” Thomas replied, scraping chopped carrots from his cutting board into a bowl, “so stop brooding.”

“I’ll try to put my brooding aside. I can pick it back up after Christmas.”

“No, then we have New Years and the servant’s ball,” Daisy said, “you have to wait until they’re over.”

“Servant’s ball,” Price said, rolling his eyes.

Thomas rolled his eyes in return. “Now what’s wrong with the servant’s ball?”

Price scrunched up his nose. “They’re insulting, aren’t they? Like it’s some big joke that the servants would dare drink and dance upstairs for the night.”

“It’s not like that here,” Daisy said. “They’re very respectful to us.”

Price scraped his celery into the bowl on top of Thomas’s carrots. “I’ve never heard of a servant’s ball that didn’t end in at least one of the servants embarrassing themselves.”

“That doesn’t tend to happen here,” Thomas said. “Who knows, maybe you can be one of the first.”

“I’ll try not to break the streak,” Price replied.

Price spent the rest of the day shadowing Thomas, joining in every activity no matter how mundane. Thomas took notice, but enjoyed it, glad Price wanted nothing else but to be close to him for the day.

“You could start smoking,” Thomas suggested when Price followed him to the courtyard. “Always helps me avoid a case of the sads.”

“I only like cigars,” Price said, “and that’s a bit too expensive a habit.”

“I didn’t know you liked them,” Thomas said, smiling, imagining Price’s lips wrapped around a
Price put out his hand. “Let me try it.”

Thomas took a drag and looked at Price with a skeptical eye. “I thought you’ve tried them before.”

“Not for some time.”

“Well, you’re not trying it today.”

“Do you have any cigars stashed away, then?”

Thomas tightened his scarf against the cold. “Flasks of contraband alcohol, I can help with. I’m afraid I’ve nothing to smoke but these.”

“Fine, then I’ll take the alcohol.”

Thomas coughed. “Don’t make me laugh when I’m inhaling.”

“Do you have any? If yes, can we drink it tonight?”

Thomas shook his head. “I don’t like the idea of you drinking when you’re so down, but I’ll come to your room after the hoopla dies down tonight and keep you company ‘til you fall asleep.”

“That sounds better than a cigar or a flask.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Thomas said as he snuffed his cigarette out beneath his shoe.

Price was forced to part from Thomas when it came time for the tenants and villagers to arrive. He collected overcoats with Mr. Molesley, and was taken aback by the number of visitors. The farms and village seemed small, but there were a lot of people arriving, even for the great hall to hold. He looked for Thomas across the sea of people, and caught sight of him by the punchbowl, passing out glasses to the guests. Though Thomas didn’t see him looking, it was still a comfort to simply set eyes on him.

When he acclimated to the crowded hall, the little box on his dresser was back on his mind. At least Thomas will be there when I open it, he thought.

Nora wound her way through the crowd to find Price. She pushed a small, folded piece of paper into his trouser pocket, giggled, and then disappeared back into the crowd. He unfolded it immediately.

*Hi David. I like your new hairstyle. I have a present for you so come get it tomorrow. You don’t have worry if you don’t have a present for me. I have more money than you do so it’s fine.*

Price laughed out loud, then looked up to find Thomas beside him. He handed Thomas the note.

Thomas read it and smiled. “The child has a way with words.”

“In fairness, I have a feeling that child has more money than God.”

Mr. Carson found both men and asked that they help hand out champagne. Once all guests had their glasses in hand, Thomas and Price took their own and joined the other staff at the back of the hall.

The room grew quiet, and everyone faced the Christmas tree as the Crawley family lined up in
front of it. Everyone was shoulder to shoulder, and Price made sure his was pressed firmly against Thomas’s. Lord Grantham gave a short speech and a toast of thanks to the gathered crowd for a wonderful year. Price raised his glass and echoed “cheers” with the rest of the room, and found that the bubbles accompanied some actual pleasant feelings bubbling inside of him.

Lady Mary lead the crowd in singing “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” Price opened his mouth, but held his breath when Thomas began singing. Everyone’s voices swelled together, with Thomas’s taking the lead in Price’s ear. Pressed in tight, the music around him, he thought back to the late summer night when the staff attended the concert together, the night before his father died. He remembered wondering that evening, as his leg touched Thomas’s, whether Thomas shared any of the same feelings for him. Now only months later, Price was fully aware exactly how deep Thomas’s feelings ran for him. He wanted to lay his head on Thomas’s shoulder, or wrap his fingers around Thomas’s just like all the couples were doing around them. Thomas looked down at him, still singing, and rubbed his index finger against Price’s. I’ll take it, Price thought, rubbing Thomas’s finger in return.

“Didn’t feel like singing?” Thomas asked as the crowd began milling around again.

“Was too busy listening to your voice.”

Thomas stuck out his lips and looked away. “I’m so rusty.”

“Sounded perfect to me,” Price said softly.

By the time the last guest left, it was too late for the staff to finish cleaning up. “We’ll all pitch in before church tomorrow,” Mr. Carson told the men.

“That’s fine as long as I can sleep now,” Thomas said with heavy eyelids.

“No,” Price whispered, “I wanted to exchange gifts. And you were gonna stay with me until I fell asleep, remember?”

“Yes, I remember. I’ll meet you in your room.”

Price waited for Thomas on his bed, all washed up and in his pajamas, his gift for Thomas in his lap. He tapped the box and hummed until his doorknob finally turned.

Thomas was still fully dressed with the exception of his jacket. He sat next to Price and kicked off his shoes.

“Who goes first?” Price asked.

Thomas handed his gift to Price. “You do.”

Price accepted the small box from Thomas and unwrapped the paper carefully. He felt Thomas’s expectant eyes on him and hesitated to open the cover.

“What are you waiting for?”

“I get nervous when I open gifts. It’s a quirk of mine.”

“You’re one giant quirk. Open it.”

Price opened the box. A gold herringbone necklace looked back at him.

Thomas lifted the chain from the box and opened the clasp, holding the necklace out to Price. “I’d
put a ring on your finger if we lived in a different world, David. I can at least give you this to wear under your shirt every day. You and I will know it’s there, and that’s enough for me. Will you wear it?”

Price stared at the chain hanging between Thomas’s hands. He looked up from it to meet Thomas’s eyes, but couldn’t see him through tears.

“Does that mean you will?”

Price leaned forward so that Thomas could put the chain around his neck. He ran his finger over it. “I’m never taking it off.”

“I wasn’t going to let you. So you like it?”

“Oh, I love it,” Price said, touching it again. “And I love you.”

“Shall I open mine now?”

Price handed Thomas the box from his lap. “I don’t know, maybe throw it in the rubbish instead. I can’t top your gift.”

“I’ll open it first before I throw it away,” Thomas said. He ripped the paper but opened the box less hastily. He looked up from the contents to Price. “This is too generous,” he said soberly.

“No, I made it, it was just the cost for parts and some engraving.”

Thomas lifted his gift, a watch with a square face and wide, black leather band. There was detailed engraving in the metal and tooling on the leather, and a sapphire set in place of the number twelve. “I haven’t seen you make anything like this.”

“Because I wasn’t making those other watches for you. Turn it over and open the back.”

Thomas turned the watch over and looked at the back of it.

“No, open it.”

Thomas opened the back, and it opened like a locket. Both of their initials were engraved inside, along with a heart and the year.

“I know it’s not practical to wear this when you’re working here, but you won’t work here forever, and I hope when that day comes you’ll wear this every day and think of me.”

Thomas’s eyes filled with tears as Price’s had, but his were accompanied by sobs. Price took Thomas’s wrist and kissed it, then put the watch on him.

Thomas held Price’s cheek. “I love you so much,” he whispered.

“You’re the sweetest man I’ve ever met,” Price said, putting his hand over Thomas’s.

Thomas sniffled and wiped his cheek on his shoulder. “And now you should open the box from your father.”

“Haven’t enough tears been shed in here tonight?”

Thomas ignored Price and retrieved the box from the dresser. “Would you prefer I open it?”
“No, I’ll be a big boy,” Price said, taking the box. He cracked his knuckles and stretched, then opened the box.

He put out his hand and turned the box over, letting the three rings fall into his palm. They clinked against each other as he caught them. He put his mother’s engagement ring on his pinky, a gold and pearl ring with small diamond accents, and then her simple wedding band on top of it. He turned his hand over, back and forth, admiring the set he hadn’t seen since the day his mother passed. He tried his father’s ring on his ring finger, then his middle finger, index finger, and thumb. It fit none of them.

“I guess he was bigger than I realized. Or I’m smaller than I think,” Price said, chuckling at himself.

Thomas held Price’s hand and looked at his mother’s rings. “They’re beautiful.”

“Mmm,” Price agreed. He slipped his father’s ring on Thomas’s ring finger, and it fit.

Thomas linked his fingers with Price’s. “What would your parents think of us playing with their rings like this?”

“I’d like to think both of them would be happy that I’m so in love.”

Thomas squeezed Price’s hand. “I like that thought.”

Price looked down at Thomas’s hand. “My father said they’re mine, and to do with them what I please. So, I want you to keep it.”

“I couldn’t, David.”

“You can and will.” Price took his mother’s wedding band from his finger, unclasped his necklace, slipped the ring onto it, and placed it back around his neck. “Do you mind if I wear it like this?”

“No. It looks even better on you now.”

“Oh, do I look good?” Price asked. He jumped up and went to his mirror. “Ooh, I do.”

Thomas joined Price and hugged him from behind. Price reached back for Thomas’s cheek and turned his face, bringing their lips together. “You look very good,” Thomas said, nibbling Price’s bottom lip.

“You don’t really have to sit vigil while I fall asleep. I think I’ll pass right out at this point, anyhow.”

“But I want to.”

“Alright. I won’t argue.”

Price cleaned up the wrapping paper and boxes strewn on his bed and then crawled beneath the covers. Thomas turned off Price’s lights and sat on the edge of the bed. He ran his fingers through Price’s hair slowly, repeatedly, soothingly. Price closed his eyes and sighed.

“Would you sing to me?” Price asked, his voice already distant and on the edge of sleep. Price expected Thomas to resist. Instead, Thomas leaned in closer to Price’s ear and sang “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen,” slowly and quietly like a lullaby. Price tried to keep his eyes open, and stay awake long enough to hear Thomas finish the song, but he drifted to sleep beneath Thomas’s
fingers, enveloped by his voice.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Mature content ahead

Thomas lined up next to Price in the great hall for the ceremonial gift-giving. He wasn’t fond of the ceremony in years past. It usually entailed watching other staff members get personalized gifts in addition to the standard bolt of cloth for the women and collars for the men. When it was his turn, he approached Lord Grantham, but Lady Grantham handed him his box instead. “Come talk to me before dinner is served,” she said quietly so that only he could hear.

“Yes, m’Lady,” he said, accepting the box from her. “Thank you.”

Next in line, Price received his gift, handed to him by Lady Edith. “Happy Christmas, David. I picked this out myself.”

Price clumsily accepted the gift. “Thank - thank you. Thank you.”

“You need to learn how to accept a present properly,” Thomas said once Price was back by his side.

Price looked around at the other servants, all opening their gifts. “We open them in front of everyone else? That seems odd.”

“They want to see us open them, and see our appreciation. Make sure you smile.”

Thomas looked on as Price opened his gift. Inside was a set of pencils and drawing tools, all of a quality far exceeding any Price could hope to afford.

Price looked to Lady Edith, who was watching him open his gift instead of paying attention as the family handed out the rest. He blushed and shook his head. Lady Edith shrugged and chuckled, and turned her attention back to the other servants in line.

“Uh oh,” Thomas said with a smirk, “is the Lady developing a soft spot for you?”

“Don’t be silly,” Price replied. “I think she pities me. I can tell she thinks I’m wasting my abilities.”

Thomas elbowed Price. “Well she’s not wrong.”

Price closed the box and straightened his posture. “So which day is your birthday, exactly?”

Thomas looked around the room. “Who told?”

“I was trading gifts with Nora and I asked what she got for you, and she said she was saving it for your birthday. I’m not sure why she knows and not me, but tell me, which day?”

Thomas held his head high and glanced away from Price. “The twenty-eighth. But you just gave me a gift, so don’t buy me another. And don’t tell anyone else.”
“Ech, so arrogant, assuming I was going to buy you something. I can’t, anyway. I’ve been instructed to pinch every penny.”

“Well good. If I catch you not pinching those pennies, I’ll start pinching your sides.”

“Don’t flirt,” Price whispered, “you know I have a terrible poker face.”

Thomas licked his molars. “I can’t stop thinking about it. I want to bite every little bit of you ‘til you explode.”

Price blushed in response. “I can’t entertain those kind of thoughts right now. I’m going to see what Mrs. Hughes received from Lady Grantham. That should help clear the visual you just put in my head.”

“Alright, but I hope you think about it when you’re alone later.”

“Oh, that’s guaranteed.”

Thomas watched with self-satisfied smile on his lips as Price walked away. He wandered from servant to servant, looking over their shoulders at their gifts. Mr. Molesley pulled him into a conversation about the massive tome he received from Lord Grantham. Thomas found the explanation of its contents as boring as the book was large, but he smiled as Mr. Molesley spoke, adding an “Ah, I see,” here and there.

He finally unwrapped the box in his hands to find a pair of cufflinks inside, made of silver and onyx. It outshined anything the family had given him in the past. He looked at the family, but they were all engaged with other servants and none looked back.

Before the servant’s Christmas luncheon, Mr. Carson passed out the day’s post. A little purple envelope arrived for Thomas with a brief note inside.

_Thomas,_

_Edith invited me to come for New Year’s and stay through the servant’s ball. She said my company would make it bearable for her. I told her I would think it over. I would like to come, but only if it’s alright with you and David. You know I wouldn’t attempt anything inappropriate while I’m there. Please telephone and let me know if you’ll both allow it._

_E_

Thomas shared the note with Price, who spent much longer staring at the paper than it took to read the words.

“I understand if you don’t want him coming.”

“I’m alright with it,” Price said, giving Thomas the paper. “Maybe I should be the one to phone him and tell him as much.”

“It would probably mean quite a bit coming from you.”

The servant’s Christmas luncheon far surpassed the ones Price experienced before Downton. It was as fun, warm, and lively as any happy family he could imagine. Gifts passed between hands up and down the table before they had their pudding. They were small gifts purchased with small wages, but all of them thoughtful and much appreciated.
Daisy put a paper box secured with twine on the table in front of Thomas.

“For me?” Thomas asked, puzzled.

“For you,” Daisy said, “so that for at least one day you don’t have to go around stealing.”

Daisy mixed back in with the other servants, watching from a distance to see if Thomas would open the box. He pulled the twine and the top popped open. Inside was a mix of two dozen cookies, truffles, and candies, all as finely made as what would be served to the family later. He closed the top before anyone around him could look inside. Daisy smiled from the other end of the room, and Thomas nodded and smiled back.

Thomas slipped away from the celebration for a quiet cigarette break outside. He thought he saw the tail of Price’s stable cat strutting by, but was mistaken. He hadn’t seen the little animal since at least November. He hoped she was just holed up somewhere warm and would be back when the weather broke.

The back door opened behind him and Anna pushed her way outside without her overcoat.

“Are you alright?” Thomas asked, moving to the steps to help her down.

“I’ll be better after a little cool air. I’m roasting like a pig on a spit today.”

Thomas held his cigarette away from her. “Does the smell still bother you?”

“No, that passed, but thank you for asking.” Anna put her hand on her chest and winced.

“Do you need me to get Mr. Bates?” Thomas asked, holding Anna under her arm.

“No, this happens more often than I’d like. I just need to sit a spell.”

Thomas led Anna to a bench and sat with her. “Do you need me to walk you back home? You look like you could use a rest.”

“Thank you, Mr. Barrow, but I’ll be fine. I just indulged in too much Christmas feast. These days nothing seems to agree with me, so I’m not sure why three helpings plus pudding seemed like a good idea.”

Thomas chuckled, entertained by Anna’s frankness.

“Did I share too much information?”

“Not for me,” Thomas said, smiling around his cigarette.

“You’re quite cheery today.”

“It’s Christmas, who wouldn’t be cheerful?”

Anna giggled. “Well you, for starters. Every Christmas I can remember before this one.”

“Maybe I’m getting less ill-tempered with age.”

“Or might it have something to do with David?”

Thomas brushed ash from his coat. “Why would it have anything to do with him?”
“Well,” Anna said carefully, “I’ve known about you two for a little while. He didn’t tell me, I guessed it, so don’t be cross with him. Though I think he was glad to share his feelings for you with someone else.”

“And what feelings are those, exactly?” Thomas asked, tucking his cigarette into the corner of his lips.

“That he’s extremely fond of you,” Anna said, staring up at Thomas until he would look her in the eye.

“He said that, did he?”

“He did. And am I right to guess that you’re extremely fond of him?”

Thomas looked away from Anna as he took a drag. “Does your present condition give you some kind of special intuition?”

Anna chuckled. “I don’t know about that. Heartburn, yes, but I haven’t noticed any psychic powers.”

“Well either way, Anna, we really shouldn’t discuss this out in the open.”

Anna patted Thomas’s shoulder. “I thought if David needed to share his feelings, maybe you did, too, and who else could you talk to about it besides me?”

“Miss Baxter has an inkling, but I never confirmed anything. Unlike David, who apparently told you everything.”

“Now, now, I told you not to get cross.”

Thomas took a drag and exhaled slowly, tapping his hand on his knee. “You know it would ruin everything for him if anyone else in this house finds out.”

“I understand,” Anna said, a little chill coming over her. “I’ve known for some time and I haven’t said anything. I’m quite good at keeping secrets, you know.”

Thomas removed his coat and laid it over Anna’s shoulders.

“No, you’ll get cold!”

“I have on considerably more layers than you, I’ll be fine.”

Anna adjusted the coat on her shoulders. “Well, thank you, then.”

“I must say, I’m surprised you’re encouraging his feelings for me. I probably get along better with you than most here, but that’s still not saying much.”

“I like that David brings out the good in you. I’m starting to see that the good side might actually be the real Thomas Barrow.”

Thomas rolled his cigarette between his fingers. “I should have shown you the good side more often, maybe you could have seen that sooner.”

“I’m seeing it now, that’s what matters.”

Thomas nodded toward Anna’s stomach. “Have you picked out any names?”
Anna put her hands on her ample abdomen. “I haven’t really told anybody, but we’re thinking John, Jr. for a boy and Jane for a girl.”

“Come on, name him something exciting, like Billy Bates. He could grow up to be a cowboy, like in the pictures.”

Anna laughed. “So now you think it’s a boy, too?”

“Why, does Mr. Bates?”

“He isn’t certain, but David is. Swears up and down I’m having a boy.”

“Then you best get used to the name Billy.”

Any shivered. “Are you almost ready to go in, cheeky devil?”

“I’m ready,” Thomas said, flicking his cigarette. He helped Anna to her feet. “May I ask a question first?”

“Of course you can.”

Thomas took a moment to decide if he could really trust Anna. Looking into her sympathetic eyes, he believed he could. “Even when things are good, like now, I can’t help but become unhinged eventually. It’s in my blood, it’s part of me, I can’t change it. David has such a kind heart. Am I being selfish by being with him? Should he be with someone whose heart doesn’t have dark corners like mine?”

Anna linked her arm through Thomas’s. “How boring would life be if we fell for someone just like ourselves? As for David’s heart, it’s not pure as the driven snow. We all have dark corners.”

“He has a cobweb here or there, but not like mine.”

“You’re too unkind to yourself. If anything, that’s your downfall.”

“Yes, I must say, I’ve realized that lately.”

Anna let Thomas help her back up the steps. “I’m glad you talked to me. You can any time you want to.”

“Thank you,” Thomas said sincerely.

“Happy Christmas, Mr. Barrow,” Anna said, kissing Thomas’s cheek.

“Happy Christmas, Billy’s mum.”

The staff already returned to work by the time Thomas and Anna came back inside. The afternoon was a busy one, and Thomas was glad to be assigned to the library so that he could get a look at the gifts the family exchanged during tea. Thomas eyed the boxes exchanged between hands, including jewelry and even a watch. Not as nice as what I received last night, Thomas thought.

Thomas was proud of himself for not dying of curiosity between the gift-giving ceremony in the morning and when he was able to meet with Lady Grantham before dinner service. He found her in the gallery just before it was time to ring the gong.

“I hope you didn’t think I’d forgotten about your request to help your sister.”
“No, my lady, not at all,” Thomas said, though he had already given up on receiving help from her Ladyship.

“I didn’t want to share before I was certain, but I’ve found a doctor in London who comes highly recommended. By whom, I can’t say, but it’s someone whose opinion I hold in high regard. Your sister will need an assessment first, and then the doctor will prescribe treatment. I know London is a ways from Ripon, but I would like to pay for the assessment and her train fare. Then we can discuss the finances of her treatment when the time comes.”

Thomas cleared his throat. “My Lady, that’s better than most any Christmas gift I could have asked for. Thank you.”

“I haven’t discussed this with the other servants, so please keep it under your hat, but we’ll be opening the house in London on the first of February and staying for the month. If your sister can wait until then, perhaps you could accompany her.”

“There’s no trouble waiting another month or so, and I think I’ll have an easier time convincing her to go if I promise to go with her,” Thomas said, giving Lady Grantham a smile.

“I do hope it will help.”

“I’m sure it will,” Thomas said humbly. “Thank you again.”

Thomas left the gallery to check on the dining room. Price was alone in the room measuring place settings.

“Can you keep a secret?” Thomas asked, purposely moving a dinner fork so that Price had to measure the same place setting again.

Price poked Thomas with his measuring stick. “Occasionally.”

Thomas moved a butter knife.

“Stop that!,” Price protested, poking Thomas again. “What’s the secret?”

“They’re opening the London house for all of February.”

Price twirled the stick in his fingers. “Do we all get to go?”

“I’m not sure who’s going, but if I catch wind they’re planning to leave either one of us behind, I’ll do something about it.”

“Why is it a secret?”

Thomas moved a wine glass out of place. “Because her Ladyship told me it was. She’ll know it came from me, so don’t go flapping your lip about it.”

“If you touch one more thing on this table I’ll go straight to her and tattle,” Price said, holding the stick out as a warning.

Thomas put his hands up. “Fine, fine, no more touching.” He clasped his hands behind his back and followed Price, watching him work. “When were you planning to call Eric?”

“I called,” Price said, sliding a chair back from the table, then checking the distance. “Already?”
“While you were out taking the longest smoke break known to man.”

“Did you reach him?”

“Mmm hmm.”

“And?” Thomas prodded when Price didn’t offer up further information.

Price slid out another chair. “And he’s coming.”

“How did your conversation go?”

“Well.”

“When is he coming.”

Price spun the stick again. “On the thirtieth. Not in time for your birthday. Sorry, I’ll have to think of another gift.”

“Don’t start.”

“How old will you be?”

Thomas snatched the stick and pointed it at Price’s chest. “You know how old I am.”

“Roughly.”

Thomas tapped his foot. “I’ll be thirty-eight.”


“You’ll regret that,” Thomas said, sliding the stick down to Price’s waist. The door opened, startling both men. They faced the door quickly and stood at attention. Thomas dropped the stick to his side.

Mr. Molesley looked back and forth between them both. “I was coming to see if you needed any help, David.”

“Thank you, but I’m almost done,” Price said with a forced smile.

Thomas looked as though he were happy to see Mr. Molesley. “Have you had a chance to crack into that book yet today?”

“Oh,” Mr. Molesley said, brightening, “why yes, after luncheon. It’s already quite intriguing.”

“Is it?” Thomas asked, placing the stick on the table. “Why don’t we head downstairs and you can tell me about it on the way?”

Price breathed a relieved sigh as the door shut, thankful that Thomas was much better at thinking on his feet.

They were reunited again shortly to serve drinks before dinner. Thomas poured while Price and Mr. Molesley served, and Mr. Carson supervised. Price brought drinks to Lady Mary and Lady Edith.

“Did you like your gift?” Lady Edith asked as she took her glass from his silver tray.
“Very much, m’Lady. I can’t wait to use it.”

“Will you be drawing more portraits of Lady Edith?” Lady Mary asked as she took a glass.

Price drew in a breath. “I thought I might go down to the stables and try my hand at drawing horses.”

Lady Mary looked at Lady Edith out of the corner of her eye. “That sounds like a lovely idea. Better subject matter, at least.”

Price smiled and moved on to serve the guests.

“It’s one thing to be rude to me, Heaven knows I’m used to,” Lady Edith said to her sister, “but you don’t have to be rude to David.”

“I wasn’t being rude to your precious David.”

“My precious David? Weren’t you the one trotting around on horses with him before I ever asked him to draw for me?”

Lady Mary’s eyes widened for a fleeting moment before her expression was cool again. “I was helping him overcome a lasting fear from the war, but you can call that ‘trotting around’ if you wish.”

“Oh, I see. You have a special bond, then?”

“I wouldn’t use those words exactly.”

When Lady Edith finished her wine, she looked to Mr. Carson for another. He waved Price over to fetch a glass for Lady Edith.

“They were arguing about you,” Thomas whispered as he poured.

“Huh?”

“Lady Mary and Lady Edith were arguing about who you like better.”

Price smiled. “No teasing while we’re working.”

“I’m not teasing, I bet they both smile at you when you go over there to see which one gets a bigger smile from you in return.”

“You can’t hear anything from over here.”

Thomas poured a second glass and put it on Price’s tray. “One of the talents I’ve learned over my many years of service is to read lips. Otherwise how would I know what they’re all whispering when I’m out of hearing range?”

Price brought the wine to Lady Edith and Lady Mary. He looked up from the tray to find both women smiling at him warmly, their eyes set intently on his. He wished more than ever that he had a poker face. He looked at each of them with a raised eyebrow and a half smile. “Can I get you anything else?”

“No, David, thank you,” Lady Edith said, looking at Lady Mary over her glass.

Price brought the empty tray to Thomas for him to replenish. “Always trust me” Thomas said
while placing full glasses on the tray.

The dinner party was an intimate one, extending beyond the immediate family to only the Dowager Countess, Mrs. Crawley, and Lady Rosamund, who was visiting through the New Year. Lady Edith and Lady Rosamund spoke in hushed voices over dinner, and Thomas took a little extra time pouring wine to hear their conversation.

“Told him to come for the New Year,” Lady Edith told her aunt.

“And you’ll announce it then?”

Lady Edith looked up at Thomas. She waited for him to move on before speaking again. Once he was back in position, he could only see Lady Rosamund, but he could tell for certain that whatever they were discussing, Eric was involved. He hadn’t died of curiosity during the day, but the dinner conversation pushed him close.

The family’s Christmas dinner was an elaborate one, and the servant’s supper was served much later than usual. Both Thomas and Mrs. Hughes noticed fatigue in Anna’s face.

“It might be time to start interviewing for a replacement,” Thomas said to Mrs. Hughes.

“She’s coming back after the baby,” Mrs. Hughes whispered. “But you have me thinking. We should start interviewing for help in her absence. Her temporary absence, Mr. Barrow. Don’t start any rumors.” She noticed Mr. Carson was dozing over his plate. “Wake up, Mr. Carson, and eat up. You’ll need your energy. We have the New Year in a week and her Ladyship has already started planning before the Christmas bells have had a chance to stop ringing.”

“What kind of plans?” Mr. Molesley asked.

“The guest list’s been decided and invitations sent, and the menu is nearly final.”

“Who is on the list?” Mr. Carson asked, showing interest mostly to prove he was still awake.

Mrs. Hughes looked upward as she recalled the list from memory. Price coughed halfway through her recital. Thomas looked over to see a look on Price’s face as though he were caught with his hand in a biscuit tin.

“Are you choking?” Thomas asked across the table.

“Some parsley in my throat. I’m better.”

Thomas stabbed a parsnip with his fork without taking his eyes off Price’s. “Oh, I thought maybe you recognized one of the names on Mrs. Hughes’s list.”

“Did you, David?” Mrs. Hughes asked.

Price shrugged. “The usual suspects. And I know Lord Pembroke. He was a good friend of my former employer. I didn’t realize he knew our Lord and Lady.”

“Lord and Lady Grantham know everyone of note,” Mr. Carson said.

Thomas’s eyes hadn’t left Price’s. “Is Lord Pembroke someone of note?”

Price swallowed a bite of bread. “I should say so if he’s on Lady Grantham’s guest list.”

“I’ve heard the name,” Mr. Molesley interjected.

“I think he is Lady Edith’s guest,” Mrs. Hughes explained, “I suppose you can all ask her yourselves whether he’s notable.”

Price slipped out of the servant’s hall as soon as supper finished. Thomas followed on his heels. When they reached the dorms, Thomas pulled Price by the elbow into his bedroom.

“Go on,” Thomas said, crossing his arms. “Spill it.”

“First thing’s first, don’t make a spectacle like that again. You had eyebrows raising around the table.”

“I didn’t, you’re just paranoid because you’re hiding something.”

“I’m hiding nothing!” Price objected.

“I said spill it.”

Price put his hands on his hips. “As I said, Lord Pembroke was a good friend of my last family.”

“And a good friend of yours?”

Price rocked on his heels. “You could say that.”

“Care to explain further?”

“He thought I was a handsome hallboy, I thought he was a good looking Lord, so on and so forth.”

“Did you ‘so on and so forth’ with him often?”

“Just whenever he visited.”

“Which was…?”

“...frequently.” Price chuckled. “It ended well before I left. You have nothing to fear, though I like the jealous little look in your eye.”

“Why did it end?”

“He wanted me to work for him, but I knew what that would turn into, so I politely declined. His feelings were hurt, which put a damper on things.”

A smile cracked in Thomas’s stone expression. “You’re a heartbreaker.”

“I’m relatively sure it wasn’t really my heart he was after.”

“Well now he’ll be a guest in this house, and if Mr. Carson assigns you to be his man, I hope you’ll find a way to get out of it.”

“He prefers to dress himself, from what I remember. Though he liked my help undressing.”

Thomas waved to his door. “I think I have a clear picture now, thank you. You can go.”

Price held Thomas’s shoulders. “I had a life before you, you know, and I’m sure you helped plenty of noble men undress before I came around.”
“Not as much in recent past.”

“Yes, well, now you’re old. What about when you were young?”

Thomas nodded to the door. “Out.”

“Awe, I thought you might want to have a little bite before bed.”

“No, old codgers like me need their rest,” Thomas said. He pushed Price into the hallway and shut the door.

When Thomas’s birthday arrived, he awoke to a card slipped under his door from Price. It had a drawing of a birthday cake, and a simple message wishing him a happy birthday, with love. Other than a slightly wider smile at breakfast, Price behaved as he would any other day. There were no surprises lurking around the corner, and by tea time, Thomas realized a little part of him was wishing for some kind of surprise. But the card was nice, he thought, and at least Price was respecting his wishes for no gifts.

Thomas slipped out for a smoke break after tea. Halfway through his cigarette, Price came out the back door.

“Follow me,” he told Thomas, walking by him without stopping. He passed through door to the grounds and let it shut behind him.

Thomas sighed and followed, checking to make sure no one was watching before he stepped through the door.

Price was waiting just behind it. “Both cars are out, and they will be for at least two more hours.”

“That’s fascinating.”

“I’m going to the garage, and then two minutes from now, you will go to the garage,” Price instructed, then resumed marching to his destination.

After waiting at least two minutes while he finished his cigarette, Thomas let himself into the garage, but saw no one inside.

“C’mere,” Price called from beside a car that was up on blocks, its wheels resting beside it.

“I didn’t see you back here.”

“That’s the whole point,” Price said, grinning. He put his hand on Thomas’s chest and backed him against the side of the car.

Thomas smiled down at Price from under his hat brim. “Aren’t we waiting until Valentine’s Day?”

“This is different. It’s your birthday gift.”

“Oh, I see. What is my gift, exactly?”

“Climb in the back and find out.”

Price opened the back door for Thomas and waved him inside. Thomas climbed in and slid over, and Price hopped in beside him.

Thomas took off his hat and tossed it onto the driver’s seat. “What makes you so sure it’ll be a
while before the cars are back?”

Price tossed his hat as well. “Because I asked one of the chauffeurs to tell me when I could get private time in here. I said I wanted a moment with my sweetheart. He didn’t ask for more information than that, and I didn’t offer any.”

“And what about our absence from the house?” Thomas asked, removing his overcoat and jacket.

“I told Mrs. Hughes I was walking to the village for an errand,” Price said, following suit with his coat and jacket. “If we’re asked, you’ll say you came with me. But shush for now, you’re burning precious time asking so many questions.”

“Precious time for what?”

Price traced the bow of Thomas’s upper lip with his middle finger. “You can’t have all of me until February, but you can have my mouth anywhere you want it today.”

Thomas peeked around the front seat and looked out of the windshield.

Price turned Thomas’s face to his. “No one’s coming, Thomas.” He looked at Thomas’s lips for a moment before meeting his eyes again. “Live a little.”

Thomas turned his head and kissed Price’s palm. “Your mouth anywhere I want it?”

“Mmm.”

“Then you can start with my lips.”

Price wasted no time, slinking his tongue between Thomas’s teeth just as their lips met. He moaned and lapped at Thomas’s tongue, exploring Thomas’s mouth in a way he hadn’t in any of their previous kisses. Thomas moaned back, excited by the new kiss. Price held Thomas’s cheek in one hand and untucked Thomas’s shirt with the other. He pulled Thomas’s thigh toward him to spread his legs, then unbuttoned his trousers. Thomas pulled down his braces and tugged his trousers to his knees, and Price helped pull them to his ankles. They smiled at each one another, both already breathing heavily.

“Thirty-eight looks good on you, Thomas.”

Thomas rested his head against the seat. “Glad you’re still keen on me despite my advanced age.”

“Well, I respect my elders.”

Thomas pinched Price’s side. “Aren’t you supposed to be nicer to me because it’s my birthday?”

Price yelped and jumped, and his head bumped against the ceiling. “No tickling in confined spaces.”

“Then shush yourself,” Thomas said, wrapping his fingers around the back of Price’s neck. “Kiss me like that again.”

Thomas pulled Price’s lips to his and kissed him with the same deep, quick licks. Price ran his hand up under Thomas’s shirt, then down his thigh. Thomas relaxed and let his thighs fall further apart, then guided Price’s hand between them. Price wrapped his hand around Thomas’s cock, and Thomas put his hand over Price’s. They both pumped together, kissing back and forth with building fervor. Price broke the kiss, and they both looked down at their busy hands.
“Your hands really are quite a bit bigger than mine,” Price said with a smile.

Thomas removed his hand from Price’s. “Yes, and I like how big I look in your hand compared to mine.”

“You’re big in any hand,” Price said playfully. “Or mouth,” he added as he lowered his lips to Thomas’s cock.

“Lick it like you kissed me,” Thomas whispered.

Price craned his neck to look up at Thomas.

“What?”

“I like it when you tell me what you want like that.”

Thomas grinned. “Put that eager little tongue to work.”

Price lapped at Thomas’s cock, then swallowed him, switching back and forth between quick licks and deep sucking. Thomas held himself by the base of his cock and ran his fingers through Price’s hair with his other hand. He caught a glimpse of the gold necklace beneath Price’s collar, and a surge of adrenaline ran through him from head to toe. He gripped Price’s hair and guided his head up and down.

“Deeper, David.”

Price swallowed Thomas until his lips reached Thomas’s fingers. Thomas grunted and pushed Price’s head down until he felt the back of his throat. Price pulled Thomas’s hand from his cock so he could swallow all of him, moaning once Thomas was all the way in his mouth.

Thomas whimpered and gripped Price’s hair tighter. “I suppose I’m thankful that I benefit from all the practice you had before me.”

Price gagged and pulled off of Thomas. “Really? You’re gonna make me laugh when you’re that deep in my mouth?”

“Sorry. I can’t help myself. Please continue.”

Price slapped Thomas’s thigh, the set his mouth back on him.

“Stroke me, too. Get your hand nice and wet.” Thomas raised and lowered his hips, falling into Price’s rhythm. He slid his fingers under Price’s collar and ran them over the necklace, then played with the hair at the nape of his neck. “That’s it, David. Wet as you can make it.”

Price reached his hand between his own legs to quickly adjust himself, as the confines of his trousers were becoming uncomfortable.

“You can take those off, can’t you?”

Price kissed the tip of Thomas’s cock. “No need. I’m pleasuring you, not myself.”

“But I want both, and it’s my birthday. I’m wet enough now, you could climb on top.”

Price sat up, still pumping Thomas with his hand. “I can’t risk staining your livery now, can I? That could be worse than getting caught in here.”
“I’m willing to risk it.”

“And we’re waiting for that until—”

“Can you honestly pass up this opportunity, David?”

Price let out a deep sigh. “No.”

Thomas pulled at Price, hurriedly undoing the impossible number of buttons that kept a man in his clothes. They worked together to get Price’s shoes and trousers off.

Price straddled Thomas, resting one hand on Thomas’s shoulder, pressing the other against the ceiling. “To protect my head,” he said, looking up at his hand. “I don’t need to bump it twice.”

Thomas put his finger under Price’s sock garter and snapped it against Price’s calf. “It’s kind of sexy that you’re still wearing these.”

“And this uncomfortable shirt?”

“I suppose, I wasn’t paying attention to anything above your waist.” Thomas met Price’s eyes and stroked himself. “Now sit down.”

Price lowered himself until Thomas was in position, pressing against him, one thrust away from sliding inside.

Price returned Thomas’s gaze. “Are you sure you don’t want to wait?”

Thomas grabbed Price’s waist and sat him down, slipping in more easily than he anticipated. He gasped, then gritted his teeth, holding Price’s hips steady while he did most of the work from below. He wrapped a hand around Price’s cock, and Price slid in and out of it as he thrust from below. As Price began moaning, Thomas rested his head against the seat again and closed his eyes, a dreamy smile on his lips.

“All I want to do when you’re inside me is repeat ‘I love you’ over and over,” Price said.

“So what’s stopping you?”

Price chuckled and leaned down to kiss Thomas, still pressing his hand into the ceiling of the car. He brought his lips to Thomas’s ear. “I love you.”

“I thought you wanted to repeat it.”

“I love you, I love you, I love you,” Price whispered, timing the words with Thomas’s thrusts. He continued to repeat them as he kissed Thomas’s cheek and neck.

Thomas opened his eyes, and his dreamy smile turned mischievous. He squeezed Price’s thigh in the ticklish spot he’d found the week prior.

Price’s muscles tensed in response, including the ones wrapped around Thomas’s cock. “Remind me to never reveal a weakness to you again,” Price panted.

“It’s not a weakness,” Thomas said, sliding his hands up to Price’s waist. “It’s bloody wonderful,” he added, pressing his thumbs into Price’s stomach.

Price flinched and tensed again. “Don’t, you’ll make me finish.”
“What’s wrong with that?”

“Your waistcoat may not appreciate it. Stay still, I want to lead.”

Thomas settled into the seat to let Price takeover. Price waited a moment to gather himself, then instead of riding Thomas up and down as Thomas expected, he leaned back and circled his hips. He looked down at Thomas. “Don’t tickle or I’ll stop doing this.”

“Don’t ever stop doing that,” Thomas said, lifting Price’s shirt to get a better view. “God, where was that kissing and this little thing you’re doing with your hips before today?”

“I have all sorts of cards up my sleeve. There’ll be many more birthdays in the future for me to introduce new tricks.” Price stopped for a moment, then circled in the opposite direction.

Thomas pulled Price toward him, wrapping him in his arms, as excited by the idea of spending the rest of his birthdays with Price as much as the movement of his hips. A familiar warm tingling started deep in his abdomen, and he held Price tighter. “Can we go fast and deep?”

“Don’t ask me, tell me.”

Thomas touched his lips to Price’s softly. “Ride me hard, David.”

Price complied, but seconds later Thomas took control, bringing Price’s hips down as he raised his own. He picked up speed as each thrust elicited increasingly higher pitched moans from Price. He grabbed for Price’s cock, but Price pushed his hand away, whispering, “no, no, I’ll finish,” between moans.

“Squeeze me,” Thomas moaned.

“What do you mean?”

Thomas pinched Price’s thigh and Price laughed, his muscles tightening around Thomas.

“Stop, I know what you mean now!” Price attempted to give Thomas the same sensation without being prompted by his fingers.

“It’s not the same,” Thomas said, and tickled Price everywhere his hands could reach. Price laughed and moaned, digging his fingers into the seat behind Thomas. Thomas didn’t let up, and Price became breathless as he tensed every muscle in an effort to delay his release. Thomas couldn’t delay his any longer, and let out a moan louder than any Price had heard from him before. He panted as his body spasmed, his orgasm lasting longer than usual. He filled Price so much that he dripped back onto himself with his final thrusts.

“Christ, Thomas,” Price said, catching his breath. He kissed Thomas's neck as Thomas came down from his high.

Thomas squeezed Price’s backside. “Sit there,” he said, nodding to the empty seat beside him.

“I - I don’t know if I should. I might stain the upholstery.”

Thomas laughed. “Alright then, bring yourself up to my lips.”

“I don’t think that’s physically possible in here.” Price climbed off of Thomas and hopped out of the car. He faced Thomas and stroked himself. “Relax, it’s your birthday. I’ll take care of myself.”

“Are you gonna keep looking me in the eye while you do it?”
“Mmm hmm.”

Thomas laced his fingers together and rested them on his stomach. “Good.”

Price licked his lips and braced himself against the car’s door frame with his free hand. He let his eyes wander briefly over Thomas’s splayed legs and wet cock. As his body relaxed, he felt Thomas’s cum dripping from inside him and down his leg. He hardened at the thought of running a finger down his leg and then licking it, but resisted, not sure if it would be a step too far for Thomas’s taste.

“Your eyes are glazing over. What are you thinking about?” Thomas asked, letting his eyes wander as well.

“I don’t think I should say.”

Thomas sat up. “Oh, now I think you should.”

Price closed his eyes and pumped faster. “I - uh - you’re dripping out of me. I was thinking about tasting it.”

“You little strumpet.”

Price laughed opened his eyes. “Too much?”

“I don’t know, but I know I like your naughty thoughts.”

“I have so many.”

“That you don’t tell me about?”

Price shrugged.

“Tell me one more.”

“Alright. I think about taking you in the back of a car and then having a wank while you watch.”

Thomas pulled up his trousers and hopped out of the car, then kneeled down in front of Price. “Do you picture finishing in my mouth?”


Thomas looked up at Price with bright eyes and a saucy smile.

Price took a step forward and stroked Thomas’s cheekbone with the back of his fingers. He took another step and tapped the tip of his cock against Thomas’s lower lip. “Almost,” he whispered.

Thomas parted his lips and closed his eyes, and Price slid himself into Thomas’s waiting mouth.

“Yes,” Price muttered, gripping Thomas’s hair in both hands. “Yes, yes, yes, fuck, yes.”

Thomas moaned, enjoying hearing such a strong curse word find its way out of Price’s mouth.

Price moved Thomas’s hands from his hips to his backside, and Thomas took the hint to slide his finger inside Price. Price gasped, and Thomas pushed deeper, massaging him with a come-hither motion. Price moaned as loudly as Thomas had earlier, slurring a mix of “I love you” and “fuck” as he came.
Thomas swallowed and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say that word, let alone over and over.”

Price looked down at Thomas. “Did you get motor oil on your trousers?”

“I love how that’s your first thought after reaching euphoria.”

“I’ll be less than euphoric if either of us gets in trouble.”

“My trousers are fine,” Thomas said, rising to his feet. “A kiss before you start examining our clothing for stains?”

Price puckered up and let Thomas plant a firm kiss on his lips.

“Thank you,” Thomas said, kissing Price again. “Quite the gift.”

They cleaned up and snuck out separately, meeting back in the courtyard to head inside. No one seemed the least bit concerned with, or even aware of their absence, and Thomas wondered why he wasn’t adventurous more often.

Thomas rode his high from the gift in the garage for another day until New Year’s guests were set to arrive. He looked forward to seeing Eric and hoped his presence would outweigh his anxious anticipation of Price’s former friend.

Eric was first to arrive, coming in time for tea as Lady Edith requested. Price was first to the car, and said quietly, “I’m glad you could come,” before Mr. Molesley arrived to carry Eric’s bags. When Price took Eric’s overcoat and hat, Eric whispered, “Thank you for letting me,” as he handed Price his gloves.

Price opened the door to the library and introduced Eric, then headed down to the kitchen. A bell rang again as soon as Price was downstairs. He rolled his eyes, but Thomas laid his hand on Price’s arm and said he would greet the guest this time.

Price opened the door to the library and introduced Eric, then headed down to the kitchen. A bell rang again as soon as Price was downstairs. He rolled his eyes, but Thomas laid his hand on Price’s arm and said he would greet the guest this time.

Thomas opened the car door, but didn’t recognize the young man inside. He watched the man climb out of the car. About Price’s age, he guessed, and exceptionally handsome, with strong features softened by deep blue eyes and blonde hair, both in shadow beneath the brim of his hat.

The man stared up at the house before speaking. “I apologize, I’m earlier than anticipated,” he said, nodding to Thomas. “I hope no one will mind.”

“I’m sure they won’t,” Thomas said with his professional smile. “Can you tell me your name, please, so I can announce you properly?”

“It’s Theodore,” the man said, looking Thomas over, “but you can introduce me as Lord Pembroke.”

Thomas’s stomach sank. He had pictured someone older, even older than he was, and not a fraction as attractive. “Right this way, then, my Lord,” he said, forcing the professional smile back on his lips.

He announced Lord Pembroke and went to find Mr. Carson to report another guest had arrived in time for tea. He clicked his teeth together as he watched Price in the kitchen from the hall. Price held a tray out as Ellie set tea cups on it, then turned and left the kitchen.

Thomas stopped Price by the bottom of the stairs. “You neglected to mention that your old pal was
Adonis incarnate.”

Price perked up. “Ah, he’s early, isn’t he?”

“So help me if you are asked to dress him while he’s here.”

Price narrowed his eyes. “He’s up in the library with the man who, quite recently, asked you to leave me for him. So you’ll have to pardon me for my lack of sympathy.”

“You’re the one who told him he could come!”

“That doesn’t mean I’m not still a bit unsettled about it.”

“So you left out the details about Lord Stunning on purpose?”

Price put his nose in the air. “Possibly.”

Mr. Carson stepped out of his office. “There are guests waiting for tea upstairs, so I can’t imagine what’s keeping you down here, David.”

“Nothing, Mr. Carson,” Price said, leaving Thomas to stare up after him as he headed for the library.

Price entered the library with his head down and set the tray on the table, then turned to leave and fetch tea sandwiches from the kitchen.

“David,” Lady Edith called from the sofa, “can you please ask for a pot of darjeeling for Mr. Weatherbee?”

“Yes, m’Lady,” Price replied. As he looked over to Lady Edith, he caught Lord Pembroke’s eye as well. He could nearly hear Lord Pembroke’s heart skip a beat from across the room. He hadn’t been sure whether news of where he was employed had reached Lord Pembroke, and by the look on the man’s face, it hadn’t.

Price returned to the library a little while later with another tray, including Eric’s steeping tea. Thomas had taken over for Mr. Molesley, having offered to trade shoe shining duty for tea. It meant Mr. Molesley could spend the hour with Miss Baxter, and he was too pleased to ask any questions. Price laid his tray down without meeting a single eye in the room, then took his post by the door.

Lady Mary broke conversation with Lord Pembroke to get more tea. Thomas poured for her, and she noticed his cufflinks.

“Ah, you’re wearing them I see,” she said, looking down her nose at his wrist.

Thomas looked up from the pot as he poured. “Oh. Yes, my lady.”

“So you like them? I picked them out, you know.”

“I didn’t know,” Thomas said, handing her a fresh cup, “but I wondered who thought to get them for me.”

Lady Mary straightened her shoulders as she sipped her tea. “Well,” she said, looking over her shoulder to make sure no one was in hearing range, “I saw what Lady Edith splurged on for David, and for some reason it made me think about what we’d gotten you over the years. I couldn’t recall, and since that was the case, I figured it was about time to splurge on you, too.”
Thomas looked down, even more touched than he was by Lady Grantham’s words on Christmas eve. “That was very kind of you.”

“I can be kind, despite what everyone may say.”

Thomas met her eyes again. “I know you can, my lady.”

“Now Barrow, if you’d like to be kind in return, help me come up with an excuse to escape Lady Edith and her minions.”

Thomas chuckled. “The children could come down early.”

“I’m not sure why I didn’t think of that. Can you send for them?”

“Of course.”

Thomas left the library, whispering, “the cufflinks were from Lady Mary,” to Price as he passed.

Price took over Thomas’s spot by the table. Lord Pembroke stood as soon as he noticed Price by the table and approached with his cup.

“Hallboys serve tea these days?”

Price accepted the cup and filled it slowly. “I’m a footman, if the get-up didn’t give it away,” he said with a smile. “First footman, to be precise.”

“Look at you. New job, new hair, new attitude,” Lord Pembroke said quietly. “Milk and sugar, please,” he added, a bit louder in case anyone was listening.

“The job’s not quite new, I’ve been here since the spring.”

“Oh, I’m well aware how long you’ve been gone.”

Price handed Lord Pembroke his cup. “You should go back to your conversation before you’re missed.”

Lord Pembroke stirred his tea. “Let’s continue this one later, then.”

“I don’t see how that would be possible.”

“I’m sure you can manage something.” Lord Pembroke handed his spoon to Price and joined the others by the fire.

Eric approached the table next. “What was that?”

“Do you think anyone noticed?”

Eric helped himself to a sandwich. “Besides me? I don’t think so.”

“If you really want to be my friend, help keep him occupied while you’re both here.”

“Sure,” Eric said, taking a bite, “but you have to give me the details later.”

“You shouldn’t talk with your mouth full.”

“Details, David?”
“Yes. Later.”

Eric filled his plate and winked at Price before walking away.

Thomas returned to the library and stood next to Price. “Did I miss anything?”

“Everyone drank tea and smiled politely. It was enthralling.”

Nanny Rebecca walked the children into the library. Nora set eyes on Eric and ran to him, jumping straight into stories about school before he could say hello. Lady Edith introduced Lord Pembroke to Marigold, and Lady Mary turned away from the others and pulled George and Sybbie onto her lap.

Price and Thomas cleaned up tea service, and then Price followed Thomas to the servant’s hall.

Thomas sat by the fire in a rocking chair and put a newspaper on his lap. “I’d like to read the paper in peace,” he said, lighting a cigarette.

“You’ll have a hard time doing that while I’m talking.”

Thomas sighed and took a drag as Price sat in the chair across from him.

“I asked Eric to do me a favor and keep Teddy occupied while they’re both here.”

A look of disgust came over Thomas’s face. “‘Teddy’? Please refrain from calling him that again.”

“Theodore, then.”

“Lord Pembroke will be fine.”

Price saw Thomas's jaw muscles working, always a sign that he was brooding. “Thomas, if either one of us should be worried, it’s me. But I’m not worried. I trust you.”

“I trust you, but not… him.”

Price leaned forward in his chair. “Why don’t you try focusing on the fact that I’d choose you any day over Lord Pembroke.”

“I don’t know why you would,” Thomas said, his lip twitching. “He’s absurdly handsome, clearly wealthy, and wanted you to come live with him.”

“But I don’t love him,” Price said. He wished he could sit on Thomas’s lap and give him a reassuring kiss. “I turned him down before I even knew you. Why are you so upset over this?”

Thomas scratched his eyebrow with his thumb and stared at the fire. “I want to work for your brother, but you have no viable prospects to work in London. What happens when the next Lord Adonis swoops in and I’m miles away?”

“Don’t you think I’m stronger than that?”

“Have you really thought about it? What it will be like when we go months without seeing each other?”

“It wouldn’t be months.”

Thomas took another drag. “Be realistic, David.”
Price shrugged. “We’ll figure it out.”

“There you go being naive again. It will be hard on both of us, but I’ll be in a new world, busy and distracted. You’ll be here, and it will be obvious to you that I’m missing. In everything you do, David, in every part of your day.”

Price pictured walking by Thomas’s room, empty of his belongings. “It won’t be permanent,” he said less confidently, trying to convince himself as much as Thomas.

“Well now I’m giving you ‘til Valentine’s. I’ve made my decision. I want to leave. Decide if you want the same, and start working on a way.”

Price took the paper from Thomas’s lap and sat back in his chair. “It’s not as fun when you’re the one making the rules.”

Thomas’s eyes were still turned toward the fire, but they didn’t seem to be focused on anything.

Price opened the paper and flipped through it. “Ooh, reviews of upcoming flicks. Do you want me to read them out loud?”

Thomas blinked and snapped out of his trance. “Only if you do it with feeling.”

Price began reading, mimicking the nasally, fast-talking speech he heard in newsreels that came from America. He began to draw a crowd as the other servants filtered in for tea. He read the review of an action film with increasing intensity, rising to his feet as he reached the end, reading the words as fast as his tongue would allow.

Thomas smiled and rocked back in his chair, watching Price entertain the gathering staff. He tried to do what Price said, focusing on the fact that Price would choose him over anyone, any day, including the handsome guest upstairs. It worked for the time being. Price began reading a cooking column with the same voice, and Thomas found himself laughing with the others. Sitting among Price’s captive audience, watching him when he was at his best, he even started to believe that between the two of them, maybe they could figure it all out.
Price pushed through the doorway from the servant’s stairwell into the great hall to find Thomas waiting for him just outside.

“Just a second, David,” Thomas said, putting out his arm.

“These hors d’oeuvres are hot,” Price said, holding out his tray as proof. “The kitchen staff will flog me if I deliver them cold.”

“Then let me accompany you.” Thomas followed as Price walked through the hall. “I thought you said he preferred to dress himself.”

“Lord Pembroke? He always did. Why?”

“Well I guess he’s changed his tune. Mr. Carson’s asked me to tend to him during his stay.”

“Don’t you prefer it that way over Mr. Carson assigning me that duty?”

“Neither of us should have to, you told me he didn’t require a man to help him.”

Price stopped and turned to Thomas. “Not like I can predict his every move.”

Thomas smiled coyly. “I bet he asked because he hoped you’d be assigned to help him.”

“Probably,” Price said, returning Thomas’s smile, “but that’s why I asked Eric to entertain him. I know you’re not exactly elated that you have to help him, but let’s both be thankful it’s not me.”

“Why? Are you worried he’ll make a proposition, and you won’t be able to say no?”

Price resumed walking toward the dining room. “I’d say no, of course, but I don’t want to have to say it in the first place. He’s the most determined man I’ve ever met, and if he’s still determined to have me, well, it’ll be a challenge to get away once he gets me alone.”

“You certainly think highly of yourself, assuming he’s still pining for you after all this time.”

Price stopped one last time before reaching the dining room. “No, not pining the whole time. But I know how he is. In fact,” Price said, patting Thomas’s chest. “You may want to watch yourself. You’re a handsome and seemingly eligible bachelor, and he’ll have to all to himself. Don’t let Lord
Adonis woo you, too.”

Thomas rolled his eyes. “Enough. Get in there before your hors d’oeuvres cool off.”

“Or before you warm up too much thinking about him?”

“It takes more than just a pretty face to warm me up.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Price said as Thomas held the dining room door for him.

During dinner service, Thomas tried to keep his chin in the air and his eyes high, but he couldn’t resist watching the activity at the end of the table. Eric and Lord Pembroke sat on either side of Lady Edith, and all three were engaged in conversation throughout the meal. Lord Pembroke’s blonde hair was parted a bit to the side but otherwise barely styled, falling over his forehead, half-covering one eye. It was light and feathery, moving whenever he did, and for reasons Thomas couldn’t explain, it irritated him immensely. Everything else about him, though, was carefully styled. His tuxedo fit him perfectly, his collar was crisp, his shoes were shined, and even his cufflinks and ring were coordinated, made from matching metal and stone. Clearly he wasn’t struggling to dress himself without a valet, Thomas thought, though a little pomade wouldn’t hurt.

Toward the end of the meal, Lady Edith stayed relatively quiet while Lord Pembroke and Eric talked and laughed across her. Price had asked Eric to keep Lord Pembroke occupied, but it didn’t look like much of a chore for Eric from where Thomas was standing.

Thomas shoveled his food into his mouth during supper, a bit anxious to spend time face to face with Lord Pembroke. It was still intimidating that he had loved Price, regardless of Price’s feelings, or lack of feelings, in return. Bells rang on the wall, and Thomas wiped his lips with his napkin and rose with the others.

Price followed Thomas to the gallery and pulled him aside in the corridor. “One quick thing before you go in there.”

“Do make it quick, these hallways are busy this time of night and you don’t have a good excuse to be up here.”

“I just wanted to apologize for toying with you. I knew full well you’d be jealous. I’m still hurting over Eric, as much as I try to put it behind me, but that’s no excuse. I’m sorry you have to dress Teddy while he’s here. I hope you’re not too uncomfortable with the idea.”

Thomas held Price’s cheek briefly, despite his own warning that the halls were often busy. “As I’ve said before, you and I are much alike. I understand the impulse to act that way. Though I’d be more comfortable with the whole thing if I had a better idea of what he meant to you.”

“He doesn’t mean anything.”

“Not now. Then.”

Price looked at the painting on the wall beside him instead of Thomas. “He was good to me, and… and the first tender lover I ever had. He worshipped the ground I walked on, despite my being nothing more than a hallboy. He doesn’t care about things like that. For all his kindness, though, I could never believe him when he said he loved me. I put him off because it’s hard for me to say no to him, and I didn’t want to lead him on.”

“Tender, hmm?”
Price met Thomas’s eyes. “Very, actually. I never believed I was worthy of that kind of treatment before him.”

“So why never mention him before?”

Price was quiet as a hallboy passed by them, waiting to speak again until the young man was gone. “Have I ever mentioned any former lover by name? Or have you? It’s just not a topic we’ve really ever broached.”

Thomas ran through his memories, and none of them included sharing any names on either of their parts. “Maybe we should. It feels like secrets are being kept.”

“Alright, we can do that after the busy New Year is over. Before you go, does this mean you accept my apology?”

“I do,” Thomas said, risking one more stroke of Price’s cheek before they parted ways.

Lord Pembroke was just untying his bowtie when Thomas came to the door. He let Thomas in, then gave him an apologetic smile. “I have to admit, I’m a bit embarrassed. I don’t like anyone to waste time doing something for me that I could do for myself, but Lord Grantham insisted. I didn’t feel like I could say no.”

Thomas was caught off guard by the shy look in Lord Pembroke’s eye and the timid smile on his lips. “Well most men of your status have a valet, even if they don’t bring one when they stay. His Lordship probably thought you were just being polite by declining his offer.”

“Probably,” Lord Pembroke replied. He resumed untying his bowtie. “Well you can say you helped me, but I don’t want to take up any more of your time than I already have.”

“Or you could let me help you,” Thomas said, approaching Lord Pembroke. “Those are my orders, anyhow, and it’s my duty to follow them.”

Lord Pembroke looked Thomas over the same way he had when he first arrived. “If you insist.”

Thomas stepped closer, and Lord Pembroke dropped his hands to his sides. Thomas took over, untying the knot in Lord Pembroke’s tie. They were just about the same height, and Thomas couldn’t pretend to ignore Lord Pembroke’s eyes on his just a few inches away. He looked up from Lord Pembroke’s throat briefly as he pulled the silk tie from his collar. “Why don’t you have a valet, if I may ask?”

“I suppose it’s always felt too personal a position to fill with just anybody.”

Thomas stepped behind Lord Pembroke and eased his jacket off of his shoulders. “Isn’t that what interviews are for?”

Lord Pembroke laughed and looked over his shoulder at Thomas as he removed his own waistcoat. “Everyone’s on their best behavior in an interview. You’re hardly able to tell much about who they really are.” Lord Pembroke tossed his waistcoat to Thomas, following Thomas’s eyes as he hung the waistcoat and jacket and returned to unbutton his shirt. “If I found a worthy travel companion, maybe.”

“Do you travel often?”

“As often as I can. And do you have to help guests often? Or am I the rare bird who shows up alone?”
“You’re not so rare,” Thomas said, taking Lord Pembroke’s cufflinks, placing them in a tray on the dresser beside him. “I don’t mind helping. I’m a trained valet, and it doesn’t hurt to practice those skills now and then.”

Lord Pembroke pulled down his braces, then shrugged off his shirt and handed it to Thomas. “Impressive. An under-butler and a valet. They’re lucky to have you here.”

Thomas smiled as he hung up Lord Pembroke’s shirt. “I was trained for both positions at Downton, so I suppose I’m the lucky one to be here.”

“Don’t be so humble,” Lord Pembroke said as he took off his undershirt. “Many men would kill for someone like you.”

Thomas couldn’t stop his eyes from wandering. He realized his mouth was slightly open and closed it, then took Lord Pembroke’s undershirt from his outstretched hand.

“What’s your name?”

“Oh, it’s Barrow, my Lord.”

“No, I know that,” Lord Pembroke said, unbuttoning his trousers. “Your first name.”

“It’s Thomas. Why do you ask?”

“Curiosity.”

As Lord Pembroke slipped his trousers over his hips, Thomas averted his eyes quickly and eyed Lord Pembroke’s luggage instead. “Did you already unpack,” Thomas asked, looking away again as he caught Lord Pembroke’s reflection in the mirror.

Lord Pembroke held his trousers out to Thomas. “Yes. Sloppily, I’m sure. I tend to myself, but I never said I did a good job of it.”

Thomas accepted the trousers while looking at the dresser. “Where did you put your pajamas.”

“I only wear bottoms. They’re in the top drawer.”

Thomas hung Lord Pembroke’s trousers, found a pair of poorly folded pajama bottoms in the drawer, then turned back to find Lord Pembroke had removed everything else below the waist himself. Thomas looked at the ground and handed over the bottoms.

“Thank you,” Lord Pembroke said as he stepped into his pajamas. “It was a mess in that drawer, wasn’t it? Am I hopeless?”

“Well, you’d never get a job as a valet, I can assure you that much.”

Lord Pembroke laughed and stepped toward the dresser. He opened a silver case sitting on top and removed a cigarette. He put it between his lips and flicked his lighter twice, but it didn’t spark.

Thomas took his lighter from his pocket and flicked it, a blue and yellow flame lighting instantly.

“See? I said they were lucky to have you.” Rather than taking the lighter, Lord Pembroke leaned forward so that Thomas could light his cigarette. He inhaled until the end was red and smoldering. “Did you travel often when you were a valet?”

“Not often,” Thomas said as he put his lighter away. “I did get to go to America once.”
“One of my favorite places. What did you think?”

“I thought a lot of things. Mostly how informal everything was compared to life here.”

“I know, isn’t it? That’s probably why it’s one of my favorite places. Do you want one?” Lord Pembroke asked, holding out his cigarette case.

Thomas put his hand up. “I have plenty of my own. Rolled a dozen this morning.”

“Ah, but you don’t have one of these,” Lord Pembroke replied, holding a cigarette out to Thomas. “Where’s that lighter?”

Thomas took the lighter from his pocket, and Lord Pembroke plucked it from his fingers. He lit it and held it out. Thomas put the cigarette between his lips, and Lord Pembroke smiled and held the lighter to the end of it. Thomas inhaled, held it in for a moment, then exhaled slowly. “I’m sure his Lordship wasn’t imagining me standing here taking your cigarettes when he assigned me to you.”

“You didn’t take it, I was the one who insisted. What do you think?”

Thomas took a long drag again, then inspected the cigarette as he exhaled. “It’s far superior to anything I typically smoke.”

“Then you have to take some. Help yourself, I have plenty more where these came from,” Lord Pembroke insisted, holding his case out to Thomas.

As Thomas took the case, his fingers brushed Lord Pembroke’s, and he suddenly remembered that the body before him, covered only by a pair of pajama bottoms, was a body Price knew intimately. The fingers that brushed over his had likely touched Price in all the same ways he had, maybe ways he hadn’t even had a chance to experience. The blue eyes peeking out from under blonde hair had taken in every bit of Price’s skin, and his lips knew how Price tasted. None of those facts upset Thomas, however, and he was surprised by his own lack of jealousy or resentment.

Lord Pembroke took note of Thomas’s pause before accepting the case. “I won’t tell Lord Grantham I gave you any, if you’re worried about that.”

Thomas put the cigarette between his lips and opened the case in one hand, retrieving his case from his jacket with the other. Lord Pembroke transferred half of his cigarettes to Thomas’s case, then took back his own.

“Thank you,” Thomas said, his cigarette still between his lips.

“And thank you for your help.”

It felt like an obvious note on which to say goodnight, but Thomas didn’t feel the urge to go. Something about Lord Pembroke made him feel comfortable. He wanted to stay and smoke and chat some more. He realized he had been staring into Lord Pembroke’s eyes too long after the thank-yous were exchanged, and looked past him to the door. “Is there anything else I can help you with before I go, my Lord?”

“Help me by not calling me ‘my Lord’ if it’s just us two.”

“That’s against the rules,” Thomas said with a smile.

“Well the door’s closed,” Lord Pembroke said, pointing his thumb over his shoulder. “Who would know but me and you?”
“In that case, what should I call you?”

Lord Pembroke took a drag and smiled. “You can call me Ted. And what do you prefer? Tom? Tommy?”

“Never Tommy,” Thomas said, pointing his cigarette at Lord Pembroke. “I go by Thomas, even to those who know me well.”

Lord Pembroke ran his thumb across his bottom lip and took a step toward Thomas. He took another drag and said while exhaling, “maybe I could be one of those people who knows you well.”

Thomas eyed the door again. “You just met me, what makes you want to get to know me?”

Lord Pembroke set his eyes on at Thomas’s lips. “Hell, I wanted to get to know you the second you opened my car door.” He stepped forward again until his bare torso nearly touched Thomas’s livery. “I have a confession,” he whispered, meeting Thomas’s eyes again. “When Lord Grantham offered, I asked specifically for you to be my man.”

Thomas swallowed, then laughed nervously. “Well, you see… I’m already somebody’s man.”

Lord Pembroke’s shoulders slumped, but he didn’t back away. “So I was right in picking up the signs, but I should have figured you were already spoken for. Why on earth would someone so perfect be perfectly available?”

“I’m not perfect,” Thomas said with another nervous laugh.

“In our brief interaction, I’ve gathered that you’re intelligent, witty, charming, sophisticated yet unpretentious, and gorgeous. If I could put in an order for perfection, those would be my requests.”

Thomas pressed his lips together to avoid laughing again. “I’d rattle off a list like that about you, except I truly am taken, and he wouldn’t appreciate my doing so.”

Lord Pembroke took another drag. “And yet,” he said after exhaling through his nose, “you haven’t walked to that door you keep eyeing. Why might that be, I wonder?”

Thomas’s eyes darted between Lord Pembroke’s eyes and lips, and then he took a step back. “Thank you again for the cigarettes,” he said, patting the case in his jacket. He put his cigarette out in the ashtray on the dresser, then stepped past Lord Pembroke and went to the door. “What time should I be back in the morning?”

“Make things simple. Stay, and then you’ll already be here in the morning.”

“Nine o’clock or so?”

“Alright, go,” Lord Pembroke said with a grin. He put his cigarette out as well. “But before you do, can you give me that list you’d rattle off if you weren’t already taken? I’ll never tell your darling you said a thing, I promise.”

Thomas was about to say something fresh and flirty in response, but felt compelled to be honest instead. “I can’t. I don’t want to disrespect my ‘darling’, nor give you false hope by reciting that list.”

Lord Pembroke gave Thomas a final look over. “Whoever your man is, he’s extremely lucky.”
“I’ll see you at nine.”

Thomas passed through the gallery on his way to the dorms, and saw that Eric’s door was open. He knocked on the doorframe, startling Eric, who was reclined on his bed while lost in a novel.

“Ah, I finally get a chance to talk to you,” Eric said, closing his book.

Thomas stepped inside and shut the door. “You’ve done a lot of talking today. I’m surprised you were able to swallow a bite with all that chatting over dinner.”

Eric sunk into the pillows and crossed his legs at the ankles. “I promised David a favor and I couldn’t let him down.”

“I think David’s the one doing you the favor, not the other way ‘round.”

Eric chuckled. “What’s the story between the two of them? David said he’d tell me, but I haven’t caught him alone to hear it.”

“I never heard of him until he was on the guest list. All I really know is that he was smitten with David, so much that he asked him to work for him so that they could be together.”

“And David declined I presume?”

“He did indeed.”

“Well,” Eric said, putting his hands behind his head, “then I’m not the only one in this house whose had his heart broken by one of the servants.”

Thomas picked up Eric’s book from his lap and hit him on the hip with it. “Well, I hear misery loves company. Are you planning to go meet Misery in his room for some company?”

“I would, if I were invited.”

“He seemed to be inviting you over dinner, without so many words.”

Eric pulled the blankets aside to get underneath. “I’m not taking hints from anyone anymore. If someone wants me I’ll need a notarized letter proving it first. I’ve been wrong one too many times, especially here.”

“You could try getting a New Year’s kiss from him tomorrow.”

“Goodness, you really want to pair me up with him, don’t you?”

Thomas pictured Lord Pembroke standing before him again, taking a drag while looking him over. “Just seems he could use some company, and you could, too.”

“Eh, well, if he makes a grand overture, I’ll consider it.”

“Five pounds says he will.”

“Ooh, gambling. And I win either way. I’m in.”

Thomas handed Eric his novel. “Don’t read too late into the night.”

“It’s a great read, but there are so many other things I’d rather be doing late into the night here.”
“Are you venturing into the inappropriate?”

“You ventured there first,” Eric said, opening his book. “Maybe you’re right and I can venture further into the inappropriate with him tomorrow.”

“I wasn’t serious when I placed that bet, you know,” Thomas said as he opened the door.

Eric looked down and turned to the next page. “You already placed your wager, you’re not taking your chips off the table now.”

“Goodnight, Eric.”

Eric smiled and waved goodbye to Thomas without looking up from his book.

Thomas went from Eric’s room to his own and got ready for bed, but despite being exhausted, wasn’t able to sleep. He paced for a while, which only stirred him more. He finally decided to go see if Price was still awake, and slipped through the dark hallway and into Price’s room.

Price’s lights were out and he was asleep under his covers. Thomas ran his fingers through Price’s hair until he awoke.

Price yawned and opened his eyes. “How did it go?”

“Fine.”

Price sat up and sniffed Thomas’s cheek. “Why do you smell like Teddy’s tobacco?”

“He gave me cigarettes.”

“Now you’re smoking pals, huh?” Price teased.

Thomas kissed Price’s lips. “Best pals.”

Price laid back down and wiped his mouth. “Ack, you taste like him. Don’t spend too much time with him and those cigarettes or he’ll think you want to be more than smoking pals.”

“You think I’m his type?”

“A handsome, warm body? Yes, I’d say you’re his type.”

“He must be more discerning than that.”

Price rolled onto his side and scooted back against the wall. “I’m not necessarily saying he wouldn’t fall in love with you, I’m just saying he’d definitely fall into bed first.”

“Oh oh, now I see. You’re the type he falls in love with. I’m the type he’d spend the night with, but no more?”

“Aww, don’t pout. Wouldn’t you rather fall into bed with me, anyway?”

Thomas grabbed Price’s alarm clock and set it for an hour earlier than anyone else would be up. “There’s nowhere I’d rather be tonight,” he said as he squeezed in next to Price.

Lord Pembroke was already mostly dressed for the morning when Thomas arrived at nine. He buttoned his waist coat, missing only his jacket and shoes. He smiled at Thomas as he pushed the
buttons through the holes. “Sorry for being so forward last night.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Thomas said, fetching Lord Pembroke’s jacket from the wardrobe.

Lord Pembroke let Thomas help him into the jacket, then turned and faced him quickly, as close as he had been the night before. “I just thought that since you were looking at me all through dinner, maybe you wanted me for dessert.”

“I was looking at that,” Thomas said, nodding up at Lord Pembroke’s hair. “Take a seat, please.”

Lord Pembroke followed Thomas’s eyes to the vanity. “Sit there?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“What did I say about calling me that?”

Thomas pulled the chair out from in front of the vanity for Lord Pembroke. He waited for him to sit, then pulled a comb and pomade from his pocket and rested his wrists on Lord Pembroke’s shoulders. “You pull yourself together well from the neck down, but you could use some help up top.”

Lord Pembroke ruffled his hair and laughed. “Nobody’s said there was a problem with it before.”

“If you had a valet, he would have told you. Stay still.”

Lord Pembroke watched in the vanity mirror as Thomas combed and set his hair, styling it in the direction it wanted to go, but back and away from his face. He had a placid smile on his lips, enjoying the touch of Thomas’s fingertips as he set the final pieces into place.

“There. Isn’t that better?”

Lord Pembroke leaned forward and admired his reflection. “Significantly. I’ve been walking around for thirty years without anyone saying anything. Thank goodness for you.” He turned in the seat and looked up at Thomas. “Will you keep me in mind if you ever want to be a valet again?”

“I don’t see that happening, but if it does, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Never say never.”

Thomas put the comb and pomade back in one pocket and took out a lighter from another. “I’ll have someone run to the village today for you to get lighter fluid. You can borrow this ‘til then.”

“I feel so well taken care of,” Lord Pembroke said, accepting the lighter.

Thomas ignored Lord Pembroke’s lingering touch as he took it. “I’m just doing my job, my Lord.”

Lord Pembroke looked at his reflection again before standing. “If you’re really as taken as you say, I won’t push further, and you don’t have to help me dress again while I’m here. There’s just something about you that draws me in, and I had to see if there was any chance you felt the same.”

“I really am that taken. I don’t mind helping you, though. I enjoy your company.”

Thomas’s words gave Lord Pembroke the same smile that his fingers caused when they ran through his hair. “That’s truly lovely to hear, Thomas. So that means I draw you in, just a wee bit?”
“I can’t speak to that,” Thomas said, seeing the tenderness Price spoke of in Lord Pembroke’s eyes. “But I’ll say this much; there are very few people I’ve liked after just one conversation, I could count them on one hand. Now I can count you among them.”

Lord Pembroke looked as though he might melt right where he stood. “Everything about you is beautiful, including your words.”

“I know another man who would agree with you.”

“I’m certain he would. Well, you know where I’ll be if anything changes between now and later, when it’s time for a New Year’s kiss.”

Thomas shook his head. “You don’t give up easily.”

“Not when there’s such a good thing standing right before me. But I will. I know there are already lips keen to find yours come midnight.”

“There will be a full house tonight. I’m sure you can find a pair for yourself among them.”

“Not as lovely as those,” Lord Pembroke said, looking at Thomas’s. “I won’t even begin talking about your eyes.”

Thomas laughed. “I’ve seen what I look like, thank you. So what have we decided? Am I still helping you while you’re here?”

“Yes, please do. But promise you won’t call me my Lord one more time when we’re alone.”

“I can do that.”

“I can do that what?”

Thomas smiled. “I can do that, Ted.”

“Thank you. I’ll stop delaying you from your day now.”

“Are you going down to breakfast?”

Lord Pembroke took a cigarette from his case. “As soon as my heart stops pounding. Go now, it’ll never return to normal if my eyes are still on you.”

Thomas watched Lord Pembroke light his cigarette, captivated by the way he closed his eyes and inhaled to light it. Lord Pembroke opened his eyes to find Thomas’s resting on his lips. Thomas let himself out of the room before Lord Pembroke had time to comment.

Guests streamed in slowly throughout the day until evening came, when a line of cars all seemed to arrive at once. Everyone was dressed in their finest, the women in beaded gowns, dripping with jewels that sparkled in the candlelight. The men were in their best tuxedos, including Eric, who had invested in his own since his last visit. The dining room was at maximum capacity that evening. Despite the numerous guests and lively conversation, Lord Pembroke was most focused on Thomas, his eyes following Thomas wherever he was in the room. Even Price caught on, whispering, “I told you not to smoke too many cigarettes with him,” between the third and fourth course.

After the fifth course, Lady Edith looked to Lady Rosamund, then Eric, then asked her family for a
moment of their attention. Many of the guests continued chatting at the further ends of the table, but the family had Lady Edith’s attention in the center. Thomas listened to the conversation from his spot against the wall, and Price listened from his spot opposite Thomas.

“1926 will be a New Year for me, indeed,” Lady Edith began. “I’ve decided to stay on as permanent editor of the magazine, and I’m moving into the London flat full time. I’m tired of life happening around me. This year, I’m making a life for myself.”

Lady Grantham smiled and put her hand to her chest. “My darling girl. When did you decide all of this?”


“And I’m so glad he did. You need to spread your wings,” Lady Rosamund said. She held Eric’s arm for a moment. “You’re a good friend.”

“Just friends?” Lord Grantham mouthed to Lady Mary while he nodded in Eric’s direction.

Lady Mary nodded in response to her father, then turned to Lady Edith. “Aren’t you worried that this may all be a bit intimidating to any future suitors?”

“And any man who finds her intimidating doesn’t deserve her,” Lord Pembroke said on Lady Edith’s behalf.

“Just friends?” Lord Grantham mouthed again.

Lady Mary shrugged, then turned back to her dinner.

“I think it’s wonderful that you’re taking some initiative,” the Dowager said, giving her son a leading look.

“As do I,” Lord Grantham said after taking a few moments to pick up on the hint. “When are you planning to settle there full time?”

“Next week.”

“So soon?” Lady Grantham asked. “That barely gives us time to adjust to the idea.”

“I think we’ll adjust perfectly fine,” Lady Mary replied.

Lady Grantham smiled at Edith warmly. “As long as you’re happy, I’ll adjust to anything.”

“I’m very happy with my choice, and I think I’ll be very happy with my new life.”

Mr. Branson raised his glass. “A toast to our Lady Edith, now London’s Lady Editor.”

The family raised their glasses, with Lady Mary raising hers last.

“To my dear Edith,” Lord Grantham said, “sharp, spirited, and strong.”

“To Edith,” the family echoed.

Thomas was inspired by the announcement, playing out how his own would go with the staff when he was ready to make it.

Price could see Lady Edith, Lord Pembroke, and Eric from his position, with Thomas in the
background. Soon they would all be in London. Dozens of questions ran through his mind. Once Thomas was no longer her employee, would Eric tell Lady Edith about their friendship? Would the three of them spend time together? Would Lord Pembroke be there? He then thought about Anna’s upcoming leave of absence, and that Nora would be heading back to school soon. Nanny Rebecca had recently found herself with a new sweetheart, perhaps she would get married and leave, too.

He envied the clarity with which Lady Edith was able to see her future. He had been perfectly happy with a career as a servant before he met Thomas. Now his vision of the future was muddied. He didn’t like the idea of staying behind as they all moved on, left to continue climbing the servant ladder. To what end, he wondered. He’d never really thought of the end, and as he tried to imagine it, none if it felt right, because none of it meant he could spend that future with Thomas.

After dinner, the family and guests moved to the hall. There was a small band waiting, and drinks flowed while couples paired off to dance. Lord Pembroke took Lady Edith’s hand during the first dance, and let go on the next song so that Eric could take a turn with her on the floor. Price watched as he served other guests, his visions growing more vivid of them all together, Thomas included. He eyed the drinks on his own tray, and between the third and fourth songs, snuck one off to the stairwell to drink it himself.

Thomas watched the three dancing as well, with his hope growing for a chance to be the one out there someday rather than the one looking on. He looked for Price, wanting to get his impression of Lady Edith’s news, but didn’t see him. He took a break searching for Price when Lord Pembroke joined the band, taking a seat at the piano to play alongside the man at the keys. Lady Mary joined alongside the singer, and Thomas’s hopes rose even higher, picturing Lord Pembroke on stage at Eric’s favorite club, himself on the floor dancing with Price in his arms.

When Thomas finally laid eyes on Price half an hour later, Lord Pembroke was standing over him. Lord Pembroke smiled as he spoke, but Price’s expression was humorless. There was no chance for Thomas to ask questions, with too much demand for the hands of the servants, followed by New Year’s toasts from the family, and finally coffee and light refreshments to set up before the servants could go down for their midnight celebration.

Most of the servants arrived in the servant’s hall before Price, including Thomas. Price arrived and went directly for the wine, finding a spot in the back corner by the piano to drink it.

“You look a bit glassy-eyed,” Thomas said, joining Price. He rested his elbow on the top of the piano while he lit a cigarette.

“Is that one of his?” Price asked, his voice wavering.

Thomas took Price’s glass from his fingers and put it on top of the piano. “Let me guess, that’s not your first of the evening?”

Price took the glass back and downed the remaining wine. “Should I send him down here? He could sit here and perform a solo for you. Or you could bring Eric down as well, maybe they could both kiss you when the clock strikes twelve.”

Thomas put his cigarette out in Price’s glass and held his arm. “From apologies to allegations in the same day, eh? Time for bed, David. We can sort this out when you’re sober.”

“I’m fine.”

“Pardon my mistake then. Carry on like this, by all means.”
Mrs. Hughes approached Thomas and Price cautiously. She noted Thomas’s hand on Price’s arm and met Thomas’s eyes. “Is everything alright back here?”

“David’s a bit squiffy.”

“Already?” Mrs. Hughes asked, looking at Price. “We haven’t been down here fifteen minutes.”

“I think he got a head start.”

Price tugged his arm from Thomas’s. “I’ll go up to bed.”

Mrs. Hughes was unsettled by Price’s slight slurring as he spoke. “Bed sounds like the right idea. Mr. Barrow, why don’t you help him up?”

“I can find my way, no need to take anyone else from their evening,” Price said, leaving both Mrs. Hughes and Thomas as he wove through the other servants to leave the hall.

Thomas didn’t head up after Price. He hoped Price might forget what he said by the piano by the morning, chalking his behavior up to a bad mix of alcohol and emotions. Christmas didn’t sit well with Price, and New Year’s seemed no different. Thomas danced with a very pregnant Anna, drank a glass of wine with Daisy, and sang at midnight with the rest of the staff. When he finally went to bed, there was no light from under Price’s door, and he hoped Price would sleep off whatever had gotten into him that evening.

Thomas awoke in the middle of the night to hands on his face and lips pressed to his. He opened his eyes to find Price’s face above him, tears falling from Price’s eyes onto Thomas’s cheeks. Thomas held Price’s shoulders and sat up. “You’re probably still tipsy. Go back to bed.”

“What you said before is true,” Price said, searching Thomas’s eyes frantically. “I didn’t think about how it would feel when you left,” he continued, his voice rising. “You’re going to move on, and I have no way to move on with you. I can’t do this. I can’t be here without you. I can’t be anywhere without you.”

“Keep your voice down,” Thomas said soothingly. “It’s not forever, remember? You’re the most optimistic person I know, and one of the most resourceful. We’ll find a way.”

Price grabbed Thomas’s face. “I have no way, I have no way. And do you really even want me to find one?”

“You’re not in your right mind, we can’t talk about this now.”

“No, that’s just it. I’m finally in my right mind. I see everything now.”

“What does that mean?”

Price sobbed, pulling Thomas’s face to his. “You only think you love me because you’re here. Just wait until you get a break from me. There’ll be hundreds of Teddys and Erics at your doorstep.”

“I don’t understand what you’re going on about,” Thomas said, pulling Price into a hug.

Price cried harder into Thomas’s chest. “Teddy asked me tonight if I’d fallen in love with someone else, and I said I had. Do you know what he said in return? That he hoped I actually meant it, because he’s sure my man deserves better than to hand his heart over to someone who’ll break it. He’s right, I don’t deserve you,” Price said, squeezing Thomas in his arms, grasping Thomas’s undershirt in both hands. “I don’t, I don’t, I don’t,” he said, louder each time.
“David…”

“Please don’t leave until I can come with you,” Price pleaded, loudly and tearfully. “If I don’t come with you, you’ll never come back to me.”

“Yes I will. Please trust me,” Thomas whispered.

Price gasped as he cried, beginning to hyperventilate. “You’ll see he’s right. You’ll find someone better. It won’t be hard, I’m nothing compared to the type of man you really deserve.”

As Thomas began to try and console Price again, his door flew open, and Mr. Carson flew into the room behind it.

Price jumped from the bed, wiping his face with hands while trying to catch his breath.

“What in God’s name is going on in here?” Mr. Carson hissed, keeping his voice quiet only to avoid waking anyone who might have slept through Price’s outburst.

Thomas stood and spoke calmly. “David’s struggling with the holidays, and he had too much to drink tonight.”

“Yes, Mrs. Hughes informed me, but that’s no excuse for whatever… this.”

Thomas made sure his tone was reassuring and steady. “He needed a friend. He probably would have gone to Anna if she lived in the house, but she doesn’t, so he came to me.”

Price couldn’t calm himself, wracked with guilt that he’d alerted Mr. Carson and forced Thomas to make excuses for him.

Mr. Carson looked to Price. “Do you have anything to say, David?”

Price looked at Thomas, and then back to Mr. Carson. He wanted to speak, but the act of trying to make words made his breath catch in his throat.

Mr. Carson pulled Thomas’s chair over for Price and waited for him to sit. “I’m sorry you’re struggling David,” Mr. Carson said, meeting Price’s eyes as Price looked up at him, still gasping, “but there’s never any excuse to run into a man’s arms.”

“He didn’t, he was-”

“Enough from you, he can speak for himself when he’s able. He knows what you are, and he should know the last place to look for comfort in this house is alone with you in your room.”

Thomas lost the ability to speak evenly, and squeezed his jaw shut. In the silence between Thomas and Mr. Carson, Price’s breathing was the only noise in the room. Mr. Carson’s own heart rate began to slow, and he saw the hurt he’d caused with his words plain across on Thomas’s face.

“You know what I mean,” Mr. Carson said, his eyebrows raised in as close to an apology as he could ever give under such circumstances.

Thomas nodded. “I understand. So will David when he’s able to.”

“Go back to your room once you can breathe properly,” Mr. Carson said. “And make sure he goes back there soon,” he told Thomas.

Thomas followed Mr. Carson to the door and shut it behind him. He kept his gloved hand pressed
against it and stayed there for a moment.

“*I’m sorry,*” Price rasped.

Thomas turned from the door and let his hand slide down it. “*You can never come in here after
dark again.*”

“I’ll smooth things over with him tomorrow.”

“No, you won’t. You won’t mention this to him, David, or anybody else.”

“What does that mean for us?”

Thomas helped Price up from the chair and led him to the door. “That we have to be extremely
careful from here on out.”

“There aren’t enough sorrys in the world for this.”

Thomas reached his fingers under the collar of Price’s pajamas and pulled out his necklace. He put
the ring that hung from it on the tip of his index finger and held it up. “*Think about this the next
time you’re in a mood like tonight. It should prove as a reminder that I have no plans of leaving
you.*”

“Not even after this?”

“No,” Thomas said, letting the ring fall to Price’s chest, “*but things have to be different here now.*”

Price nodded. “*I know. I got far too comfortable.*”

“We both did.” Thomas rested his forehead on Price’s, and Price squeezed his eyes closed and let
his final tears for the evening roll down his cheeks. “*We’ll get through this together, don’t worry.*”

“You’re too good to me, Thomas.”

Thomas kissed the tip of Price’s nose. “*Good as you deserve. Now go get a glass of water and put
yourself to bed, David.*”

Once Price was gone, Thomas was able to vent his own frustration, punching his fist into his palm
as he paced the room. After their tryst in the garage he was thinking of ways to be even more
adventurous, and now he wouldn’t be able to spend even another minute behind a closed door with
Price until he was no longer employed at Downton. It took every bit of his willpower not to
become furious over the situation, but he had enough of his own misguided eruptions to find
patience with Price over his, regardless of how much damage Price did that evening.

First thing the next morning, Thomas knocked on Mr. Carson’s office door, taking a seat opposite
him at the desk.

Mr. Carson sighed deeply. “*I don’t want to rehash last evening.*”

“I don’t, either. I just wanted to assure you that I didn’t take advantage of David in his state. I
assumed that was your main concern.”

“Then you assumed wrong, Mr. Barrow,” Mr. Carson said. He crossed the room to shut the door,
then returned to his seat and folded his hands on his desk. “*Does David know about James?*”

Thomas felt the wind knocked out of him at the utterance of the name. “*No, Mr. Carson. Why*
“Because then he might understand why his actions were especially inappropriate. We don’t need yet another young man in the house giving you the wrong impression. You’ve been through enough in that department.”

“This may sound odd, Mr. Carson,” Thomas said with a modest smile, “but that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Yes, well, that was all quite the ordeal then, and not one I would care to relive, either.”

“You won’t have to. There are no misconstrued feelings between me and David,” Thomas said confidently, since it was technically the truth.

“Let us keep it that way, Mr. Barrow. I can talk to David and explain if you’d like.”

“No, no, I can tell him. But I’m not concerned. He understands enough not to do it again.”

Mr. Carson rose, and Thomas followed. “Then we can close the book on this matter.”

“We can. Thank you, Mr. Carson.”

“There’s nothing to thank me for.”

“Yes there is. You didn’t assume the worst in me, and for that, I’m thankful.”

Mr. Carson tone was a bit more jovial. “I’m impressed with you these days, Mr. Barrow. You seem to be trying to make a better life for yourself, like how you’re building friendships with people you’ve burned bridges with in the past.”

“I didn’t think you noticed those kinds of things.”

“I notice everything. That’s my job.”

Thomas smiled. “Yes, of course.”

“Keep making progress, Mr. Barrow,” Mr. Carson said as he followed Thomas into the hall, “and you may eventually find yourself as a butler just as you hoped.”

I have different hopes now, Thomas thought. “Whatever I do eventually, I won’t make the kinds of mistakes I’ve made in the past.”

“I truly believe you don’t want to repeat them,” Mr. Carson said. “With that in mind, make sure you explain things to David. For your own benefit.”

Thomas saw Price out of his peripheral vision, stopping at the end of the hallway when he set eyes on Thomas and Mr. Carson engaged in conversation. “Yes. I’ll explain it all to him.”

Thomas walked down the hallway toward Price, but didn’t stop to chat like he would have just a day before. Instead, he nodded a greeting as if Price were any other man in the house, and continued walking, heading upstairs to help Lord Pembroke dress.

Thomas wondered on his way up whether Lord Pembroke suspected that Price was the unnamed man in his life. He was a little fond of the idea of him finding out and being jealous, even though he liked Lord Pembroke. Thomas was the tender lover in Price’s life now, even if it would be quite some time before love making would become an option again.
More important than that, though, he had Price’s love, even if sometimes it burst out of Price in a storm of fear, self doubt, and self loathing. He knew what it was to ride the waves in that kind storm himself, and he was willing help Price through them, no matter how choppy the waters.
Chapter Notes

Mature content chapter.

PS Early on, I used to write chapters between around 1k and 4k words, and I updated every couple days. I'm writing longer ones now, I think this one's around 11k words, hence the longer span between posts. I've been feeling badly for taking a week to update, but I suppose it makes sense that it takes twice as long to write twice as much.

Mrs. Hughes had followed through on her discussion with Thomas, placing local adverts for a temporary Lady’s maid in preparation for Anna’s upcoming absence. In the days after New Year’s, and leading to the servant’s ball, a number of eager young women came and went for interviews, but none impressed Mrs. Hughes.

“Do you have another Miss Baxter waiting in the wings?” Mrs. Hughes asked Thomas as they both watched Anna pause midway on the stairwell before continuing her trek to the top.

Between the upcoming servant’s ball and the interviews, there was a constant buzz of chatter downstairs. The gossip also included Lord Pembroke, who several of the staff thought was hoping to court Lady Edith.

Eric and Lord Pembroke had participated in the family’s post-New Year’s traditions, including hunting. Both were good shots, receiving praise at the outdoor luncheon that followed.

“I think it’s barbaric,” Price whispered to Thomas as Lord Grantham patted Lord Pembroke on the back.

“I don’t see you complaining when you inhale your meat at supper,” Thomas replied.

“That’s for nutrition,” Price countered. “Making a game of it is entirely different.”

“You’re saying that just because it’s him. If it were me getting compliments on my marksmanship from Lord Grantham, you wouldn’t be up on your high horse right now.”

Probably, Price thought, but didn’t respond.

They returned from the hunt to another line of young women awaiting interviews.

“Is there some kind of employment crisis?” Thomas wondered aloud.

Mr. Molesley eyed the line. “Can you blame them? A short stint at Downton and a letter of recommendation from Mrs. Hughes will help them for the rest of their career."

Price was about to chime in when he recognized one of the women standing outside of Mrs. Hughes’s sitting room. She was talking with another woman, and Price turned and walked swiftly to the servant’s hall before she had a chance to notice him.

Thomas followed Price, but said nothing, giving Price only a slight raise of his eyebrow.
Price fell into a rocking chair by the fire and closed his eyes. “There are too many ghosts of my past in this house right now.”

Thomas sat across from Price. “Which ghost did you just see?”

“I’ve told you all about my past. What young woman do you think would give me cause to run and hide?”

“I can’t think of one. Do you have a secret sister I forgot about?”

Price opened his eyes and rocked forward in the chair. “My former fiance, Thomas.”

“You’re kidding,” Thomas said, chuckling. “You should send her up to Ted, they can commiserate over having had their hearts ripped out by your hands.” Thomas teased Price a little harder those days after the New Year, passive aggressively venting frustration over the scene he caused, and repercussions from it.

“Not funny,” Price said, rocking back again.

“Which one is she? I want to have a look.”

“Tall. Dark hair. Light eyes. Blue hat.”

Thomas rose from his chair and stepped into the hall. After looking over the line of women, he returned. “Pretty girl, and so much taller than you. That must have been a bit strange.”

“Yes, Thomas, that was the strangest part about being engaged to a woman for me. Her notable height.”

“I don’t know. Almost my height, my coloring, maybe you could squint your eyes and give it another go with her.”

“Don’t be rude. She doesn’t deserve ridicule.”

“It’s not her I’m taunting. What’s her name?”

“It’s Lily,” Price answered through his teeth.

Thomas pushed Price’s chair with his foot, making it rock. “Looks like I hit a nerve.”

“I’ve never stopped feeling guilty about the whole thing, and I haven’t set eyes on her in ages. It’s making me feel guilty tenfold.”

“Are you going to go acknowledge her?”

“No. Let her have her interview without having to look at my face first.”

“Why? Do you think she’s still bitter?”

“I would be if I were her.”

“You can’t use yourself as a point of comparison. You’re not the most emotionally sound individual.”

Price closed his eyes again. “There’s a time and a place for your teasing, and it’s not here or now.”
“Alright. Sit and stew. I’m going to go make conversation.”

“Don’t!” Price begged, jumping from his chair.

“Not just with your Lily, there’s three of them waiting now. I would have anyway, then I can weigh in when Mrs. Hughes does her deliberation.”

“Because she values your opinion so much?”

“Miss Baxter’s here now, isn’t she? So I’d say yes, yes she does.” Thomas smiled at Price, then took his smile down the hall to the three women.

The women turned as Thomas approached. The shorter two smiled up at him with toothy grins, eager to please and impress. Lily held her head high and smiled with her eyes, but not her lips.

Thomas greeted them with an even larger smile. “Hello, potential Lady’s maids. All prepared for your interviews?”

“I think so,” one of the shorter women replied.

“Me, too,” the other echoed.

“And how about yourself?” Thomas asked the only woman he was actually curious to talk to.

Lily’s high heels put her at eye level with Thomas, and the look in her eyes told him she knew his smile was some kind of guise. “One is never completely prepared for an interview, are they? At least, it would be slightly arrogant to think you were.”

“Fair point,” Thomas said, already amused by her. “I’m Mr. Barrow, by the way,” he said to all three, “the under-butler. And you are?”

“I’m Emily,” one replied.

“Betsy,” said the other.

Lily smiled. “Miss Benham.”

“Miss Benham,” Thomas repeated. “And why are you pursuing temporary employment, rather than a permanent position, Miss Benham?”

Lily's response came easily, but didn't sound rehearsed. “This position was more intriguing than the permanent ones currently advertised, and you never know where something will lead. I’d rather take the better job even if it’s shorter term.”

“Good answer.”

Lily raised her eyebrows at his praise. “Do you usually conduct your own interviews before the housekeeper has her chance?”

“You know, I was just saying how one of the other lady’s maids was hired based on my recommendation. You should be glad for a quick interview with me before Mrs. Hughes.”

The other two women exchanged glances and smirks.

“I wasn’t testing you, Mr. Barrow. On the contrary. It’s impressive to see one of the highest male members of staff take an interest in who’s hired on the female side of the house.”
“It’s not like that where you work today?”

“Not hardly,” Lily said, narrowing her eyes at the thought of her current job. “Do you have any advice for our interviews with Mrs. Hughes?”

Thomas addressed all three again. “Lady Mary is whip-sharp and has high standards. You need to prove to Mrs. Hughes that you’re up to the task.”

Lily nodded. “Good. I like to be challenged.”

The door to Mrs. Hughes’s sitting room opened. She walked a young woman to the door and thanked her for coming, but looked unimpressed as the woman walked away. “Mr. Barrow,” Mrs. Hughes said with a fatigued sigh, “keeping these ladies company, I see? I hope he didn’t bother you all too much. Now which one of you was next?”

Lily stepped forward. Thomas met Mrs. Hughes’s eyes and nodded.

“Come in, please,” Mrs. Hughes said. As Lily passed through the doorway, Mrs. Hughes said quietly, “it looks like you already have Mr. Barrow’s approval. That doesn’t come easily.”

Price was pacing when Thomas returned to the servant’s hall.

“She’s brilliant,” Thomas reported. “I can’t wait to see how she and Lady Mary get on.”

“Ah, so she’ll be Mrs. Hughes’s choice then?” Price said, taking a seat on the edge of the piano bench.

“Mark my words, she’ll have a job offer before supper.”

Price wrung his hands. “If you really think so, then I have to see her before she leaves. What an awful surprise it would be for her to accept the job only to find out she’s living with me.”

Price waited by the back door, pacing again, eyeing Mrs. Hughes’s door every few seconds. When it finally opened, he stopped in his spot and stood up straight. Price couldn’t hear across the distance, but both Mrs. Hughes and Lily were doing quite a bit of talking and smiling. Mrs. Hughes called in the next woman, and Lily turned toward the back door. At the sight of Price, her smile vanished and she stopped in the middle of the hall.

Price let her adjust to the fact that he was standing before her, then walked toward her. She gripped the handle of her handbag tightly, but appeared cool otherwise.

“Lily.”

“David. I didn’t realize you were employed here. I didn’t know you were in service at all, actually.”

“I didn’t know you were, either.”

Lily blinked a few times and then pushed a smile onto her lips. “So, how do you like working here?”

Price was flustered by the question, expecting a much less mundane question or comment from Lily’s lips. “Uhm, I like it very much.”

“That’s good to hear. I think the job might be mine, but I don’t want it if this isn’t a good place to work.”
“Oh. No, it’s a very good place to work… Lily, are you sure you want to work alongside me?”
Lily held her head high. “I’m sure we can both behave like professionals.”

“Well, yes, obviously I would. I just thought you detested me, and figured my presence wasn’t welcome in your world.”

A few of the staff began watching the conversation through the kitchen window, and Thomas joined them.

“David knows her?” Daisy asked in a whisper.

“You’ll have to ask him all about that,” Thomas replied.

Lily sensed the prying eyes and turned her back to the kitchen window. “I don’t detest you. I’ve had quite enough time to move on from those kind of feelings. I’ll never understand it, but I’m sure you had your reasons. Better before the wedding than after.”

“You can’t imagine what it feels like to hear you say that. I never meant to hurt you.”

Lily exhaled through her nose and her smile faltered. “Please, David. Let’s not go back there. If I’m to work here, we can tell people we knew one another back home. It’s the truth, anyway. The details are none of anybody’s business, and frankly, I’d rather they not know.”

“Alright,” Price said, looking quickly to the curious faces in the window. “I won’t elaborate with any details. Do you really think you’ll get the offer?”

“Mrs. Hughes already told me to expect a telephone call later this afternoon.”

Price lead Lily to the door and put his hand out for her to shake. “Then we’ll probably be peers for a short while, and in that case, I look forward to working with you.”

Lily took Price’s hand and smiled as she shook it. “Who would have ever thought?”

“Not me in a thousand years, I can tell you that much. Take care, Lily.”

“You as well, David,” Lily said, taking her hand back from Price’s. She gave him another quick smile before leaving.

Price went straight to the kitchen. The staff was busy back at work, except Thomas, who stood near Ellie with a teacup and saucer in hand.

“She was a friend when I was younger, for the busy-bodies who were wondering.”

“Nobody said anything,” Mrs. Patmore said over her rolling pin.

“Right. Well, there’s really nothing to say anyway.”

Thomas sipped the last bit of his tea and put the cup on the counter, licking a drop from his lip. “I can think of a few things,” he said to Price, “but I’ll save it for her first day.”

The day of the servant’s ball, a heavy snowfall was in progress. The weather made taking an excursion outside of Downton impossible for Lady Edith’s guests. Eric wandered the halls, feeling housebound after only a couple days in the Abbey. He wondered how Lady Edith had spent most of her life there. Despite being the largest home he’d ever visited as a guest, the diversions within
it were limited. As he walked, he made mental notes of the trips he wanted to take after the two that were coming up. He always preferred to have at least three planned at a time.

His walk brought him to a door he hadn’t passed through before, and found on the other end of it what he assumed were the servant’s bedrooms. It was empty as the staff was occupied with work ahead of the servant’s ball that evening. He read the names on the doors, stopping when he came to “Thomas Barrow.” The door was closed, and as tempting as it was to turn the knob, no amount of boredom would push him to do so uninvited.

He reached the end of the hall and turned back, reading the names on the opposite side. As he approached the only open door, he heard the floor creak inside. He stopped where he stood and held his breath, listening to determine if there was indeed a person on the other side of the wall. His question was answered when Price poked his head out of the doorway.

Price leaned on the door frame and smiled. “Sneaking around, hmm? What were you hoping to find?”

“A cure for monotony,” Eric whispered. “Is anyone else up here?”

“Not to the best of my knowledge,” Price said, looking past Eric down the hall. “If you were looking for Thomas, he was down in the servant’s hall last time I saw him. I didn’t feel much like tea today, so I’m up here.”

“I truly wasn’t looking for anything in particular,” Eric replied. “Can I see your room while I’m here?”

Price stepped fully into the hallway and swept his arms toward the door. “Be my guest.”

Eric approached the doorway slowly. The room was as small as his own, but more stark. He was surprised at the lack of decoration for someone who loved art as Price did. He stepped inside and looked at the handful of furnishings. His eyes rested on three watches and their parts spread across the bureau, and then a leather folder on Price’s nightstand. “What’s in there? If I may ask, since I’m already invading your personal space.”

“Some sketches.”

Eric saw a stack of books next to the folder, including books he’d sent Thomas. “Have you read any of those yet?”

“Two in that stack. I read everything you send Thomas eventually. The books, I mean. I stopped reading the letters, I promise.”

Eric met Price’s eyes and chuckled, then ran his finger down the spines of the books. His hand trailed to the cover of the folder. “May I have a look?”

“Sure, I suppose. I’m not exactly certain what’s in there at the moment, so I can’t speak to the quality.”

Eric looked at the bed for permission to sit, and Price nodded. He put the folder on his lap and sorted through dozens of pieces of paper with a variety of different subjects, from portraits to landscapes to still lifes. Most were pencil, with a few that Price had stained with tea and coffee in lieu of paint. Eric spent such a long time pouring through the folder in silence that Price wandered to his watches and poked at them while waiting for Eric to finish.

Eric closed the folder and put it back on the nightstand. “David, I don’t even have words.”
“Meaning what?” Price asked, stepping away from his watches.

Eric laughed. “Meaning, I don’t understand why you’re here when you can create magic like that.”

“Ech,” Price said, rolling his eyes. “The lot of you. It’s a hobby. I’m not a professional by any stretch of the imagination.”

“Well I am,” Eric said, rising from Price’s bed. “I help select the art to accompany my pieces, and David, it’s often not half as lovely as what you create.”

Price rolled his eyes again and looked back to his watches. “Maybe in my next life.”

Eric looked around the room again. A few cracks in the wall, rust on the metal of the bed, scuffs on the floor. His heart ached at the thought of such a talented young man spending his life in a bare little room like Price’s. “Why not this life? I don’t understand.”

“Because. Because I’m a realist.”

“That’s funny. Thomas always describes you as a dreamer.”

“I dream for him,” Price said, looking at Eric briefly. “I’ve given up on false hope for myself. You should probably go, Eric. You’re not supposed to be up here.”

Eric stood over Price’s shoulder and looked at the watches. “What about those? Are you thinking of getting back into the watch business?”

Price put the tool in his hand down hard on the dresser and turned to Eric. “Please, Eric. I’ve accepted my fate. You, and Thomas, and Lady Edith, you can all forget it.”

“Why are you so resistant?”

“Why are you so bold?” Price asked, his brow furrowed. “You barely know me. You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Eric stared into Price’s eyes, distracted by the fact that one was a little more green than the other, and that he found Price’s expression more endearing than sinister. He tried not to smile. “I know you through Thomas. His letters are about you at least as much as they’re about him.”

Price’s brow relaxed, but he crossed his arms. “Well it’s his interpretation.”

“Then get to know me. I keep begging for you to be my friend.”

Price crossed his arms tighter. “Why?”

Eric couldn’t prevent a grin from spreading across his lips. “Because I like you. Despite the fact that you caught Thomas before I had a chance, that is.”

“You’re cheeky today.”

“Every day,” Eric corrected.

“Like when you kissed me?”

Eric’s grin grew to a full smile, teeth and all. “David, Thomas isn’t here. We both know you tempted me into that kiss.”
“Not so,” Price said, looking away from Eric.

Eric put a finger under Price’s chin and lifted his face. “I was there and I know what transpired. Maybe you’ve convinced yourself otherwise, but it wasn’t a complete misunderstanding on my part, that much I know is true. However, I know Thomas doesn’t welcome that kind of behavior, so I understand why you don’t care to acknowledge it. My point is that I like you, and it would mean a lot if you liked me back.”

Price didn’t pull away from Eric’s touch or look away from his gaze. “Thomas likes you, so I like you.”

“Hint taken,” Eric said, dropping his hand. “I’m glad I found you here, even if you’re not. Now I know what kind of art you’re capable of making. Spend all the time you like dreaming for a future on Thomas’s behalf. I can spend my energy dreaming something better for you.”

“You want to do that, even after Thomas chose me over you?”

Eric grinned again. “Are you trying to convince me not to like you?”

“Sorry,” Price said, finally cracking a smile. “It’s been a bad past few days. I’m reacting to that, not you. If I don’t want bad days to continue, I better get back downstairs. I’m sure tea’s over by now.”

“Don’t let me keep you,” Eric said, making the same sweeping motion toward the door that Price had earlier.

“Actually, one quick thing first.” Price opened the bottom drawer of his dresser and flipped through two books full of sketches. He found the one he was looking for, tore it from the book, and handed it to Eric. It was a loosely drawn sketch of Eric writing in a journal by a campfire, with suggestions of the scene around him, such as the form of a tent and a knapsack. “I drew it after reading one of your pieces,” Price explained. “It’s not the only one, but I can show you those another time.”

Eric studied the drawing. “I’m out of words again.”

“How about goodbye?” Price joked as he shut the bottom drawer with his foot. “I really do have to go now.”

Eric handed the drawing back to Price, but Price put his hands up.

“Keep it since you like it so much.”

“Thank you. I’d love to. Anything I can give you in exchange?”

Price shrugged. “Uhm... you could write something to inspire me to draw, I suppose. Maybe that can help break up the monotony for you today.”

They both stepped into the hall together and turned in opposite directions; Eric to the door back to the gallery, Price to the door downstairs. Price reached the door and realized he hadn’t heard any footsteps on Eric’s part. He felt an odd tug to turn around, the kind he often felt when being watched. He looked over his shoulder to find Eric still standing by his bedroom.

“What?” Price mouthed.

Eric looked at him a moment longer, then shook his head. “Nothing,” he mouthed back, then turned to leave.
Price was still leery of the servant’s ball, despite the other staff insisting that servant’s balls were different at Downton. He’d heard so many rumors, especially in houses as prestigious as Downton. The larger the house, the larger the staff, the greater the chance for debauchery. With Eric and Lord Pembroke as guests, and his very recent outburst, he decided not a drop of alcohol would touch his lips that evening.

Thomas was leery of the servant’s ball as well, but his concern was over Lord Pembroke, Eric, and Price. He feared the lively, more casual setting would lead to inappropriate behavior by at least one of them. He also decided not to drink, and to make sure the same was true for Price.

Lady Edith prepared Eric for the evening in the afternoon while the family was gathered in the library, playing with the children. She gave him the background on the tradition and an overview of what to expect.

“How nice that the staff gets to take center stage for a night,” Eric noted. And nice that there will actually be something to do for a few hours, he thought.

“It sounds different here,” Lord Pembroke said. “It’s often treated as a bit of a gag, the whole idea of the servants taking over upstairs for one evening.”

“Aren’t they upstairs often?” Eric asked, thinking there almost always seemed to be a servant present no matter where he was in the house.

Lord Pembroke smiled at Eric’s inexperience in great houses. “There’s different levels of staff. For example, some of the kitchen staff may not have seen much of upstairs since the last ball. And forget the outside staff, if they’re inside more than once a year they’re probably lucky.”

Lady Mary turned from George, who was bouncing on her lap, to Lord Pembroke. “I suppose your outside staff frequents the inside of your home?”

“I wasn’t passing judgement,” Lord Pembroke replied, giving Lady Mary a soft look to smooth things over. “There’s an order to things, that’s all I meant to say.”

Eric hadn’t been curious about Lord Pembroke’s home until Lady Mary’s comment. They had spoken so comfortably with one another during their stay that he hadn’t considered how far apart they were in the order of things, as Lord Pembroke put it.

Lady Edith and Mr. Branson strayed from the others, following as Marigold and Sybbie played tag. When they were far enough away, Mr. Branson whispered, “Teddy seems like he’s enjoying your company.”

Lady Edith smiled. “I didn’t invite him here to enjoy my company.”

“No?”

“No. He seems quite lonely, as does… my other guest.”

“Oh, I see,” Mr. Branson said, looking over to Eric and Lord Pembroke. “Too bad, wasn’t Lady Mary routing for Mr. Barrow when it came to your other guest?”

Lady Edith chuckled. “We ought to stop before we’re overheard,” she whispered as Thomas entered to clean up the last of tea.
Eric excused himself from his conversation with Lord Pembroke, which had extended to Nora, to join Lady Edith. “I wondered, has that artist footman of yours drawn anything else for the magazine lately?”

Lady Edith gestured for him to walk with her a bit further from the others. “I haven’t. The staff is always so busy, I don’t want to burden him with more requests.”

“With his abilities, I would think his job would be the burden, not your requests.”

Lady Edith stopped by a window and watched the falling snow. “Also, I don’t want to play favorites. I think there’s already some contention downstairs because Lady Mary’s shown him more attention than most of the others.”

“Then that’s for him to worry about,” Eric said, looking out onto the bleak landscape as well. “Jobs in a place like this, they’re becoming fewer and fewer. No disrespect to your family, you all seem to be the exception. But it would be a shame if he never did anything with his skills, and one day lost his career in service, too.”

“You seem quite invested in his future.”

“I just thought I’d share an outsider’s perspective on the situation, especially since it seems like you, my friend, are the one quite invested in his future.”

Lady Edith smiled and looked up at Eric. “A little, I admit, but there’s not much I can do about it.”

“Isn’t there?”

Lady Edith looked down as Marigold ran over for a hug. She picked her up and kissed her cheek. “Do you have any ideas?”

“I might.”

Eric was cut short when Lord Grantham announced that the staff was dismissed to have time to get themselves dressed and ready. The family had their own work to do, though it was more ceremonial, as the staff had already done the majority of the preparations.

Thomas had debated over what to wear once he knew Eric was coming, and especially once he knew more about Lord Pembroke. He was sure they would both look dapper, and he was looking forward to a night of feeling like their equal. A lesser ensemble wouldn’t suffice.

Price entered Thomas’s room as Thomas was perfecting the knot in his tie.

“No closed doors, David, remember?”

“I just opened it. Plus it’s daylight. It’s different.”

“Maybe in a week or so. We should still be cautious.”

“Everyone knows we’re friends. Now we can’t even be that?”

Thomas huffed and untied his tie, then attempted the knot again. “This isn’t my fault.”

Price looked Thomas over in his brown suit, white shirt, and green tie. “You look beautiful.”

Thomas looked at Price’s reflection in the mirror. “Trying to change the subject?”
“No. I just wanted to say it.”

“You look good yourself,” Thomas said of Price’s gray suit and blue tie. “I get to wear this around here for once,” Thomas said, shaking his wrist from his sleeve to show Price the watch.

“I’m glad you still want it.”

“Of course, don’t be daft,” Thomas scoffed as he finally finished his tie.

“I’m worried. About a lot.”

Thomas raised his eyebrows. “Don’t be,” he said reassuringly. “We’ll laugh at all of this some day, trust me.”

“I pray nightly that you’re right,” Price said so quietly that Thomas could barely hear him.

Thomas approached Price. He brushed the front of Price’s jacket with his hands to smooth down his lapel, then adjusted Price’s collar. “Forget it for now. Are you ready to go down?”

“Yes. I’m finally looking forward to it now that it’s here.”

“Good. You should. It’ll be fun,” Thomas whispered back as he fixed the front pieces of Price’s hair.

“You really are a cat, Thomas. I’m not your kitten, you don’t need to groom me.”

“No, you’re a messy puppy. And I’m surprised you’re complaining. Don’t mother cats lick their kittens to groom them? Don’t you want to be licked?”

Price laughed. “I’m happy you’re flirting with me, but I don’t need to think of you as a mother cat. That’s just weird.”

“A regular cat is less weird?”

“Yes.”

“Alright then. No mother cat. No licking.”

“Now wait a second...”

Thomas looked into the hallway and saw no one coming. “We’ll find time for licking soon, alright? Just wait for things to blow over.”

“I can wait as long as you need,” Price whispered.

They were two of the last to arrive given Thomas’s primping. The band hadn’t started playing yet, but the staff and family were already mingling. Several of the lower servants stood close together, basking in awe rather than engaging with the Crawleys.

“Don’t stand there,” Thomas told them as he passed by. “It’s your night to enjoy. Do as you please.”

Eric and Lord Pembroke stood chatting by the fireplace. Lord Pembroke wore his tuxedo, but Eric opted for a suit after asking Lady Edith what the staff would be wearing. They both stopped speaking as they saw Thomas and Price enter the hall.
“Both arriving together, that’s interesting,” Lord Pembroke said quietly as he took a cigarette from his case.

“Interesting how?”

Lord Pembroke lit his lighter and smiled. “Oh, I’m pretty sure you know why that’s interesting.”

Eric shook his head as Lord Pembroke offered him a cigarette. “Why would I know?”

“Has the under-butler not visited your room at least once during your stay?”

“He’s visited yours multiple times per day,” Eric replied quickly.

Lord Pembroke clapped his cigarette case shut and put it back in his jacket. “Don’t get defensive. I’m just a little jealous, that’s all.”

“You have it wrong,” Eric replied. “Though I wish you didn’t,” he added with a laugh.

“Hmm. I’m usually very good at telling these kinds of things. You don’t have to lie to me, you know. It’s not as if I’d go off and tell everyone at the ball. That would leave them wondering about me as much as you.”

The band began playing, and Eric took advantage of the noise to speak openly. “There was something, but it’s over. Very recently over, in fact.”

Lord Pembroke was genuinely touched. “I’m sorry. I wouldn’t have said a word if I thought it would cause you pain. Just tell me to mind my own business next time.”

“I’m too polite for that,” Eric said with a playful smile. “Maybe next time you could just mind your business in the first place.”

Lord Pembroke laughed and took a drag of his cigarette. “Noted. Now, shall we go find some lovely ladies to dance with?”

“Oh yes, of course. You read my mind.”

The order of the dances were carefully planned for the senior staff Thomas was to begin with Lady Mary, and Price was to take Lady Edith’s hand. The sisters were standing together when Thomas and Price approached them.

“May I have this dance, my Lady? Thomas asked, holding out his arm.

Lady Mary put her arm on his. “I’d be delighted, Barrow.”

“And a dance for me, my Lady?” Price asked Lady Edith, presenting his hand.

Lady Edith took his hand and smiled. “I’d be honored.”

Thomas placed one hand on Lady Mary’s back and held her other hand in his. They smiled at one another while they waited for the other servants to take their dance partners in hand. The band members ended their piece and waited for a signal from Mr. Carson to start the next.

“I’m still very touched by your thoughtful gift,” Thomas told Lady Mary as he nodded toward his cuff.

“Since it’s the servant’s ball, and we’re more casual this evening, I’ll tell you the other reason I
Mr. Carson gave the signal to the band to begin. Thomas moved with Lady Mary to steps his muscles remembered without his brain having to do any work. “Please do, I’d like to hear it.”

Lady Mary looked up at Thomas warmly, a look that appeared on her face rarely since Matthew Crawley passed. “You’re special to Master George, he’s extremely fond of you. You’re good to him like Mr. Carson was to me as a child, in fact. You deserve something a little special for that.”

Thomas laughed bashfully. “That’s high praise, my Lady. Though I don’t deserve anything for it, his affection is a gift alone.”

“Well enjoy both anyhow, Barrow.”

Price held Lady Edith nearly as gracefully as Thomas held Lady Mary, though he had to put more thought into his steps. They didn’t chat as they danced. Lady Edith was preoccupied trying not to blush at the sensation of Price’s fingers on her shoulder blade and his palm against hers. She had no romantic emotions for him, but he was even more handsome to her up close. She was drawn to the mystery she felt around him. His art indicated to her that there was something else under his polite and genial exterior, and she wanted to know more.

Eric and Lord Pembroke’s first dance partners were Mrs. Patmore and Ellie respectively. Eric was entertained by Mrs. Patmore, trying to commit every amusing comment she made to memory so he could write it down later. He wrote character studies as a personal project, and he wished he’d known about her the first day of his stay so that he could have spent his free time following her around the kitchen.

Ellie was already two drinks in and flirted heavily with Lord Pembroke as they danced. He was equally as entertained by Ellie as Eric was by Mrs. Patmore, enjoying the silly things she said as she mooned up at him. He was careful not to flirt back, as the servant’s ball at Downton didn’t seem like the ones he’d experienced, where a few drinks and heavy flirting would have been expected. But he didn’t want to stop her from having a little fun upstairs, and let her continue bathing him in compliments and suggestive comments.

When Lady Edith finished dancing with Price, Lord Pembroke handed Ellie off to him and took Lady Edith’s hand.

“So what do you think of my friend?” Lady Edith asked, looking over Lord Pembroke’s shoulder at Eric, who had followed Mrs. Patmore to the refreshments.

As they turned, Lord Pembroke looked at Eric. “He seems like an interesting chap.”

“Just interesting?”


“You seem bored by proper behavior.”

“That’s true, I am.”

“And he’s not one bit boring, is he?”

“Not one bit,” Lord Pembroke agreed. “But I’m sorry, we seem to be a better fit as friends despite your go at matchmaking.”
“There’s nothing wrong with friendship, then. Truthfully, you’ve both seemed in need of a friend as of late. I’ve found him to be a very one, so I hope you do stay in touch with him after you both depart tomorrow.”

Lord Pembroke walked to the side of the room with Lady Edith as the song ended. “You’re a good friend yourself, young lady. I may have turned down your matchmaking services, but I’d be happy to let you bring more friends into my life, especially if they’re anything like you.”

“He was planning to take the train back to London tomorrow. Perhaps you could drive him instead.”

“Provided there’s a path carved out in the snow for me to do so, I’d be delighted.”

Thomas approached the two to ask for Lady Edith’s hand for the next dance. He danced with each of the Crawley women during the night, and then several of the female staff. Anna was often his dance partner at the servant’s ball, but she looked uncomfortable standing still, let alone dancing.

Price’s last dance for the evening was with Daisy. He had avoided it, not wanting to give her the wrong impression, but she had confided in Thomas that she was a little hurt that Price danced with everyone but her, and Thomas told him he better ask her for a turn before the band wrapped for the night.

The dance was everything Price expected it would be. Daisy’s cheeks were scarlet as soon as he took her in his arms, a goofy grin on her lips. He grinned back, unable to resist smiling at how sweet she looked.

Lady Mary stepped closer to her sister. “Hmm, perhaps your David’s hand is already taken,” she said of the smiles and laughter now flowing between Daisy and Price.

“Oh stop,” Lady Edith rebutted. “I’m not interested in his hands or anything else of that nature.”

“Well that’s just a lie. I think every woman in this household is at least a little interested in natural things about him.”

“Not everyone’s as interested in natural things as you are, Mary.”

Lady Mary sipped her drink, then gave a single shrug of her shoulders. “Then I feel sorry for them,” she said before walking away.

After everything wound down, Price and Thomas were the two of the last to leave, both energized by the evening rather than worn out like the rest. They both began cleaning, but Mrs. Hughes waved them off. “We’ll handle it all tomorrow, let’s not do any chores tonight,” she told them.

As Lord Pembroke began to climb the stairs, Thomas turned to follow.

Price stood in front of Thomas. “Mrs. Hughes said no more chores today. He’s capable of getting ready for bed himself.”

“Then he can dismiss me when I get to his door, but Mr. Carson is who I take direction from, not Mrs. Hughes, and he hasn’t permitted me to shirk my duties, has he?”

Price stepped to the side as Thomas tried to pass him. “That’s not what it’s about. You want to go up there.”

Thomas’s lasting frustration over Price’s outburst began running through his veins. He clenched
his jaw to prevent his words from coming out too loudly. “Don’t you think you’ve spoiled enough evenings? Do you have to spoil my favorite night of the year, and probably the last servant’s ball of my career?”

Price’s blood pressure rose as well. “I know you both and I know where this is leading.”

Thomas laughed. “There’s nothing leading anywhere.”

“Don’t. Go. Up there,” Price warned, quietly but sharply. “He’s been drinking and you’re flying high from this evening. Even if you deny his advances, I know he’d direct them at you right now. If you really think a servant should check in on him for the evening, then let it be me or Mr. Molesley. But not you.”

“So what if he does make an advance?,” Thomas asked just as sharply. “You said it yourself, you know I’ll deny it. What I won’t deny is that I like his company, and I’m going to go spend some time smoking with him and talking about the evening before he’s gone in the morning and it’s back to humdrum life around here.”

“Why can’t you smoke while you and I talk about the evening?”

Thomas leaned into Price and sneered. “Because you made bloody sure we can’t have so much as a chat after hours in this house anymore.”

Price shook his head. “You said you understood my temperament.”

“To a point, and you just pushed beyond it.”

“Interesting last straw, Thomas. Mr. Carson bursting in on us, you can handle that. But I get between you and Teddy, and now you’re scowling in my face. If you’ve convinced yourself you just like his company, that’s lovely for you, but every part of me is screaming that I shouldn’t let you up those stairs.”

“Then it’s a good thing I don’t require your permission,” Thomas replied, stepping around Price to go to the gallery.

He climbed the stairs without looking back, but as he reached the top he was already cooling off, guilt replacing anger. Price wasn’t wrong on any account.

He turned the corner to Lord Pembroke’s corridor and found his door open and room empty. He wondered if Lord Pembroke decided to join the younger family members in the drawing room rather than going directly to bed. He turned to head to the drawing room, and then saw Eric’s closed door. He walked to it slowly but stopped before his shadow had a chance to pass under it. After a few seconds waiting, he heard Eric laugh, and then Lord Pembroke. The sound of talking followed, though he couldn’t make out any words, and then even harder laughing. The following moments were quiet, and he pictured one touching the other tentatively, followed by their eyes closing and lips meeting. He felt more foolish than he had in a very long time. Foolish for thinking Lord Pembroke would have been waiting for him, and foolish for wanting Lord Pembroke’s time and attention at the expense of Price’s feelings. Even if nothing more than innocent conversation was happening behind Eric’s closed door, it was conversation that excluded him, and he felt more foolish still for ever imagining himself in a friendship shared between all three of them. He considered knocking, maybe just opening the door and pretending he assumed that Eric was alone. But if they wanted me there, he thought, and they knew I was bound to come up to dress Ted, they wouldn’t have shut me out.
He walked quickly back to the dorms, feeling the back of his eyes burn like they always did before tears came. Every door was closed with no light bleeding from underneath. He stood outside Price’s door, panting in an effort to prevent tears. He’d successfully isolated himself from all three of the men that evening, including the one he cared most about, who was likely under his covers, shedding tears that Thomas had yet again set into motion.

He looked at each door in the hallway to confirm, again, that no one was likely awake, then let himself into Price’s room.

Price was standing in his pajamas in the dark, looking out of his window. He jumped when Thomas entered, and Thomas was just as startled to find Price’s figure by the window rather than under the sheets. Thomas met Price by the window, the light from the snowy evening making Price look like an apparition before him.

“Come downstairs,” Thomas heard himself whisper. His heart was connected to his lips, bypassing his brain, and he wasn’t sure yet what he was asking.

“Now?”

“In a minute. Let me get down there first.”

“Downstairs where?”

“The boot room,” Thomas said before becoming a shadow as he passed back through the doorway into the hall.

Price timed exactly one minute, crept quietly down the hall, and then down the stairs. He found Thomas in the boot room as he said, standing in the corner opposite the door, looking like a pale apparition himself.

“You weren’t up there with Teddy very long,” Price whispered.

“Shut the door.”

Price complied, holding the knob carefully to avoid a click as it shut. “Did you want to talk about our argument?”

Thomas stayed in the corner. Price couldn’t see his face in the shadows, just the outline of his figure, hovering quietly across the small room.

“Thomas? Are we going to talk about it?”

“No,” Thomas said, his voice flat.

“Then we’re down here because…”

Thomas crossed the room slowly, the click of his heels hitting the floor especially loud as it cut through the silence. He cradled Price’s face in his hands and ran his thumbs across Price’s cheekbones. His breath was shallow, and Price could finally see his eyes, an icy light gray in the moonlight. He parted his lips and held them close to Price’s, his short breaths becoming ragged. “I need you. I need to feel good. Now.”

Price swallowed and looked at Thomas’s lips. “What are you planning to do with those?”

Thomas passed the tip of his tongue slowly over Price’s bottom lip, bringing a thumb from Price’s
cheekbone to his chin. He pulled Price’s chin down with his thumb, parting Price’s lips, and then
slipped his tongue inside. Price’s tongue still tasted of the chocolate-covered strawberries he’d
popped in his mouth throughout the evening. Thomas ran his hands from Price’s face down to his
narrow waist and slid them under his undershirt. He broke their kiss to pull Price’s shirt past his
arms and over his head, tossing it on the table behind them, then pulled Price’s pajama bottoms
down to the middle of his hips. He took a step back and admired how the shadows fell across
Price’s torso, especially the dark shadows by his hip bones, tempting Thomas to pull the bottoms
down further.

“What if we’re caught? There’d be no more warnings this time,” Price said, his breathing shallow
as well.

The shadow where Price’s neck met his shoulder looked especially enticing to Thomas. “Let them
fire me for all I care,” Thomas answered as he pulled Price toward him, sinking his lips into Price’s
neck.

Price moaned in appreciation of Thomas’s tongue on his skin. He untucked Thomas’s tie from his
waistcoat and tugged on it, pulling Thomas’s lips deeper into his neck. Thomas pulled back and
smiled as the sight of Price’s grip on his tie. He ran his fingers up to Price’s lips and let Price suck
two into his mouth. Thomas gave a low moan in response to Price’s sucking, then slid his fingers
slowly out of Price’s mouth and down the back of Price’s pajamas, squeezing his backside in both
hands. Price pushed his hips back as Thomas let his wet fingers wander, hoping they sought to find
their way inside. Thomas teased him instead, exploring, but not probing.

Price pushed his bottoms down to his thighs and took himself in his hand, pumping as he pushed
backward against Thomas’s fingers, trying to coax them inside. He let out a frustrated groan as
Thomas continued to tease him, then tugged on Thomas’s tie again and whispered in his ear,
“Don’t tease me, sugar. Take me.”

Thomas nuzzled his cheek against Price’s, trying to remember if Price had ever called him a pet
name before. “Am I your sugar?”


“Wait, are you hungry or horny?”

Price nibbled Thomas’s earlobe. “A little of each. I want to eat you up.”

Thomas pushed his hips against Price’s. “You taste like all the treats you ate this evening.”

Price pushed his hips against Thomas in return. “I want to taste the rest of you.”

“No, I’m tasting you first.” Thomas kissed Price once more, then pulled Price’s bottoms to his
ankles and waited for him to step out of them. He stood and looked at Price for a moment, then
grabbed him and hoisted him up in his arms. Price wrapped his legs around Thomas’s hips, his
arms around Thomas’s neck, and kissed him deeply, clinging to him so tightly that Thomas barely
had to hold him up himself.

Price broke the kiss and looked down at Thomas. “You’re strong,” he said as he rubbed his nose
against Thomas’s.

“Eh, you’re just light, especially without all of those heavy clothes on.”

“What about your heavy clothes?”
“It’s not time for that,” Thomas replied. He carried Price the few feet to the table and sat him on top.

Price laid back and rested his weight on his elbows as Thomas saddled up between Price’s spread legs. “What time is it now, then?”

Thomas bent at the waist and layed Price’s thighs over his shoulders. “For us to make up for fighting earlier,” he said, looking up at Price, his lips inches away from Price’s cock. “Let’s fight every night if it ends like this.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Maybe that’s why you instigate things.”

“Me, an instigator? Why, I never.”

Thomas licked the inside of Price’s thigh. “Troublemaker.”

“Not at all.”

Thomas licked the base of Price’s cock. “Naughty.”

“That one, maybe.” Price closed his eyes and put his head back as Thomas’s tongue moved lower, and lower, until he licked where Price had so desperately craved attention from Thomas’s fingers. Price laid all the way back on the table and put his arms above his head as he pulled his legs up higher. “Oh god, that feels so good, Thomas.”

Thomas popped his head up for a moment. “No, don’t call me by my name. Call me something fun again.”

Price laughed. “Like creampuff?”

Thomas smiled. “No, no, something with more sex appeal.” He kissed his way lower again and licked Price slowly.

Price rocked his hips, longing for Thomas to put something inside him - tongue, fingers, cock, anything he could get. “How about honey?” Price suggested, stretching his toes as Thomas licked him with a firmer tongue, “it’s fitting, since I’d love to lap up every sweet drop of yours.”

Thomas groaned and laid one long, last lick on Price. He stood and pulled Price further to the edge of the table, then ran his middle finger from Price’s knee, down the inside of thigh, and between his legs. “Yes, that’s much better,” he said, sliding his finger inside.

Price covered his mouth with both hands and wriggled, overcome with the need to cry out as his aching desire was finally met.

“Well aren’t you excited,” Thomas said, petting Price’s cock with the palm of his hand.

Price closed his eyes and gripped the edge of the table, grunting between clenched teeth. “You’re going to kill me, Thomas.”

“No, call me something else.”

Price laughed as he shivered. “Do you want to be my little peach? Ripe, juicy, dripping from my lips?”

“I think you’re the luscious little peach tonight,” Thomas said, wrapped his hand around Price while he pushed his finger deeper. “Are you ready to drip?”
“Not before you’ve been inside me.”

Thomas didn’t argue, unbuttoning his trousers as he met Price’s eyes. He positioned himself, then hooked his arms under Price’s knees, sliding inside as he pulled Price toward him. He stifled a moan and held on tight to Price’s legs, moving easily, thankful he was tall enough to take advantage of the table. In the past he would have enjoyed feeling powerful, fully dressed and in control while another man lay naked underneath him. However, looking down at Price, eyes closed and consumed by the rapture of their love making, Thomas felt like the one exposed. He’d let Price see every deep, dark part of himself, and the sweet, tender parts, too. He realized no man could truly claim to know all sides him except the one on the table, now trailing his fingers up his own body, all of his skin feeling electric as his excitement built.

“You really are such a sweet thing,” Thomas whispered.

“But really,” Price said running his fingertips across his chest, “but I want to be, even when I’m a sour little lemon.”

Thomas smiled. “More like lemonade.”

“Maybe we should drop the food references, though in fairness I am served to you on a table.” Price gasped at the end of his sentence as Thomas hit the perfect spot. “Yes, yes, yes, like that.”

Thomas wrapped his hand around Price, but Price moved Thomas’s hand away. “No, just keep going like this and I’ll be able to finish without that.”

“Without being touched…”

“Mmm hmm,” Price answered, gasping again.

“I don’t believe that’s possible.”

“Well shush and you’ll see that it is.”

Price ran his hands through his hair and let out a long, open-mouthed sigh. Thomas watched as Price’s cock grew harder, flexing each time he moaned. He slowed down, not changing his position, just moving more deliberately, and Price gasped with a throaty moan Thomas hadn’t heard from him before. Thomas kissed Price’s knee and moved a little faster, and Price grinned and moaned again.

“Is it going to work?”

“Shh! Yes.”

Thomas wanted to put his mouth on Price’s cock, throbbing and dripping precum as Price squirmed and rocked against him. It was one of the most tempting things he’d ever seen, and he began to wonder if he might finish before Price, who still seemed halfway between the real world and Heaven, and didn’t look like he was coming down anytime soon. Beads of sweat gathered on Thomas’s forehead, the clothes on his body and scene below him both heating him up. He tore off his jacket, then loosened his tie with quick, jerking motions. He wanted to rip every piece of clothing off, lay his body on Price’s, and let their sweat mix while Price grinded against him. His thoughts continued to become more carnal as he edged on orgasm.

“David, I don’t think I can hold out much longer.”

“Don’t wait. Enjoy. Then fill me with your fingers until it’s my turn.”
Thomas moaned softly. “I love when you say things like that.”

Price sat up on his elbow and gripped Thomas’s tie. “Mmm. I like every part of you inside me, my sweet,” he cooed. “Prick, fingers… tongue.”

Thomas shivered, remembering the sugary taste of sweets on Price’s tongue, then the salty sweat of his skin. He eyed Price’s untouched cock. “If I can’t lick you when it’s your turn, let me lick your fingers now.”

Price dropped Thomas’s tie and traced Thomas’s lips. “You want to suck me?”

“Yes,” Thomas breathed.

Price touched the tip of his finger to Thomas’s tongue. “Swallow me?”

“Mmm…” Thomas moaned, licking Price’s finger.

“Savoring the nectar from your dripping little peach?”

Thomas sucked Price’s finger into his mouth, imagining devouring the rest of him. It pushed him over the edge, joining Price somewhere unearthly, transported by the luxurious sensation that charged every part of him, even making his lips tingle. His pleasure was so intense that it nearly bordered on pain. He forced himself back to earth enough to stop himself from crying out.

As soon as his climax began to subside, he slid out of Price and slipped two fingers in, seeking the spot he’d found in the garage that pushed Price to ecstasy. Price shuddered and tucked his hands under his knees, pulling his legs further apart, encouraging Thomas to go deeper. Price’s eyes rolled back and he licked his upper lip, panting and moaning as Thomas followed Price’s silent request for him to go deeper still. Thomas took Price’s hand from under his knee and laced his fingers through Price’s. Price held onto Thomas’s hand tightly in return and rubbed his thumb against Thomas’s. He whimpered, tightening around Thomas’s fingers.

“Are you about to-”

“Yes, yes!”

Price squeezed Thomas’s hand and pressed his lips together, trying as Thomas had not to wake everyone in the house. Thomas looked on as Price’s cock flexed involuntarily, an urgent need for release taking over. He pulsed as he came in streams across his torso, unable to stop a few quick, high moans from escaping in the process. He looked down at himself, then up at Thomas, and then closed his eyes and went limp on the table.

Thomas chuckled and massaged Price’s hips. “Well, David. You proved me wrong.”

Price wiped sweat from his brow. “Ah, I love being able to say, ‘I told you so’.”

As Thomas came fully back to reality, his passion satiated, he no longer felt so cavalier about potentially getting caught, and even fired. He walked around the table to Price’s side. “I’ll clean you up,” he said, grabbing a folded rag from the counter, “and then you can head up first.”

Price closed his eyes and Thomas wiped him clean. “What brought all this on? There are other, less risky ways to make up, after all.”

Thomas ran his fingers from Price’s shoulder all the way to his toes. “As I said, I needed you.”
“You’re very lucky no one heard you needing me.”

“Don’t tempt fate, we’re not upstairs yet,” Thomas said, running his fingers back up to Price’s shoulders.

Price sat up and let Thomas help him down to the floor. “Well whatever the reason, I’m glad for it. I’m much less scared that I’ll lose you now,” he said as Thomas helped him back into his pajamas. “You wouldn’t have done this if you had intentions of leaving me.”

“Not that I have to prove myself to you,” Thomas said, buttoning and straightening himself.

“Of course you don’t.”

Thomas pulled Price into a hug, holding Price’s head to his chest. He rocked with him and rested his cheek on Price’s forehead. “But you make me, over and over.”

“I shouldn’t. I won’t again.”

Thomas patted Price’s bottom and let him go. “Yes you will.”

“Let’s not go back separately. It’s better to hide in plain sight.”

“And if we’re noticed?”

Price took one of Thomas’s cufflinks and put it in Thomas’s trouser pocket. “You say you lost your cufflink during the ball and we were looking for it.”

“Relatively believable.”

“That’s all it has to be.”

“You came up with that excuse rather quickly.”

Price kissed Thomas’s wrist where his cufflink was missing. “I’m wonderful at making excuses in order to make love.”

“As long as I benefit.”

“Only you, always,” Price said as he lead Thomas by the wrist back upstairs.

----------------------------------------------------

Lord Pembroke was roused from sleep by a knock at his door. He croaked as loud as his early morning voice could manage that he was coming and pulled himself from the cozy bed. He answered the door in just his pajama bottoms, hair tousled and cheeks rosy from sleep below warm, heavy covers. He was surprised to find that Thomas was the one knocking. “I wasn’t sure you were coming back,” he said, stepping back so Thomas could come in.

“I came last night,” Thomas said as he entered and shut the door behind himself, “but you weren’t here, so I left.”

Lord Pembroke stretched his arms above his head, then helped Thomas pull back the curtains. “I was down the hall. You could have knocked there.”

“I’m not welcome to go around knocking on doors up here.”
Lord Pembroke pulled back the last curtain and looked at Thomas. “But I was in your friend’s room. Surely you’d be welcome there.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Your friend. I know Eric is your friend. You could have knocked, we were enjoying each other’s company, sharing traveling stories.”

“Well I wouldn’t have much to share in that department, anyhow,” Thomas said curtly, “so I guess it’s good I left you both to it.

Lord Pembroke crossed the room to his dresser. “I thought perhaps he was your man,” he said, grabbing his cigarette case, “but he said he wasn’t. Though he confessed he wished he were.”

Thomas felt bitten by the words. “So you’re nosing around here about me? If so, you’re playing a very dangerous game.”

Lord Pembroke smiled and tried to tame his hair with his fingers. “I’m not. I saw the way he looked at you. At least I was only half wrong, he was your man, he just isn’t now.”

“I really don’t appreciate where this seems to be going.”

Lord Pembroke put two cigarettes between his lips and lit them both, then handed one to Thomas. “Relax, please. I’m coming off wrong. It’s a skill of mine, actually.”

Thomas accepted the cigarette but was still dubious. “If you’re trying to make a point, then please cut to it.”

Lord Pembroke approached Thomas as he took a drag. “You looked so handsome last evening. You look lovely in your livery, of course, but a suit,” Lord Pembroke said, raising his eyebrows, “well it was almost irresistible.”

“I’m sorry, but you’ll have to resist me,” Thomas said, taking a drag as well. “It’s a new year, but nothing else has changed, and I’m still very taken.”

“Yes, about that. I’m quite certain I know who you’re taken with. I’m not going to complicate this situation or risk a budding friendship over it, but I would like to say one thing.”

Thomas held his breath, then exhaled slowly. “Go on, then, I suppose. Say what you want to say.”

Lord Pembroke’s eyes took on a pensive, far-away look. He seemed both hesitant and vulnerable as he spoke. “Just that you should watch yourself,” he began carefully. “People may seem… committed. And honest. And deeply in love. They may even believe that they’re all of those things, but in reality, they’re not even capable of those kinds of emotions; not really. If you open yourself up to that kind of person, you may find your heart wracked and ruined in the end. I can tell you have a kind heart that doesn’t deserve destruction.”

Thomas’s heart felt like a wild bird in a cage at that moment, fluttering against his ribs. “I doubt someone could invent a love that intense if they didn’t truly feel it.”

“I would have said the same thing if I hadn’t lived it. I’m sorry I put that hurt on your lovely face just now, but it’s better than you finding yourself in my shoes.”

Thomas shook his head. “It’s different for me.”
Lord Pembroke nodded. “I really do hope that you’re right. Maybe lessons were learned. Maybe I’m too bitter and burned to see that they were.”

“I think that’s most likely the case.”

Lord Pembroke put his cigarette between his lips and went to the small desk in the corner of the room. He retrieved a piece of stationery and pencil, and jotted down a quick note. “That’s really all I’ll say on the matter. Let’s move on. We’ve established that, at the very least, we like one another, so please don’t be a stranger to me.” He handed over the paper, which listed his address and telephone number. “I like your friend, too. If you’re in London maybe the three of us could enjoy a night on the town. He could be your chaperone and make sure my hands don’t take on a mind of their own,” he added with a small smile.

Thomas took the paper and put it inside his waistcoat. “I don’t know if I’d take you up on that offer, but, as you’ve said before, never say never.”

Lord Pembroke looked relieved. “Yes. Keep that paper handy, you never know. I’ll be off after breakfast, and I’m driving Eric back with me. He really is quite lovely. Are you sure you don’t want him, either?”

“I’m certain, not to say it was an easy decision. What about you? Are you sure you don’t want him?”

“Never say never,” Lord Pembroke said with a chuckle, “but he’s no Thomas Barrow.”

Thomas put out his cigarette in Lord Pembroke’s ashtray. “So, shall I do what I came here to do and help you get dressed.”

Lord Pembroke closed his eyes and sighed. “No. Taking these bottoms off in front of you right now is probably the last thing I should do. Go on your way, let me make eyes at you on your way out the door, and do keep that paper handy, won’t you?”

Thomas smiled. “Alright. And I’ll even let you take my hand while I help you get into your car later.”

Lord Pembroke sighed again. “After watching you all night, I haven’t been able to get the image of us dancing together out of my head. Begone, enchanter. Leave me to remove my pajamas alone.”

Thomas thought Lord Pembroke was a bit of an enchanting site himself, disheveled and mostly undressed in the hazy morning light. “I’ll keep the paper handy,” he said. “Enjoy your alone time.”

“With pleasure,” Lord Pembroke said, making sultry eyes, just as he promised, as Thomas took his leave.
Chapter 28

Three weeks moved swiftly. Nora departed for school, followed by Lady Edith’s departure for London. Days later, when Lady Edith secured a nanny, Marigold was taken to London as well. Lady Grantham announced that the house would be opened in London for February, giving the family and staff something to look forward to. Downton was calm and quiet with the holidays past and three of the house’s residents gone so shortly thereafter.

Thomas was calm and quiet as well, preferring to be alone in his room when he was off duty. Price gave Thomas his space, still feeling confident in their relationship after their meeting in the boot room. Thomas had taken a significant risk, and it meant even more to Price than the gold chain Thomas placed around his neck on Christmas. After all, Eric and Lord Pembroke were both easily accessible in the gallery that night, and yet in Thomas’s need for an intimate, emotional connection, he chose a clandestine union with Price instead.

Miss Baxter was more concerned with Thomas’s sudden desire to be alone. He didn’t spend as much time chatting with the kitchen staff, reading the paper by the fire, or even smoking in the courtyard. He was always heading up to the dorms, shut up in his bedroom. He was pleasant but quiet during staff meals and tea, not jumping into conversation with a witty remark or wisecrack like usual. He seemed distant and deep in his own mind, a combination she thought never ended well for him.

She followed him to the courtyard before breakfast one morning when he decided to have a smoke outside. The weather was finally above freezing, and rain overnight began to melt the piles upon piles of snow. Water streamed between the bricks under their feet, puddles forming on the ground where bricks were broken or missing. The air smelled fresh and wet, teasing of spring that was still months away.

Thomas gave Miss Baxter a half smile and lit his cigarette. “Felt like getting some air, too?”

“I came out here for you, actually.”

“For me?” Thomas asked, eyeing her playfully. “Hasn’t Mr. Molesley been keeping you occupied enough?”

Miss Baxter smiled. “Don’t change the subject. You’ve been distancing yourself, I can see it. Is everything alright? Is it your sister? Is it… anyone else?”

Thomas flicked ash to the ground and watched the swirling water take it away. “I’ve been working on watches in my room.”

“With all of your time?”

“Every minute I can get.”
“As a form of relaxation? Or distraction?”

Thomas shook his head. He squinted as the sun appeared, reflecting off the snow. “I know you’d never tell a soul, but I still have to ask that you keep what I say to yourself.”

“As you said, you know I will.”

Thomas took a drag. “I need all the practice I can get. I’m leaving in March for good. I’m moving to London. I’ll be working in David’s brother’s shop, fixing watches.”

Miss Baxter could scarcely believe Thomas’s words. “Thomas, that's incredible!”

“It’s not all that,” he said, smiling bashfully.

“My, but it is. You’re taking a huge step in your life, outside of what’s comfortable and familiar. How many people would strike out on their own in that way?”

“Lady Edith has,” Thomas replied, answering Miss Baxter’s rhetorical question.

“And that’s wonderful for her, but Thomas, she lives a charmed life. There will always be a net to catch her, no matter what risks she takes. People like us, we have no nets. Yet despite that, here you are, walking the wire alone into the unknown, eyes straight ahead. How proud you must be of yourself.”

Thomas laughed. “You’re loopy.”

“Tell me more about the job. What will you be doing? Where will you be living?”

“I’ll be David’s brother’s assistant, though he doesn’t want to call me that. He says I’ll be his ‘associate,’” Thomas said, smiling at the term. “He’ll delegate much of the repairs to me so he can focus on making the watches himself, until I’m skilled enough for both. As for where I’ll live, I don’t know yet. I figured while we’re all in London I can make some calls and visits.”

Miss Baxter grabbed Thomas’s shoulder and kissed his cheek. “If you’re not proud of yourself, I have enough pride for us both.”

Thomas met Miss Baxter’s eyes, seeing the look of pride his mother might have if she were on earth to see him. “Thank you, Phyllis. Thank you for always being loopy about me.”

The back door opened and Mrs. Hughes took a step outside. “I’m glad I found both of you. You have some busy days ahead.”

“Why’s that?” Thomas asked, tipping his hat up to better see Mrs. Hughes.

“Because Anna and Mr. Bates are a bit preoccupied this morning, and come later today, they’ll be preoccupied for a good time to come.”

Thomas put his cigarette out and followed Miss Baxter quickly up the steps. “That’s a rather poetic way to say she’s in labor.”

“Polite and poetic terms are much more pleasant than that one.”

“Childbirth isn’t very polite or pleasant, Mrs. Hughes.”

Miss Baxter smiled as she removed her coat and hat, but Mrs. Hughes tskd. “Mr. Barrow, can we please not have a lecture about the particulars of,” she dropped her voice to a whisper, “childbirth.”
Thomas hung up his coat and hat once Miss Baxter was finished. “I’ve been in the same house when my sister had her boys. She certainly wasn’t shouting anything poetic when she was in the throws of,” Thomas whispered, “childbirth.”

“I won’t have you sully this moment,” Mrs. Hughes said, walking away before Thomas could see her smile.

Thomas walked Miss Baxter to the servant’s hall for breakfast. “I’m sure you’re looking forward to Miss Benham’s arrival next week. Dressing two ladies at a time is a bit of a burden.”

“And I’m sure you’re looking forward to some time out of your livery.”

“Not much time. I’m sure Mr. Bates will be back shortly.”

Miss Baxter pulled out the empty chair next to Price and looked up at Thomas. “Yes, but I’m sure he won’t go to London now. It’s a little over a week away, he can’t leave Anna with a tiny baby for a month.”

Thomas slid Miss Baxter’s chair in as she sat and then went to his seat, processing the idea that he may spend his last month as valet before he left service. He looked down at his livery, wondering what it would feel like to wear it for the last time.

Price watched Thomas eat the simple breakfast of toast with leftover ham from the family’s dinner, transfixed by the way Thomas’s hands moved and the working of his jaw as he ate. They hadn’t laid hands on one another since the boot room, and his longing for Thomas’s touch was spilling over into the daylight hours. He’d been able to keep it in his bedroom until that point, but the simple flexing of Thomas’s neck as he swallowed started to give Price impure thoughts. He ate his toast while devising a way to get Thomas alone, and came up with an idea so exciting that it made him giddy. He held his teacup to his lips for the rest of breakfast to hide his smile.

Bells rang, and Mr. Carson gave Thomas direction to tend to Lord Grantham, and to bring the news that Mr. Bates would not be back within the next day at least. Thomas didn’t hear Mr. Carson say his name the first time, and looked up from his plate slightly dazed, lost in sentimental thoughts about the good experiences he had while in his livery. He finally responded, following Miss Baxter upstairs.

Immediately after breakfast, Price followed Mr. Carson to his office and asked him for a moment of his time. Price closed the door before joining Mr. Carson at the desk.

“What is it you need, David?”

“Two things please, Mr. Carson. The first, while I anticipate no awkwardness or challenges, you should know that Miss Benham and I have a past. I wanted you to hear it from me before she started.”

Mr. Carson leaned forward in his chair. “What kind of past?”

“We were engaged,” Price said, letting his shoulders slump, “but she broke my heart. It was years ago, and I’m completely over her now.” Price took a breath before continuing, hoping he sounded convincing. “We spoke while she was here, and both we agreed that no one else should know our story, and that we’ll each behave as professionals.”

Mr. Carson sat back, a bit bewildered. “And with everything that’s happened recently, you waited for her to be hired, and then took weeks to tell me?”
“I confided about it to Mr. Barrow, and he said it was wrong not to tell you. He was right, so here I am.”

“Well as you might have imagined, I’ll have to tell Mrs. Hughes.”

Price nodded solemnly. “Certainly. But please, can you ask her not to say anything to Lily? I mean, Miss Benham. I promised her I wouldn’t tell.”

“I don’t know, David. I’ll consider it. I’m afraid to ask now, but what was the second thing?”

Price blinked, as if he were clearing the heartache over Lily from his mind. “Yes, the second thing. I wanted to have a chat about Mr. Barrow.”

“A chat? Why, what did he do?”

“Oh he didn’t do a thing,” Price began, leaning forward as though he had something to share in confidence. “It’s just, he told me about the situation - the one you asked him to share with me about the other footman. He told me right after the whole little scene I caused, which I’m still dreadfully sorry about. Only, since he told me, he’s been extremely distant. He’s afraid to be my friend now.”

Mr. Carson sighed over the burden of having to deal with the staff’s emotions. “Never once did I say he couldn’t be your friend.”

“I’m sure you didn’t, but that’s how he took it. He’s been quardening himself off in his room, you might have noticed. I think he’s depressed.”

Mr. Carson pulled his chair closer to the desk. “David, I’m not going to sound the alarm because Mr. Barrow wants to spend his free time as he pleases.”

“And I don’t ask you to. I just thought maybe you could find a way to reassure him somehow, show you trust him not to make the same mistakes. I’m sure in light of the information about Miss Benham, he most certainly won’t get any wrong ideas about my intentions. If you could just find a way, he would be comfortable being my friend again.” Price looked into Mr. Carson’s eyes imploringly. “Couldn’t a man like him use a friend, Mr. Carson?”

Mr. Carson waved his hand and closed his eyes. “Yes, yes. He shouldn’t be punished for your lapse in judgement, anyhow. I’ll think of some way to let him know that I have no concerns about your friendship.”

“Thank you, Mr. Carson,” Price said. “I’m sure a happy Mr. Barrow will be a good thing when he’s dressing Lord Grantham in London.”

“In London?”

Price recalled Miss Baxter’s words that he’d overheard at breakfast. “Well, I assumed Mr. Bates wouldn’t be running off to London just a week or so after the baby was born, leaving Anna with a newborn and no hands to help.”

Mr. Carson straightened papers on his desk while thinking. “We don’t just give men a month’s leave of absence for having a child.”

“He could watch over things here, couldn’t he?”

Mr. Carson considered Price’s suggestion. “I was planning to do that, but suppose if Mr. Bates took
on that responsibility, I could come to London this time.”

Price smiled. “Everything’s working out for the best then, it seems. Speaking of London, is that the itinerary?” Price asked, pointing to one of the piles on Mr. Carson’s desk.

“It is.”

“May I?” Price asked reaching his hand toward the paper.

Mr. Carson shrugged. “You’ll find nothing exciting among those papers, but be my guest if you really want to have a look.”

Price nodded and took the pile. He flipped through the pages and stopped at one. “Well I have an easy way for you to show Mr. Barrow that you trust him,” Price said, placing the page at the top of the pile. He put the stack on the desk and turned it to face Mr. Carson. “You could assign us as roommates.”

Mr. Carson looked over the paper, which listed Thomas in his own room, as he would have been in charge without Mr. Carson present. He pushed the pile back to the side of the desk. “And you’re sure you want to share a room with him? I know you’re friendly, but you also know his predisposition.”

Price smiled. “I have no concerns that Mr. Barrow will get the wrong impression about being roommates.”

Mr. Carson slapped his hands on his thighs as he stood. “Alright, if you think that will help, and it will bring Mr. Barrow around a bit, then I’ll update the list accordingly. Of course, I’m sure you know not to say anything to him. It might be confusing, you asking for a room with him alone.”

“I won’t say anything, he can see the list whenever you would’ve normally shared it with him. Thank you, Mr. Carson.”

Price tried not to skip out of the door he left. He decided he truly wouldn’t tell Thomas. The look on Thomas’s face would be worth keeping the secret another week.

The telephone was closely monitored that day, everyone eager for news of the Bates’ baby’s arrival. It wasn’t until after the servant’s supper that the phone in Mr. Carson’s office finally rang, bringing good news that a healthy baby boy had finally arrived.

Two days later came another arrival as Lily entered through the back door, two suitcases in hand, already dressed in her black frock for work. Thomas happened to be in the hallway when she arrived. He congratulated her on her new job, took her bags, and lead her to her room.

Lily chuckled as she followed Thomas up the stairs. “The under-butler carrying my luggage, what a warm welcome.”

“I carry luggage often.”

“Not servant’s luggage, I bet.”

Thomas grinned. “What should I have done? Let you carry it yourself?”

“Yes,” Lily laughed, “no one of your rank would have carried a bag for me at Meadowbrook.”

Thomas looked over his shoulder at Lily. “I’ve heard about the reputation there.”
“Downton has a reputation, too, and you seem to be a shining example.”

They reached the women’s dorms and Thomas stopped at the door. “What kind of reputation is that?”

Lily had a spirited gleam in her eye, and she smiled as she removed her hat. “An agreeable reputation.”

“You didn’t seem to find me all that agreeable when we first met.”

“I was anticipating an interrogation.”

“And now you find me agreeable?”

Lily looked upward while she pretended to consider the question. “Well you did give Mrs. Hughes some kind of signal that ended with me getting an offer that same day. And now you’ve carried my heavy cases up the steps.”

Thomas shrugged. “All of the other candidates were insufferable.”

“Oh, I see,” Lily said with a grin, “I’m the best of the worst?”

Thomas opened the door and lifted the bags again. “They would have sooner hired no one than someone mediocre, so you’re not the best of worst. Not at all.”

Lily followed Thomas into the hallway and to her new room. “And you decided in the few minutes we spoke that I wasn’t mediocre?”

“I did,” Thomas said simply. He put the bags down on the bed and clasped his hands behind his back. “I’ll let Mrs. Hughes know you’ve arrived. Spend some time settling in, and then I’m sure she’ll put you with Miss Baxter to start your training.”

Lily hung her hat on the peg and spun around once, taking in the room. “So much brighter than where I was,” she said more to herself than Thomas. She let Thomas help her out of her coat, then followed him to the door. “Thank you for giving Mrs. Hughes that signal. I can already tell I’ll like it here.”

“You’re much peppier than when I last met you.”

“I’m happy to be here. And to not be there. This is the honeymoon period, though,” she said with a little shrug. “Give me a week and I’ll sober up.”

Thomas nodded. “That sounds more like it.”

“Why? You’d prefer it if I were spiky?”

“It would be more fun,” Thomas said cheerfully, “and I liked the idea of not being the only spiky member of staff.”

Lily raised an eyebrow. “Well, if you’re giving me permission, I can speed up the honeymoon period and go straight to cynical.”

“Perfect, now I don’t have to tell Mrs. Hughes to fire you.”

“Goody, because I’d prefer not to crawl back to Meadowbrook with my tail between my legs.”
“Don’t tempt fate,” Thomas said, raising his eyebrows as well. “I need at least a week-long trial before I decide whether or not to run you out of here.”

Lily gave a single, quick nod of her head. “That sounds reasonable, Mr. Barrow.”

Thomas jogged back down the steps with a smile on his face, his only regret that he would have such limited time enjoying banter with Lily before they were both on to their next jobs.

Price met Thomas at the bottom of the stairs. “Mr. Carson says I can visit Anna and Mr. Bates during our tea this afternoon. Will you come?”

Thomas shook his head. “I doubt they’d want me to come.”

“If you show up and they don’t want you there, you can leave.”

“Won’t that be a little awkward?”

Price shrugged in response.

“Speaking of awkward things, I just delivered your wife to her new bedroom.”

Price shushed Thomas. “Don’t say things like that, please, Thomas. I promised her.”

“What are you going to do to stop me?”

“Don’t tease me, either!”

Thomas smiled. “Yes, I will go with you to the Bates’s.”

“I recant my offer.”

“Sorry, too late, Mr. Benham. I’m your date for the afternoon.”

Price huffed and turned to leave, but Thomas caught his arm.

“Wait. One question.”

“Yes, what is it?”

Thomas leaned in closer. “What was it like kissing her?”

“Oh my god,” Price groaned. He pulled his arm away and left Thomas in the hallway.

They met up again in the afternoon for their visit to the Bates’s, both with umbrellas to guard against the threatening sky. Every day that week brought at least a bit of rain, but the clouds looked like they intended to get quite angry before the afternoon was over.

“Seriously, I’m dying to know,” Thomas said, poking Price’s side with the tip of his folded umbrella.

“What?”

“What it was like kissing her.”

Price pushed Thomas’s shoulder. “I don’t care if no one’s around to hear it, I still don’t want to talk about it.”
“It’s killing me, I need the details.”

“What kind of details are you hoping for? We kissed. It didn’t magically change me into a different kind of man, and so we didn’t get married.”

Thomas spun the umbrella in his hand and held it by its curved handle, swinging it as they walked. “I’ve never kissed a woman. What’s different about it?”

Price looked up at Thomas. “You’re legitimately curious?”

“I am.”

Price pictured the scene, one he had tried not to picture for a very long time. “I didn’t find her attractive. It was like kissing a relative.”

“No, I mean what did it feel like. What felt different?”

Price gestured with his arms while searching for an answer. “I don’t know. Their bodies are different, not the kind of body I want in my arms.”

“Well we’re not talking about her body, we’re talking about her lips.”

Price blushed.

“... we’re not talking about her body, are we?”

“It was only kissing. I just don’t like to think about how the kissing went beyond lips.”

“How much further?”

Price smiled sheepishly.

“How much further? Lower than here?” Thomas asked, pointing at his neck.

Price nodded.

“Lower?” Thomas asked, pointing to his chest.

Price nodded.

Thomas pointed to his hips silently, and Price nodded again.

“Which one of you was doing the kissing?”

“Mostly her,” Price said, furrowing his brow at the memory. “I closed my eyes and tried to imagine things that would make me able to… participate… but I couldn’t force it. As if she deserved that, to spend her life with a man who had to close his eyes to accept her kisses.”

Thomas opened his umbrella as a light drizzle began to fall. He took Price by the elbow and pulled him in under the umbrella, then held it up for them both. “That doesn’t sound very pleasant. I’m sorry for bringing it up.”

“You were just curious. For the record, her lips were the softest I’ve ever felt, and it wasn’t a physically unpleasant experience.” Price smiled up at Thomas from under his hat brim. “Was that the kind of detail you were hoping for?”
Thomas let out a quick laugh as he looked down at Price. “I don’t know what I expected you to say. I’m just so fascinated by the whole thing, now that I know a bit about her.”

“What’s so fascinating about it?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Think about it and tell me.”

Thomas listened to the wet gravel crunch under their feet as he thought and walked. “It’s making me wonder, what if I had found a girl like her, someone I connected with easily? Not physically, obviously, but someone who could have been at least a companion. What if that person would’ve been willing to make an arrangement? Get married, live together, even have children, all as friends.”

“That all sounds extremely weird, and what would she gain from it?”

Thomas shrugged. “Stability? Friendship? Maybe someone who isn’t interested in more than that, but still wanted a family.”

“You have companionship in me. Not just me, many others now.”

Thomas took a deep breath of cool, damp air. “But I can’t have children with you.”

Price nodded. “Walking to see this new baby has me thinking those kind of thoughts as well.”

“Hmm. You’re right. It’s not your Lily that has me thinking.”

When they arrived at the Bates’s, Price knocked while Thomas stood just behind him, ready to depart if he wasn’t welcome. Mr. Bates opened the door with tired eyes but a wide smile to greet them both. He held the door as Price stepped inside. “I didn’t expect you, Mr. Barrow.”

Thomas remained just outside the door. “David asked me to join, but this is a private affair, so I understand if you’d rather I go.”

Mr. Bates stepped back from the door and waved Thomas inside. “Of course I wouldn’t rather you go.”

Price and Thomas each shook Mr. Bates’s hand with congratulations, then removed their hats and coats. Thomas set his umbrella against the doorjamb as Price headed for the stairs up to the nursery.

“Ah ah ah,” Thomas said after Price. “Wash your hands first.”

“Huh?”

“You’re not touching a baby without washing your hands,” Thomas said as he headed for the kitchen sink.

Mr. Bates and Price smiled at one another, and then Price followed Thomas.

“How’s the mother doing?” Thomas asked as he rubbed a bar of soap between his palms.

“Tired,” Mr. Bates said with a sigh. “I’m going back up to the house tomorrow, and the midwife offered to come back to help here and there. It’s a heavy lift alone.”
Price accepted the bar of soap from Thomas as they both scrubbed their hands under the running water. “I have a half day tomorrow, I can come. I’m sure many of us can find time to come down. It’s not that far, a quick visit to lend a hand is easy.”

“You can make that offer to Anna directly. Nothing I say right now seems to land very well.”

Thomas chuckled. “It’s fun, isn’t it? Being the post-birth punching bag? I played that role for my sister’s first and second babies, when her husband was traveling for business both times. I realized by the third baby that his travel plans weren’t a coincidence.”

Mr. Bates chuckled. “If there’s a next time, I’ll be on a train to somewhere else, and you can be here.” He led Thomas and Price up the stairs, then had them wait in the hall while he explained that the two of them were there to visit.

Anna perked up and called to them. “Please, come in!”

Thomas followed Price inside. Anna sat in the rocking chair, pulled close to the window that boasted the cozy seat. Her new son was swaddled carefully, sleeping soundly in her arms. Thomas and Price each met Anna’s eyes first, then stepped beside her to get a look at the baby’s face. They stood silently, drinking in the new life below them.

Anna looked up at Thomas and Price. “Do you want to hold him?”

“You go first, David,” Thomas said, not taking his eyes from the little face in the swaddle.

Anna directed Price to sit in the window seat. He removed his jacket so that he could hold the baby more easily, and then Mr. Bates transferred the little bundle from Anna’s arms to Price’s.

Price held his breath, afraid the new, warm little infant in his arms might be too much for his heart. He hadn’t seen a baby quite that young, not even his niece and nephew. No one since his own brother, when he was just a tiny tot himself. The baby felt impossibly small and light. He stirred in his swaddle, making tiny chirping sounds, and then settled in the crook of Price’s arm.

“What’s his name?” Thomas asked as he looked down into Price’s arms.

“His first name’s John, after his father,” Anna said, “and his middle name is David, after the man we hope will be his godfather.”

Price kept his eyes on the baby, now afraid to even look up.

“Would you, David?” Mr. Bates asked.

Price felt his chin tremble despite his best efforts. “Of course. I can’t believe you’d include my name in his.”

“You can thank Mr. Barrow,” Anna said. “When I heard his nephew was named for him, it made me think about how you should have a namesake, and then how really, you’re as close to family as anyone to me. To us. And now in a way, you are.”

Price sniffled. Thomas began to move his hand to Price’s shoulder to comfort him, then thought better of it.

“Why don’t you hold him?” Price asked Thomas. “I don’t want to soak him in tears.”

Thomas didn’t need to be asked twice. He took his jacket off as Price had, then squeezed in next to
Price and carefully took the baby into his arms. “Hello young man,” he whispered as the baby wiggled to get comfortable.

Price leaned his shoulder against Thomas’s as though he were doing it to get a better look at the baby, and not to simply feel Thomas beside him.

Thomas nudged his finger into the swaddling and let the baby grab hold. He bounced his arms lightly and hummed, completely absorbed by the moment, thinking of nothing other than what it was like to hold and rock a sleeping newborn. Price wanted to close his eyes and rest his cheek on Thomas’s shoulder, soothed by the humming just as much as the baby was.

“Do you want to hold him again?” Thomas whispered.

Price looked at Thomas’s eyes, which were locked on the baby’s restful face. “No, it’s alright. You enjoy him.”

They stayed long enough to keep Anna company while she had tea, Thomas keeping the baby soothed until Anna’s arms were free again. On the walk back to Downton, Price didn’t strike up conversation. Thomas looked more peaceful than Price had ever seen him, and Price didn’t want to disrupt whatever pleasant thoughts were swirling in Thomas’s mind.

--------------------------------------------

At Lily’s first supper that evening, she answered numerous questions from around the table about herself, her last employer, and her first day. She had chosen a seat next to Price. Here and there throughout the meal, Price and Lily whispered things under their breath to one another and either rolled their eyes at the other, or laughed genuinely. Sitting across from the pair, Thomas could see how Price would have thought it once possible to make a life with her, getting so far as to buy her a ring.

“How did you get on with Lady Mary?” Thomas asked as he passed Lily a basket of warm dinner rolls.

Lily selected a roll and handed the basket to Price. “She’s delightful, very easy to get on with indeed. It sounds like she’ll miss Anna quite a bit, so I hope I can fill Anna's shoes in the meantime.”

“You’d overfill them,” Price whispered. “Your feet are twice the size of hers.”

Lily narrowed her eyes but smiled. “There’s a saying about big feet,” Lily whispered back, “but it doesn’t apply to you and your tiny toes.”

“There’s no correlation.”

“Yes there is, David. Yes there is.”

Thomas smiled while he chewed. “What’s going on over there? Are you two bickering?”

Lily nibbled her dinner roll. “David said he thinks I’ll more than fill Anna’s shoes. Such a nice compliment.”

“Lily’s fantastic at filling shoes,” Price added.

After supper, Thomas planned to go straight to his room to work on watches, but changes his mind when Price and Lily settled in front of the fire to play a board game that belonged to Lily.
“What is it?” Thomas asked, standing over Price’s shoulder.

“Ludo,” Lily answered. “Sit and play.”

“What’s the object?” Thomas asked, still hovering.

Lily pointed at the chair between her and Price. “Well, if you sit, I can tell you the rules.”

“It’s mostly a game of luck,” Price said, knowing Thomas wouldn’t risk wasting his time if the game sounded boring. “It’s still fun competition.”

“Eh, I don’t enjoy games of chance. I prefer games requiring skill.”

Lily set up the board for two players, then rolled the dice. “What kind of games do you like?”

Price chuckled. “I think he’d prefer the kind of games you play at a table in a bar.”

“Oh, I see,” Lily said, moving her piece on the board. “You’re a gambling man?”

“When the mood strikes,” Thomas replied. He watched as Price rolled the dice and grunted when he didn’t roll a favorable combination.

“When does the mood strike you?” Lily asked, rolling a combination of her own that made Price grunt again.

Thomas sat down in the seat between Lily and Price. “When I have more money in my pocket than I have lately.”

“Then you should settle for playing games of chance in the servant’s hall,” Lily said. “They’re free, and the company’s pleasant.”

Price pumped his fist as he finally rolled the numbers he needed. “I don’t know about the company, but at least the games are free.”

“Cheeky,” Lily said, scooping the dice into her hand. She handed the dice to Thomas. “This game isn’t fair competition, I’m destroying David. Let’s start over. Mr. Barrow, you’re playing.”

“Don’t try arguing with her,” Price said, “you won’t win.”

“Then I won’t argue,” Thomas said, shaking the dice in his fist while Lily set up the board.

--------------------------------------------

Though Mr. Bates assisted, the duty of packing for Lord Grantham was Thomas’s responsibility as it was his charge to care for every item once they were in London. A month of clothing and accessories for Lord Grantham added up to more items than Thomas had owned in his entire life, and it took days of coordination to ensure everything was accounted for properly. He folded, hung, wrapped, and arranged with great care, inspecting each item to make sure it was perfect prior to packing. The last thing he wanted was to be blamed for an item’s damage en route to London.

On the train, Thomas took a seat and waited for Price to join him, but Lily slipped into the seat beside him first.

“Is this seat taken?” she asked after she was already settled.

“It is now, yes,” Thomas said, barely perceptible irritation in his voice. He had imagined the train
ride beside Price, sneaking a stroke of his hand now and then.

They arrived in a haze of fog, made souper by steam churning from under the train’s hissing undercarriage. Thomas waited on the platform and checked each case and bag as it came out of the train. He held his clipboard and pencil proudly as passers-by noted the stacks of expensive and important luggage.

The trip from train station to house involved a convoy of cars, the servants going ahead of the family so that they would be waiting when the Crawleys arrived. Thomas had been the main servant in charge on the last few trips to London, as Mr. Carson was always more comfortable keeping an eye on things back at the Abbey. He was a little regretful that he wouldn’t be head of the staff while they were there, and was pleased when Mr. Carson handed him several pages clipped together of activities he could help coordinate.

Mr. Carson handed over the papers as they stepped onto the sidewalk outside of the house. “Mr. Barrow, send everyone to their rooms first, and then right back down to help with the house.”

Thomas flipped through the papers until he found the room assignments, and reviewed them twice over, sure he misread the pairings. He pointed at the women and paired them up, then the men, and said as casually as possible, “and David, we’re in room C.”

Price nodded and grabbed his bags from the car, giving Thomas a quick look before going inside. Thomas gathered his suitcase and followed the other servants up the narrow stairwell that lead from the kitchen to the servant’s quarters. It made the servant’s accommodations at Downton look palatial. The stairwell was just wide enough for two people to pass, the hallway barely earning the title of a hall, and the rooms were the size of the servant’s bathrooms at Downton. The smallest rooms had bunk beds. Room C had a short dresser, hooks on the wall, and two narrow beds, separated by a single, small nightstand adorned with a lantern.

“They couldn’t even give us a lamp?” Price commented, tossing his bags onto a bed.

Thomas shut the door. “That’s what you have to say about our sleeping arrangements? That the lighting isn’t up to your standards?”

Price placed his hat on a hook and smiled at Thomas. “Are you pleased?”

“Am I pleased? You say that like you had something to do with it.”

Price put on a heavy-lidded, dreamy look. “Mmm… maybe I did,” he said with a kittenish growl.

Thomas grabbed Price firmly by the waist and pulled their bodies together, eliciting a playful gasp from Price. “Do I even want to know what kind of scheme you devised to pull this off?”

“Nothing too outrageous, though I would’ve said or done just about anything for this opportunity,” he said, the heavy-lidded look no longer a put-on.

Thomas drank Price in with a wide, open-mouth smile. “You still manage to surprise me, David.”

Price stroked Thomas’s cheek slowly and gazed at his lips. “Will you be my valet tonight? These clothes are so complicated. I need a skilled hand to help me undress.”

Thomas swayed side to side, enticed by the image of him slowly undressing Price in their private room. “Don’t torment me.”

“Oh, poor dear, are you suffering? Tell me, what might help alleviate your pain?”
“If you’d been able to alleviate anything recently, I wouldn’t be in such pain.”

Price kissed Thomas so delicately that their lips barely touched, giving Thomas just the hint of warm, soft lips that longed to taste the rest of him. “I’ll soothe whatever’s aching, I promise.”

“Tell me how,” Thomas whispered.

“I’m sorry, there’s a lot of work to do, my love. You’ll just have to ponder the ‘how’ for the rest of the day.”

Thomas touched his lips to Price’s, even more lightly than Price had touched his. He closed his eyes and breathed, parting his lips and readying his tongue, but not going further. Price leaned into Thomas, but Thomas pulled away quickly. “Sorry, there’s work to do,” he said, patting Price’s bottom before breaking away completely.

They went downstairs, both eager for the day to move as quickly as possible so that they could reunite in room C at night. Thomas’s day was mostly dedicated to unpacking all the items he’d so carefully packed just days before. It was almost meditative work, and his mind had hours to meander through thoughts and memories.

One memory kept creeping up to the front of his mind, one he hadn’t allowed himself to recall in years; the first time he shared a room in the London house. It was his first year as footman, and he was paired with Lord Grantham’s valet at the time, a man named Mr. Abram. They paid each other little mind at Downton. Thomas found Mr. Abram plain and stodgy, and Mr. Abram found Thomas smug and smart-mouthed. Mr. Abram was a decade older, half a head taller, and a bit heavier; not just with muscle, but soft around the middle, too. Thomas’s first impression of Mr. Abram was that he was likely attractive once, but his seemingly uninteresting existence had dulled his features over time. Mr. Abram mostly ignored Thomas, thinking him just another handsome footman hired to patter around Downton, whose main purpose was to brighten up a room much like a decorate vase or tapestry.

They spent their first few days as roommates indifferent to one another, just as they were at Downton. One evening, Thomas made an offhanded comment, and Mr. Abram lobbed a witty response back so quickly that Thomas couldn't help chuckling. The brief moment made each drop their guard, and as more days passed, they began to enjoy and even look forward to one another’s company.

Mr. Abram recognized much more quickly than Thomas that he wanted to enjoy Thomas’s company in another way. It took Thomas some time to see beyond his perception of Mr. Abram’s appearance. So what if he was soft in the middle, Thomas eventually thought, or that he had deepening smile lines at the corners of his hazel eyes. Thomas imagined that being wrapped in Mr. Abram’s thick arms might be cozy, especially with kind hazel eyes smiling down at him.

Mr. Abram had the opposite challenge, and had to overcome seeing Thomas as just another cookie-cutter young footman. He was actually a unique beauty, Mr. Abram began to realize, one that would be worth getting to know beyond his looks. Though he figured out early on that Thomas was attracted to men, he never thought to put himself in the running, not even after he saw the potential for friendship. But still, he decided to drop a hint just to see where it might land.

Mr. Abram left a correspondence from an admirer unfolded on a small stack of other letters, and left the stack on his bed while he went to wash up for the night. From what he knew of Thomas, he figured Thomas’s curiosity would make him sneak a peek at the letter, and it would tell him everything he needed to know. When he came back from the wash room, Thomas was on his bed reading a book, but he seemed to be breathing rapidly, and he didn’t speak or look up from the
pages for the rest of the night.

Thomas thought about the letter for days, wondering if maybe he misunderstood it - but no, it was signed by a man, that was clear. Then he wondered about the glances he received from Mr. Abram during the day, but then again, maybe he was making too much of them. Every conversation, every glance, every gesture, it all seemed to indicate that Mr. Abram was curious to know what it was like to be held in Thomas’s arms, to look down into Thomas’s blue-gray eyes. But that would all be too convenient, Thomas thought. A man he wasn’t just simply attracted to, but a man he respected, who seemed to respect him in return, and who lived in the very same house. Who, for the next few days, would be in the very same room.

While taking his bath one evening, Thomas accepted that he wasn’t misreading messages from Mr. Abram. He pictured all the little looks and accidental touching from Mr. Abram, and couldn’t help closing his eyes, letting his hands explore his own body. After a few minutes alone in the bath, his eyes flew open and he stopped, deciding he would let Mr. Abram’s hands do the exploring instead.

Thomas barely took time to dry himself and returned to their shared room, clad in his robe, and locked the door after shutting it. Mr. Abrams looked up from the newspaper spread over his lap, curious why Thomas turned the lock. He never turned the lock.

Thomas walked slowly to the foot of Mr. Abram’s bed, breathing as heavily as he had after reading the letter. His desire for passion that evening burned so intensely that Mr. Abram’s felt it instantly upon looking in Thomas’s smoldering eyes. Wordlessly, Thomas untied the belt of his robe and let it fall open, and then let the robe fall from his shoulders, onto the floor. He approached Mr. Abram, not breaking his gaze, and sat on the edge of the bed. He let Mr. Abram take him in, and then tilted his head back as Mr. Abram let his hands wander just as Thomas imagined in the bath. Only it was better than in his imagination.

He’d given Mr. Abram too little credit. The pleasure he received that evening was several times more affectionate and intense than any man he had been with until that point. The others had been mostly young and cheeky like himself, or if they were older, they were just looking for a good time. No one before wanted to go as slowly as he wanted to, or as softly, or as passionately. He finally realized what the term ‘making love’ really meant.

Their fling turned into an affair, and then later, a relationship. The secret was kept easily. No one suspected for a moment that Mr. Abram was the type to desire another man. They went on for a year, living and working together, finding ways to see each other privately as often as their circumstance would allow.

The staff was woken one evening, just after midnight, and summoned to the servant’s hall. Mr. Carson announced regretfully that while out earlier that evening, Mr. Abram had been struck by a trolley and died in transit to the hospital. The staff gasped and clung to one another. Thomas backed away from the huddle and ran up the steps. He locked himself in the bathroom. Just like that, Mr. Abram was gone. They had nodded a goodbye in passing, and now that would be it, the last time Thomas would ever see Mr. Abram alive. He was so ill from the news that by the time he felt he could leave the bathroom, he had to crawl across the hall to his room. He laid on the floor in his bedroom, pressing his cheek to the wood. The idea of laying on a soft mattress seemed inappropriate. He would have been content to crawl down the stairs and outside, hoping maybe the ground would open and swallow him up, and he wouldn’t have to face the next morning.

The hardest thing about the loss was grieving in silence. No one else even knew that they were friends, let alone lovers. He didn’t go to the funeral for fear of losing control over his emotions and divulging the secret, which he thought was even less his to share now that Mr. Abram could never
consent to revealing it. The other staff thought he was callous for staying behind, and it took every bit of his willpower not to scream that none of them knew the first thing about Mr. Abram, and none of them would feel a fraction of the loss that enveloped him.

When Thomas stopped by room C before tea, he pictured Mr. Abram on the bed. He smiled bittersweetly at the empty mattress, all the pleasant and painful memories swirling together. Price passed in the hall, and Thomas pulled him in the room, unloading the entire story of Mr. Abram start to finish, barely taking a breath as he told it. Price was surprised by Thomas’s sudden need to share, but hugged him and kissed him, assuring him it was alright to still be sad over it so many years later.

“Especially since you didn’t get to grieve properly,” Price said as a final thought on the matter.

“I’ve never told anybody but you,” Thomas said before going to splash his face in the bathroom, hoping the water would help mask the redness from tears before they went down to tea.

Thomas was lost in his tea until Lady Grantham stopped downstairs. She told the gathered servants that the family would attend a ball on Valentine’s Day, and so all could have the night off. The staff began making plans instantly, coming up with ideas to celebrate the night as a group.

Thomas rested his elbow on the table and leaned toward Mrs. Hughes. “But if we want to go out and celebrate our own way, we could, couldn’t we?”

Mrs. Hughes looked to Mr. Carson, then back to Thomas. “Well, I don’t see why you couldn’t. Did you have special plans?”

“We don’t need to hear about Mr. Barrow’s special plans,” Mr. Carson interrupted. “Everyone is welcome to do as they please, just as Lady Grantham said. Stay in, go out, it makes no difference to me.”

Lily nudged Price’s elbow. “What did Mr. Carson mean by that, not wanting to hear Mr. Barrow’s special plans?”

“I guess Mr. Carson’s just not a romantic,” Price replied quickly.

“Why? Does Mr. Barrow have someone romantic in his life?”

“How should I know?” Price asked before stuffing a hunk of bread into his mouth.

“Fine. I’ll ask him myself later.”

“Why do you care?” Price asked with his mouth full.

Lily dipped a biscuit into her tea and gave Price a sideways glance. “Why do you care if I care? I think we both know you have no interest in anything related to me and romance.”

Price looked at Thomas, who was watching them from across the table. He wondered if Thomas was reading their lips, and held up his cup to obstruct Thomas’s view. “He has someone.”

“Pity,” Lily said plainly. “Though not surprising. Do you have plans?”

“I see, I’m your second choice?”

“You’re no choice at all. I’ll spend the night with the group. I just wondered if you’d do the same.”

“No,” Price said, finishing his tea. “I think I’ll offer to watch my brother’s children so he can have
the evening with his wife.”

Lily’s eyebrows raised. “Sam has a family?”

“Wife and two kids.”

“Well, then,” Lily said with a wry smile, “I suppose I picked the wrong Price.”

Price wrinkled his nose at Lily and pushed his chair back, leaving without dignifying her comment with a response. Lily waved a little goodbye, continuing to smile as she ate the rest of her biscuit.

“He’s not often left speechless,” Thomas said from across the table.

“I know. I love finding new ways to shut him up.”

Thomas’s mood greatly improved after tea, his mind occupied by ideas for a Valentine’s Day with Price rather than memories of past loves. He was still in a good mood when it was time for bed. After getting Lord Grantham into pajamas, he returned to room C and found Price in his pajamas, doing push-ups on the floor.

“I thought I was going to undress you.”

On the next push up, Price paused and looked up at Thomas. “Mr. Carson wanted the livery cleaned tonight, and I didn’t want to torture the hallboys and make them wait ‘til all hours.”

Thomas rested against the dresser. “Can you take your shirt off while you do that?”

Price chuckled. “Why?”

“I want to see your muscles working.”

“You won’t see much by lantern light, but sure, why not?” Price sat back on his knees, pulled his undershirt off and tossed it to Thomas, then resumed his push-ups.

Thomas undressed himself while he watched Price. “Do you want to have your Valentine’s with the others, or would you like to do something special with me?”

“That’s a hard choice,” Price said, rolling onto his back to do sit-ups.

“Do you do this every night before bed?”

“And sometimes in the morning. What sort of special plans do you have for me?”

Thomas pulled on his pajama bottoms and buttoned up the top. “They’re not special if I share the details. I plan to take you somewhere I don’t think you’ve been, and have a kind of fun I don’t think you’ve had.”

“Is there any nudity involved?”

Thomas kneeled in front of Price, and when Price came up for the next sit-up, he leaned in to give him a quick kiss. “At the end of the night, if you’re lucky.”

Price hugged his knees and kissed Thomas again. “What about tonight? Am I lucky tonight?”

Thomas pushed gently on Price’s chest until he laid on the ground, then crawled up Price’s body and settled between his legs. He kissed Price’s collarbone, then his throat, and finally his lips.
“Your muscles look tight. Why don’t I give you a little massage?”

“Yes. I’m so very tight, Thomas.”

Thomas squeezed Price’s side and nipped at his neck. “You always want romance. I was trying to be romantic.”

“Romance me when you play valet. Relieve our shared aching tonight.”

Thomas pressed himself against Price and rocked his hips. “You’ve been aching for me, too?”

Price raised his hips to match the movement of Thomas’s. “More like craving you.”

“Ravenously hungry for me?”

Price chuckled and wrapped his arms around Thomas’s neck. “Bringing it back to dessert again?”

“No, no, not this time, but I know your appetite for me is insatiable.”

Price nibbled Thomas’s bottom lip. “Let me try a few bites.”

“Not if I bite you first,” Thomas teased. He growled playfully while baring his teeth, then lightly bit Price’s shoulder, bicep, and then chest. He went back and licked the spots he’d bitten, then licked his way up to Price’s lips.

“Sorry,” Price whispered. “I’m a little sweaty.”

“Don’t apologize. I like it.”

Price wrapped his legs around Thomas and moved his hips faster. “Make me sweat more, then.”

Thomas slid a hand between their bodies and squeezed Price through his pajamas. “What remedy would you like for your aching? My mouth?” he asked, kissing Price’s cheekbone. “Or my body?”

Price groaned. “Your body is an option tonight? I ran out of… you know… and I haven’t run errands in a while. I would have planned better if I thought you were going to offer.”

“You say that like I never offer.”

“Because you never offer.”

Thomas rolled his eyes. “Alright, alright. Let’s see if we can do this without assistance. I make no promises, though.”

Price smiled and wiggled like a child about to open a present.

“I said no promises.” Thomas repeated. He pulled his bottoms down over his hips and then kicked them off. “I don’t know why I bothered putting on these clothes.”

“It was very shortsighted,” Price said, unbuttoning Thomas’s shirt.

Thomas threw his shirt to the side, then crawled back down Price’s body and pulled Price’s bottoms off, tossing them on top of his shirt. He kissed his way from Price’s ankle to his thigh, then took Price into his mouth. Price sat up on his elbows and watched Thomas, letting out quiet, blissful little moans as Thomas ran his tongue up and down. Thomas used his hand along with his tongue to help make Price slick, licking, pumping, and moaning with increasing speed.
Price helped guide Thomas’s head gently, careful not to get overzealous while he pictured being back inside Thomas. He found himself pushing Thomas’s head down harder than he intended, and put his hand back by his side.

“Why’d you stop?”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t hurt me, David.”

Price sucked air between his teeth and shivered as Thomas licked him more eagerly. He grabbed a handful of Thomas’s hair and guided his head again, mumbling words of praise for Thomas’s tongue. Price sat up further to get a better look at Thomas’s hollowed cheeks and full lips, the shadows on them flickering in the dim light of the lantern.

“Lay on the bed,” Price panted.

“The springs may be unforgiving,” Thomas said between licks.

“No, I checked earlier. Your bed is very quiet.”

Thomas sat up on his knees. “Then why are we on the floor?”

Price hopped to his knees as well. “I thought it was a bit sexy that you wanted to take me right there.” He sighed deeply looking Thomas’s body over. “You’ll tell me if I’m hurting you?”

“Yes, yes, yes. You don’t have to keep asking.”

“It never hurts to ask,” Price said before climbing to his feet. He held Thomas’s gloved hand and pulled him to his feet, then patted the foot of the bed. “Lay here.”

Thomas kissed Price quickly, then followed his direction and laid down. Price stood at the foot of the bed, grabbed Thomas’s thighs, and pulled him to the very edge of the mattress in one quick motion.

“That exercise is paying off,” Thomas whispered, linking his ankles together behind Price’s lower back.

Price flexed his bicep. “Almost as strong as you now.”

“You don’t have to flatter me. I already took my clothes off.”

“I can still flatter you. It’s one of my favorite things to do when your clothes are off.” From Price’s vantage point, he could touch almost every bit of Thomas. He ran his fingertips lightly from Thomas’s neck, slowly down his torso, his hips, his thighs, and back to the top, then ran them down Thomas’s arms until their fingers intertwined. He brought Thomas’s hand to his lips and kissed it. “I will never get over the look of you disrobed. It’s exciting as seeing you for the first time.”

“You promise? Because I’m not one to exercise, and I think it’s starting to show,” Thomas said, patting his stomach.

Price bent over and kissed the spot Thomas had patted. “I like it all.” He kissed his way up to Thomas’s lips, resting his stomach against Thomas’s. “Your body is the most comfortable place I’ve ever been.”
Thomas grinned. “Most comfortable place you’ve ever been inside, you mean?”

“I don’t remember,” Price said, kissing Thomas’s cheek, “it’s been a while.”

“Then we should fix that.”

Price rubbed two fingers on Thomas’s lips and let Thomas suck them into his mouth, then pulled his wet fingers from Thomas’s tongue and slid them between Thomas’s legs. He rubbed gently while stroking Thomas with the other hand, and waited for Thomas to push against his fingers before pressing them inside.

Thomas squeezed Price’s hips between his thighs and grabbed the sheets above his head, bracing himself against the initial twinge of pain.

“No, love,” Price said, keeping his fingers still. “Relax.”

Thomas closed his eyes and helped Price pump, and then took over, relaxing as he found a pleasurable pace. “Try again.”

Price slid his fingers in further, and Thomas winced slightly but moaned. “Keep going?” Price asked.

“Mmm, yes, yes.”

Price pushed his fingers to the hilt, then out halfway and back again. “Keep going?”

Thomas laughed. “Yes! Bloody hell, David, yes.”

Price moved his fingers carefully and put his tongue to the palm of his other hand.

“I’ll do that,” Thomas panted, grabbing Price’s wrist. He met Price’s eyes and licked Price’s palm liberally.

Price took his hand from Thomas’s lips and stroked himself, then positioned himself by his fingers. He slipped his fingers out, and then pushed inside.

Thomas breathed heavily while he pumped himself faster, moving quickly past discomfort once Price began moving his hips rhythmically. Price breathed heavily as well, their quiet breathing and sighing more erotic to him than any moan or cry would ever be. He laid his body back onto Thomas and nuzzled into Thomas’s neck, growing more excited by the tickle of Thomas’s breath in his ear.

Thomas cradled Price’s head in his hand while he continued to pump himself in the other, wishing he had two more hands to explore Price’s body. Every sense was beginning to heighten. He inhaled the scent of Price’s hair, licked his salty, sweaty cheek, and looked down over Price’s shoulder to watch his bottom rise and fall with each thrust.

Thomas kissed Price’s forehead. “How do I feel?”

Price laid kisses all over Thomas’s face, mumbling, “Beautiful, sublime, warm, perfect, heavenly, glorious,” between each kiss. “How do I feel?”

“All of those things, plus big and hard.”

Price laughed. “That sounds more like something I would say.”
“You’re rubbing off on me.”

“Good, because I got bigger and harder hearing you say that.”

They both chuckled and held each other tighter, Thomas still pumping himself between their bodies.

“I want this every night,” Price moaned.

“Forever?”

“Mmm.”

“Then what are you going to do about that?”

Price nibbled Thomas’s ear. “I’m working on it.”

“Work harder. I need this every night, too.”

Price pushed himself back up to standing and held Thomas below the knees, spreading his legs further apart. He let his hands roam, feeling the soft skin and fine hairs on the inside of Thomas’s thighs, wishing he could contort himself to kiss the same spots. He felt Thomas contract and relax around him, and looked up to see the beginnings of climax washing over Thomas’s face. “May I?” he asked, putting his hand on Thomas’s.

Thomas took his hand away and let Price take over. He closed his eyes, his back arching as the first rushes of deep pleasure overcame him. He smiled, his eyes rolling back behind closed lids. He let his arms fall to his sides, palms up, giving in as his orgasm took over his body. He didn’t have much awareness of what was happening physically in the room until Price wiped his thumb across Thomas’s cheekbone and whispered, “Good god!”

Thomas looked down at himself. “Good god, indeed. See what you do to me?”

Price’s face took on the same expression Thomas’s had earlier. He quickly pulled out of Thomas and panted while pumping himself. Thomas propped himself up on his elbows to watch, stroking himself slowly to enjoy the little aftershocks that followed ecstasy. Price squeezed Thomas’s thigh in one hand, struggling to keep himself both upright and quiet. He bent down quickly and licked Thomas’s chest, and the taste of Thomas on his tongue was too much to hold out longer. He came across Thomas more than Thomas had himself, whimpering as he drained the last drops from his body.

Thomas licked his lip. “Your aim is terrible.”

Price laughed while panting. “My aim was exactly where I wanted it.” He grabbed either side of Thomas’s face and kissed him. “Next time, let’s try finishing at the same time. That’d be something.”

Thomas slid back and slowly sat himself up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. “You’re always on to the next time before we’ve even cleaned up from the last time.”

“You’re right. Time to clean up.” Price fetched the pitcher, basin, and a washcloth. He placed them on the floor and knelt in front of Thomas. He wet and wrung out the cloth, then wiped Thomas in delicate strokes, starting with his cheek. He repeated the motions; dunking, wringing, washing. They were both silent, the quiet splashes of water the only sounds in the room. Once Thomas was clean, Price kissed both of Thomas’s hands, and then sat on the bed so that Thomas could return
They each dressed in their pajamas again, and Thomas put out the lantern as they climbed into their separate beds.

“I can almost reach you from here,” Price said, stretching his arm halfway between the beds.

Thomas reached across the distance and held Price’s hand. “Not almost. You got me.”

“How hold my hand until I fall asleep?” Price asked as he closed his eyes.

Thomas squeezed Price’s hand and closed his eyes as well. “Gladly.”

Thomas woke up a little while later as Price’s hand slipped from his. He squinted in the dark and saw Price deep asleep, stomach down on his bed, his arm now hanging from the edge. Price’s face was pressed against the pillow, squishing his lips into a little pucker. His back rose and fell slowly with the steady breaths of sleep, his eyelids flickering briefly from some kind of activity in his dreams. It took Thomas an hour to get back to sleep, too exhilarated by the idea of waking up for the rest of his life next to the sleepy, silly man across from him. Lord Pembroke’s words of warning played over in his mind quite often since New Year’s, and he hadn’t been sure what to truly make of them. But as the words visited him in that moment, he wished he could go back in time and tell Lord Pembroke passionately that there was no question what Price felt for him. It was a love equally reciprocated, by a man who Thomas could bare his soul to, and who shared every part of his soul in return. He shouldn’t have to defend it, he thought, but he wanted to, loudly and repeatedly.

“How dare he question us?” Thomas whispered. “You love me.” He reached back across the empty space and held Price’s hand again. “He probably just didn’t deserve you. I deserve you.”

Price opened one eye and rubbed Thomas’s hand. “What did you say?”

“I love you.”

Price smiled, his lips still squished by the pillow. “I love you, too,” he mumbled.

“I know you do,” Thomas said, closing his eyes again, the thought of holding Price’s hand every night finally lulling him to back sleep.
Hi, friends. As alluded to in the last chapter, the nightclub is revisited in this chapter. Only good things happen, but in light of recent major events I wanted to give you a heads up in case you’d rather not read a nightclub scene. I’d be happy to edit it out and provide a summary for anyone who would prefer it that way.

Also, I can’t stand writing “Lord Pembroke” every time I want to refer to him, so he’s just Teddy now. I actually want to call Price David instead, but we can do that when this part of the story ends and we move on to part two.

Happy reading!

PS Mature content. A chapter this long couldn’t be free of some wink wink nudge nudge now, could it?

Price woke as Thomas squeezed into the bed beside to him. “What time is it?” he croaked with gravely morning voice.

“Almost five.”

“Why are you waking me up, then?” Price asked, turning to the side so Thomas could hug him from behind.

Thomas wrapped his arms around Price and pulled him close. “I’ve been up for two hours,” he whispered into Price’s neck. “I’ve a lot on my mind.”

“And now I’m awake so you can tell me?”

“I have a few questions I’d like answered, but we can talk later. Mostly, I just wanted to hold you.”

Price felt himself drift back to sleep briefly, nearly impossible to prevent when held so tightly between warm arms and under warm sheets. He forced his eyes open, though there was nothing to see in the pitch dark of early winter morning. “I’m up. You can ask your questions.”

Thomas exhaled through his nose, deciding which of the many questions he’d thought of through the night to ask first. He kissed the back of Price’s neck gently. “Did you return Ted’s love? Or did you only tell him you loved him, but didn’t mean it?”

Price was roused suddenly and completely from sleep. “Why, what did he say to you?”

“I can’t recall his exact words, but something to the effect that you told him you loved him, but you weren’t actually in love.”

“You’re worried it’s the same for you?” Price asked bitterly.

Thomas kissed Price’s neck again and slid his hand under Price’s shirt. “Not a bit. I’d just like the whole story.”
“He’s just a piece of the story,” Price muttered into the pillow.

“Then what’s the whole puzzle?”

Price sighed. “There’s no puzzle or great mystery. I truly wanted to love him, but I wasn’t in love, and then I let it get too far. He has every right to be angry with me, which it still seems he is. But he’s one of several who could accuse me of similar.”

“One of several?”

Price looked over his shoulder at Thomas. “You know I was promiscuous, is that some kind of secret? Do I really have to say it that plainly?”

“Always thinking you’d find love that way?”

Price settled his cheek back on the pillow. “Not quite. I think I always hoped it would spark something in me. I just wanted to feel something. I did, sometimes, but nothing real.”

Thomas ran his fingers over the soft, sparse hairs below Price’s navel. “You love everyone, and they love you back. Why did you have to go looking?”

Price closed his eyes and relaxed under Thomas’s touch. “There was a long period in between the war and finding work that I felt almost nothing. Just numbness, so I filled the void improperly, from Sean Moores to Teddy Pembrokes, and in between. I wasn’t sure if you’d be different, if I’m being honest.”

“Well, I know I am.”

“Thank god you are.”

“While you’re being honest, then, what happened between you, and Eric, and that kiss? I’ve never known him to lie to me.”

Price sat up and leaned back against the headboard. “My,” he said flatly, looking down at Thomas, “you really did invent a list of questions while you were awake.”

“This is more of a running list,” Thomas said, resting his head on Price’s thigh.

“Alright,” Price huffed. “You don’t just suddenly turn off years of certain behavior. He gave me a look, I gave him one back, and he kissed me. I shouldn’t have returned the look, but I did, so yes, that’s my fault. All my fault.”

“Don’t get defensive.”

“I have every right to be defensive, because I haven’t pushed you about Teddy, and here you are, pushing me about my past and about Eric.”

Thomas rolled off of the bed and fetched a cigarette. He lit it by the dresser, then returned to the bed and sat shoulder to shoulder with Price. “So push me about him.”

“Did you kiss him?”

Thomas laughed as he exhaled. “No, David.”

“Did you want to?”
“David...”

“Did he make advances?”

Thomas rubbed his molars together.

“If he did, and you denied him, just tell me.”

“He did, and I denied him.”

Price plucked Thomas’s cigarette from his fingers. “Then you’re a better person than I am, it seems.” He waved the cigarette in the air, watching the trail of smoke it left in the small bit of sunlight beginning to creep between the curtains.

“Are you through being defensive?”

“Yes, but I still don’t like it. Do you really need to be his friend? There are so many other people out there, can’t we both leave him in the past?”

“We can talk about it another time.”

Price made another trail of smoke. “You started this conversation, remember?”

Thomas reached for the cigarette. “May I have that back, please?”

Price put the cigarette between his lips and smiled. “Was it his cigarettes that tempted you? He smokes, and I don’t, is that it?” Price pointed at his mouth. “Does this make me look more handsome?”

Thomas slapped Price’s thigh with the back of his hand. “You’re the most handsome of all, and you know it.”

Price took a drag, then tipped his chin up and exhaled between pursed lips. He handed the cigarette back to Thomas. “They’re just as foul as I remember.”

“You don’t seem to mind the way I taste.”

“Your tongue is so sweet, it makes up for the tobacco.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Want to double check?”

Price chuckled. “Maybe after you brush your teeth.”

Thomas pushed his shoulder against Price’s, then rose from the bed. He turned on the lantern and placed the cigarette in his ashtray, then began to get ready for the day.

“Dressing this early?”

“I have to meet my sister this morning.”

“For what?” Price asked as he slid back under the covers.

Thomas slicked a comb with pomade and ran it through his hair, following each stroke with flat
fingers. “I don’t really want to talk about it, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, sure. Of course.” Price watched Thomas silently for a moment, then asked carefully, “If you end up needing any help or anything, you’ll let me know, won’t you?”

Thomas paused with his comb halfway through his hair and looked at Price’s reflection in the mirror. “It’s hard to imagine you feeling numb,” he said while pulling the comb through. “You’re probably the most loving person who ever loved me back.”

“It’s you. I can’t feel numb around you.”

“I can certainly say the same about you.”

“When will you be back?” Price asked, squinting to see Thomas’s body as he undressed in the dim light.

“I’ll be back after breakfast. By the way, I have a guest coming for tea.”

“Really? So do I.”

Thomas hopped into his trousers. “Who?”

“You first.”

“My friend Kait,” Thomas said while putting on his shirt.

“But she’s a friend of Eric’s, aren’t you worried someone will make a connection?”

Thomas shook his head and pulled his braces over his shoulders. “The only one who might make a connection is Lady Edith, and far as I know she’s not visiting today. And really, David, I’m gone in a month, so what if someone makes a connection?”

“Don’t get cocky, nothing’s done until it’s done. When will you tell Mr. Carson, anyhow? Don’t you want to give him time to fill your position properly?”

Thomas dropped his shoes by the bed and sat next to Price. “They won’t replace my position,” he said, putting on his shoes. “They only created it as an excuse to keep me on staff. I bet they’ll hire another footman at most.”

“At most? We can’t get by without someone like you.”

Thomas kissed Price’s lips. “What do you mean ‘we’? You’ll be the next one out the door.”

“I hope so. I’m trying to find something, really.”

Thomas stroked Price’s cheek with the back of his fingers. “It seems obvious to me, David. Ask Lady Edith for a job.”

Price looked down and traced the pinstripes on Thomas’s thigh. “I’ve looked at the adverts for positions at her magazine, there’s no position open for an illustrator. Plus she only let me draw for her out of pity. I’ll just find a house in London so we can be closer.”

Thomas tipped Price’s chin up and looked in his eyes. “We can’t live together if you stay a footman.”

Price laughed and looked back down. “Well that’s the best I can do.”
“That’s rubbish,” Thomas grumbled. He stood to finish dressing. “You’re afraid to take a big leap. I can understand that, but you’ll never get anywhere treading water, David. Lady Edith likes you and you know it. Talk to her.”

“Eric said something that made me a bit hopeful.”

“About Lady Edith?”

“No, not exactly. He wants to help me find a job. It seemed like he had an idea, but he didn’t give any details.”

“Brilliant,” Thomas said as he finished knotting his tie. “When Kait’s here you can put a bug in her ear, too. Between the two of them, you’ll have something, and if not, then you can ask Lady Edith. So who’s your guest for tea?”

“Sam’s visiting. He’s always been too busy to visit me at work, but he’s just down the road so he wanted to stop in. That’s the story, at least. I think Marie put him up to it.”

Thomas put on his waistcoat and looked himself over in the mirror. “I’d like to see the shop sometime this week.”

“Tell him today, then.”

Thomas chuckled. “I just imagined Kait’s reaction when she sees both you and your brother. She has a hard time handling one handsome man, let alone the two of you.”

“I thought men weren’t her cup of tea.”

“I gather she likes to look, but not touch.”

Price chuckled, then rolled over and faced the wall, sinking back under the covers.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Price giggled into the pillow.

“David, what?”

“Nothing! Don’t be late to see your sister.”

Thomas pulled the pocket watch from his waistcoat and checked the time, then cursed under his breath. He tucked the watch back in quickly, put on his jacket and overcoat, swiped his hat from the dresser, and ran to the door, barely remembering to say goodbye before leaving.

Marie hadn’t put Sam up to anything, though he wasn’t visiting just to see Price. He wanted to talk with Thomas in person, hoping to leave fully confident that Thomas was willing to take the job. Since his father’s passing, Sam learned what it meant to work to the bone, his knuckles and joints constantly burning from long days of meticulous work. The assistance Price and Thomas provided on the side took off a little pressure, but the day-to-day work in the store was becoming far too much, both physically and mentally. He wasn’t strong with the store’s finances, and handling the backlog of watches on top of the backlog of bills was becoming overwhelming.

Thomas looked cheerful when he returned from his outing, but he offered no details to Price, and so Price asked no questions. They served luncheon side by side, both eager for their tea time guests. Sam and Kait arrived only fifteen minutes apart, with Sam arriving first. Price pulled Sam
into a quick hug, then brought him to the kitchen for the first round of introductions. Daisy stopped kneading her dough to marvel at the younger version of Price, her cheeks instantly rosey when both pairs of green eyes were on hers.

“It’s a good thing you’re not here more often,” Mrs. Patmore told Sam. “I don’t think Daisy’s heart could handle two David’s on a regular basis. I can hear it pitter-patter from over here.”

Daisy choked out a flustered objection, then returned to kneading her dough, this time with tight fists.

Sam laughed and looked at Price. “Are we really that much alike?”

“Purely on the outside,” Price replied.

Thomas arrived in the kitchen and reintroduced himself to Sam. Price had cautioned Sam that Thomas hadn’t announced his plans to leave, and so Sam was careful to greet Thomas cordially without too much familiarity.

Price paraded his brother proudly from the kitchen to the servant’s hall, introducing him to the rest of the staff. He saved Lily for last, having also warned Sam that no one knew all the details of their past.

“I’ve seen your younger sister recently,” Sam said, kissing Lily’s cheek. “She’s as nice as I remember.”

“She’s certainly the nicer of the two of us,” Lily said, leaning into the kiss politely.

“All of the Benham girls are lovely, no need to compare one to the other,” Price said before guiding Sam to the table.

Thomas appeared in the doorway with Kait, and all eyes turned toward them. Thomas lead Kait in with a similar look of pride to Price’s. Kait had bleached her brown bob a silvery blonde, and her dress was so lovely that it made her look like she was lost on her way upstairs to spend tea with the family. “This is my friend Kait Christian,” Thomas said, introducing her to Miss Baxter first.

The kitchen staff stepped into the hallway, watching Thomas and Kait curiously.

“I’ve never heard him mention someone by that name in all these years,” Daisy whispered to Mrs. Patmore.

“Maybe he didn’t want us to think he had any friends,” Mrs. Patmore whispered back.

“What’d be the purpose of that?” Ellie asked.

Mrs. Patmore shrugged. “He likes to keep a certain mystery about himself, I suppose. How much do any of us know about him?”

“Enough now to want to know more,” Ellie said with a grin.

“Well, you can both eavesdrop when you serve tea. Back to it,” she said, pointing a wooden spoon toward the kitchen.

The staff selected their seats at the table. Sam sat next to Price, across from Thomas and Kait. Kait looked back and forth between the brothers, then whispered something to Thomas. He rolled his eyes and poured Kait’s tea, not responding to whatever she whispered.
Lily slid into the chair next to Kait. She handed her cup past Kait for Thomas to fill. “So,” she said with a cheery smile, “how do you two know each other?”

Kait returned the smile and passed the cup back once it was full. “We met through a friend, nothing exciting I’m afraid.”

“And what do you do, Kait?” Lily asked, stirring her tea. “It doesn’t look like you’re in service like the rest of us.”

Price frowned at Lily from across the table and wished he was close enough to kick her foot.

“Photography,” Kait answered brightly. “You’re very pretty, by the way. I bet you photograph beautifully.”

Lily looked down at her teacup, the next question she’d wanted to ask seeming inappropriate after the compliment.

“Photography, really?” Mr. Molesley asked. “What kind? Journalism?”

“Different kinds over the years, but right now I’m focusing on editorials as well as some personal projects. I actually hoped I could take a few pictures of some of you while I was here.”

“Unfortunately, the staff doesn’t have that kind of time, Miss. Christian,” Mr. Carson said, cutting off the chatter that started when Kait mentioned taking the staff’s pictures.

“May I take some of them working, then?”

Mrs. Hughes chuckled and patted Mr. Carson’s hand. “Let us see how things go after tea.”

“Down, girl,” Thomas whispered to Kait. He looked across the table to Sam. “How’s our other guest this afternoon?”

“I’m well, thank you. It’s nice to finally see all the faces I’ve read about in David’s letters.”

“He writes about us?” Mr. Molesley asked.

Sam looked at Price for silent direction whether it was alright to respond. “Naturally,” Sam said slowly. “He’s with you all every day, you’re his life. So when he writes to me about his life, of course, it includes all of you.”

“What do you know about us?” Mrs. Hughes asked.

Sam looked at Price again, then to Mrs. Hughes. “Well, ma’am, I know you’re very kind to David. So’s everyone. Especially you,” he said as Daisy set down a fresh plate of bread.

Price pushed his thumb into Sam’s thigh under the table.

“You remind him of our dear cousin. Like family,” Sam added quickly. “And he enjoys games with you,” Sam said to Mr. Molesley.

“What does he say about me?” Thomas asked with a tight grin.

“Well… that he’s learned a great deal from you, and he’s thankful for it,” Sam answered. He let the conversation change to other topics, and leaned into Price’s ear to whisper, “you said people shouldn’t know he’s leaving, but that sounded like he was setting me up to say something.”
“He’s just cheeky,” Price whispered back, keeping his chin down. “Worse than Lily.”

“What a pair to work with.”

“Yes, but you’re taking half the pair soon.”

“I wanted to talk about that. Are you sure he’s sure? I really need the help.”

Price covered his mouth in case Thomas was reading lips. “I’m sure he’s sure.”

“If it doesn’t work out I’m making you quit to help me instead.”

Price laughed. “Shh. I said I’m sure. Don’t you trust your big brother?”

Sam nodded. “Implicitly.”

“Nothing to fear then.”

“Will he be that cheeky when he’s at the shop?”

Price saw Mr. Carson take notice of the whispering. “Yes. Now stop talking about it.”

The staff settled into their work after tea, and Kait fetched her camera. Mrs. Hughes gave Kait permission to take a few photographs, and Kait went straight to the kitchen. Eric told her how interesting he found Mrs. Patmore, and Kait wanted to know more, and get a few pictures along with the stories.

Sam followed Thomas to corner of the servant’s hall, where Thomas’s ashtray was waiting. “Have you given your notice?” Sam asked quietly.

“Not yet. I will.”

“Might I ask what’s keeping you? I don’t mean to appear too eager, but, well, I’m extremely eager,” Sam said with a laugh that sounded exactly like Price’s when he was nervous.

Thomas rolled his cigarette between his fingers and thought over his options. “Tomorrow. I’ll give it tomorrow.”

“That’s a huge relief,” Sam sighed. He took a cigarette from his waistcoat and lit it. “Do you need somewhere to stay for a while? Our home is yours for as long as you need it.”

Thomas wasn’t sure why Sam’s smoking surprised him, but he was a bit taken aback by both the smoking and the generous offer. “Thank you, but if I’m to strike out on my own, I should truly do it on my own. You’re already giving me the job.”

“You earned yourself the job, and I’m the one who’s lucky to have you. Please, I need to keep you happy. Just let me know. We have a spare room ready at any time.”

Price joined Thomas and Sam and waved his hand in the air to clear the smoke.

Thomas raised his eyebrows at Sam. “Worried I’ll run in the other direction once I’m under your employ?”

Sam chuckled while exhaling. “Not if I have you locked up in my house.”

Price wrinkled his nose. “What in God’s name are you talking about over here?”
“Business, brother,” Sam said, holding his cigarette away from Price. “Why was Lily testing Kait during tea?”

Price shrugged. “I think she’s sweet on Thomas, and she probably thinks Kait’s her competition.”

“Oh, she is not,” Thomas scoffed.

Sam nodded. “I’ve been here for an hour and I can tell Lily’s sweet on you. You’re not interested?”

Thomas took in a breath and smiled. “She’s not quite my type.”

Sam nudged Price. “She wasn’t David’s, either.”

“Stop it.”

“He’s just stating a fact,” Thomas noted.

Price closed his eyes. “Don’t you both gang up on me, please. At least wait until you’ve been working together a while.”

Kait interrupted the trio and waved her hand at Price and Sam. “Stand together.”

“We are standing together,” Price replied.

“Closer.”

Price and Sam each took a sideways step toward one another. Sam bumped his hip against Price’s and they both laughed, and Kait released the shutter.

“We weren’t ready yet!” Price protested.

“I know,” Kait said with a smile. “Now, Thomas and David together,” she said, waving Sam away. “I like taking photographs of friends,” she added when Thomas gave her a look.

Thomas reluctantly took Sam’s spot next to Price. He checked the room and saw only Miss Baxter seemed to be watching.

“Don’t look so gloomy,” Kait told them both. “You are friends, aren’t you?”

Price’s heart raced, giddy over the idea of receiving a copy of the picture from Kait; a keepsake until he could be with Thomas every day again. He looked straight into Kait’s camera. “Of course we are. Smile, Mr. Barrow.”

Thomas chuckled and looked down at Price out of the corner of his eye, and Kait released the shutter again.

“I wasn’t ready that time,” Thomas whined.

“I know,” Kait repeated, then left to see if Mr. Carson would allow her to take his picture.

Mr. Carson gave an outright “no”, but Mrs. Hughes said she would enjoy a picture of the two of them together, and Mr. Carson relented. Kait snapped a picture while Mrs. Hughes fixed Mr. Carson’s tie, then one of them side by side, Mrs. Hughes beaming and Mr. Carson trying to resist giving a full smile. Mr. Carson let Kait stay until it was time to ring the gong, and then told both guests it was time for Thomas and Price to return to work.
On their way out, Thomas pulled Sam aside to promise he would give his notice the following day. Price pulled Kait aside as well, and said something Thomas couldn’t hear, but that made Kait jump and clap her hands together. Price put his finger to his lips and they both smiled, and then he helped Kait into her overcoat.

“What were you talking about?” Thomas asked as they both headed upstairs.

“Big secrets,” Price said with a smirk.

Lily pushed past Thomas and Price on the narrow stairs. “My Lady is waiting. Out of the way please, gentlemen.”

“My Lord is waiting, but you don’t see me pushing and running.”

Perhaps I’m more dedicated to my craft,” Lily replied, then climbed the steps quickly, leaving Thomas and Price far behind. She slowed before reaching Lady Mary’s room and checked her posture, then knocked lightly.

Lady Mary was pacing between two dresses laid out on her bed, not sure which to choose for the evening. Two decent and eligible bachelors were coming for dinner, and she knew one would like the dress on the left and the other, the right.

“What do you think, Miss Benham?”

Lily looked each dress over carefully. “They’re both lovely, but the emerald green gown I ordered for you arrived. I hung it up this morning. Since you’re so torn, maybe go with option three?”

“I didn’t realize it arrived so quickly. Let’s have a look, then.”

Lily fetched the gown from Lady Mary’s wardrobe. She held it out, turning it back to front and back again.

Lady Mary approached the dress with mouth agape. She ran her fingers over the black embroidered beads on the bodice. “I don’t remember it looking like this in the picture.”

“I had a few adjustments made to better suit you. The neckline is rounded instead of the v-shaped, the back plunges further, and the beading is more intricate. I hope you don’t mind my taking the liberty.”

“Of course I don’t mind, just look at it,” Lady Mary replied, stroking the delicate shoulder straps. “You have quite the eye,” she said, looking up from the dress to Lily.

“It’s my job to have an eye, my Lady,” Lily said humbly.

Lady Mary slipped off her robe so Lily could start the process of dressing her for the evening. “My sister should take advantage while you’re with us. She’s been getting more and more matronly in her gown selection. Frock selection, more like it.”

Lily smiled up at Lady Mary as she helped her into her stockings. “I thought she looked quite nice on her last visit.”

Lady Mary tilted her head to the side. “I suppose. I don’t know, I think I’m made to simply dislike everything she does, down to her choice in clothing.”

“I have a sister like that, too. We spent so much time together, and I thought it was out of
obligation. Then I left to work, and I realized the time I spent with her was because I actually liked her company.

“I don’t think I’ve ever liked my sister’s company,” Lady Mary said, raising her arms so Lily could help her into her gown. “I might miss her being around a bit, though. Don’t share that, please. I’d never admit to saying it, anyhow.”

Lily nodded and handed Lady Mary her evening gloves. “What you say is kept private, my Lady.”

“I trust you’re telling the truth, you don’t seem like the type to tell. How are you fitting in downstairs, anyhow? Are the other women being kind to you?”

“Oh, yes,” Lily said, clasping Lady Mary’s bracelet for her. “I talk to the male staff a bit more than the female staff, but the women are nice as well.”

“Which male staff?” Lady Mary asked with a playful smile.

Lily stood behind Lady Mary and clasped her necklace. “You share your secrets, so I’ll share one with you.” She stepped in front of Lady Mary and leaned toward her. “David and I were engaged once.”

Lady Mary’s jaw dropped for the second time that evening. “Who here knows besides me?”

“I’ve gotten the impression that David told Mr. Barrow.”

“Oh dear, that’s the last person he should tell.”

“Why’s that, my Lady?”

Lady Mary turned to her mirror and admired her new gown. “Barrow enjoys his gossip. So do I, so I’m not throwing stones, I just wouldn’t trust him with information I didn’t wish to spread like wildfire.”

“He’s a bit spiky, but not untrustworthy. You know him better than I do, though.”

“I’d hate to call him untrustworthy. Let’s say, meddlesome.”

“Well that I’d believe.”

Lady Mary turned back to Lily. “So those are your friends in the male staff? Your former fiance, which I need to hear every detail about when you’re back here tonight, and Barrow?”

“I’d rather Mr. Barrow’s friendship over David’s, but yes to both.”

“Most people don’t like Mr. Barrow so quickly.”

Lily smiled, looking at the ground as she pictured Thomas. “Enough people like him. He had a visitor earlier. I think it might have been his girlfriend.”

Lady Mary covered her mouth with the back of her hand as she fought off a laugh. “I’m not sure who visited Barrow, but I promise it wasn’t his girlfriend.”

“No?” Lily asked, perplexed by Lady Mary’s laughter.

“I don’t think it’s for me to say.”
“This is a private conversation, it won’t leave these walls.”

Lady Mary smiled and twisted on the ball of her foot as she prepared her response. “Barrow isn’t... fond of women in that way.”

Lily laughed and put her hands to her cheeks. “Why didn’t anyone warn me? Does the staff know?”

“I’m certain they know.”

Lily put her hands on her hips. “You know, I think David tried to tell me politely, but I thought he meant Mr. Barrow was spoken for by another woman. Now I’m very curious who David meant when he said Mr. Barrow wasn't eligible.”

“I have an idea, but don’t know for sure.”

“Who?”

“A friend of Lady Edith’s,” Lady Mary whispered.

Lily gasped. “A friend of the family, how naughty!”

“You don’t approve of the staff mixing with the guests that way?”

“Do you?”

Lady Mary sat at the vanity to touch up her powder. “I do for Barrow, at least. I’ve known him a long time, and heard rumors of many rejections. I like the idea of him having a little fun, guest or otherwise.”

“That’s quite modern of you.”

“You don’t feel the same?”

Lily hung Lady Mary’s robe. “I think I’m still surprised, that’s all.”

There was a knock on the door, and Lady Grantham summoned Lady Mary for dinner. “Is everything alright?”

“We were just chatting,” Lady Mary said, rising from the vanity. “And we have more chatting to do later tonight,” she reminded Lily.

“Yes, my Lady,” Lily said, smiling as she hung the unwanted gowns.

After picking up the room a bit, Lily gathered some necklaces that needed cleaning and headed for the servant’s hall. Price passed her on his way to the dining room, and she whispered for him to stop.

“What’s with the smile?” Price asked.

“You could’ve told me the whole truth when I asked about Mr. Barrow. Lady Mary just explained why I’d never have a chance.”

“Sorry,” Price said, pulling on his gloves for dinner service. “You seemed to enjoy flirting, so who was I to take that away from you.”
“He seemed to be flirting back.”

“He does that.”

Lily pushed a loose curl from her forehead and huffed. “If only there were other handsome, eligible men in the staff.”

“Thank you, Lily.”

Lily tipped up her chin and smiled. “Well, you made it abundantly clear that regardless of your eligibility, you weren’t interested.”

“Maybe you’re just aiming too low,” Price said, adjusting his gloves at the wrists. “Mr. Branson is single.”

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed,” Lily said with an exaggerated wink.

Price looked over Lily’s shoulder as Mr. Molesley entered the hall. “Time for work, at least for me. If I get a chance, I’ll whisper something to Mr. Branson about your interest.”

“Yes, please. That has no chance of going awry.”

Lily gave a little wave as Price fell in step with Mr. Molesley.

----------------------------------

When Thomas returned to room C that evening, Price was lying on his bed in his pajamas, halfway through the latest novel on loan from Thomas.

“When exactly do I get to be your valet?” Thomas asked, taking the novel from Price’s hands.

“When you stop coming back so late.”

“What would you have me do? Tell Lord Grantham I have to get back to my room because my man’s waiting for me to undress him, too?”

Price stole the book back from Thomas. “That, or you could feign illness.”

“Or,” Thomas said, pinching Price’s waist, “you could wait for me.”

Price hit Thomas’s hand lightly with the book. “I need to go to bed early, I promised to meet Marie for a walk early.”

“May I come?”

Price looked down and flipped through the book to find where he left off. “I’d rather it be just be me and her. Sorry.”

“Paying me back for not sharing the details of my visit with my sister?”

Price found his page and looked up. “No, I wouldn’t do that.”

“Don’t look offended, I was teasing. I took my sister to see a doctor.”

“Is everything alright?”

“I think it will be, with time. It was a good visit. She left satisfied.”
Price leaned forward and kissed Thomas’s cheek. “You’re so sweet about her.”

“Hmm, well, I have to be, I have making up to do.”

“I bet she doesn’t feel that way.”

Thomas tapped the book. “How are you liking it?”

Price beamed. “I’m loving it! I’ve never read anything that took place in Australia. Is that a place you’ve ever been with the family?”

Thomas kissed Price’s forehead. “I’ve been less places than you think.”

“You’re more worldly than I am,” Price said. He began reading again as Thomas stood to undress.

Thomas watched Price while he prepared for bed. “You’re squinting,” he observed. “Have you ever had your eyes checked?”

“Am I? No, I haven’t. I do get headaches sometimes when I read, though.”

“Then you should get an exam. I can make you an appointment.”

“Taking everyone to the doctor, then?”

Thomas shrugged a shoulder. “Everyone I love, I suppose.”

Once ready for bed, Thomas picked a book from the three most recent ones Eric sent, and then sat at the foot of Price’s bed. He placed Price’s feet in his lap and held his book in one hand, rubbing Price’s foot in the other. After finishing the first chapter, he looked up to find Price asleep, his book face down on his chest. Thomas smiled, then switched hands, rubbing Price’s other foot. He finished two chapters, then put Price’s feet back on the bed carefully, placed both books on the nightstand, and put out the lantern.

-------------------------------

Price found excuses to hover in the drawing room during an afternoon visit from Lady Edith. He hoped for a chance to pull her aside quietly and ask about a job. It was a risk to his current position to show interest in something entirely different, but he trusted Lady Edith. He was out of patience waiting for Eric, as he could no longer bare the look of disappointment on Thomas’s face every time moving to London was discussed.

It was harder to find privacy in the London house than at Downton, including upstairs. Price couldn’t even hope to find Lady Edith alone after the gong was rung, since she was sharing a room with Lady Mary to dress for dinner. Before going through to the dining room, Price whispered to Lady Edith that he wanted a moment of her time if she could spare it. Lady Edith told him to meet her by the stairs after the family went up, and she would find an excuse to stay behind so they could talk.

Price spent dinner service going back and forth between thinking it was a great idea to take Thomas’s advice and talk to Lady Edith, and an absolutely terrible one. He wondered if he wasn't being impulsive, thinking Eric deserved more time that a couple months to reveal a plan. He finally decided he would simply ask the question of Lady Edith, and hoped the answer was the one he needed.

Price noticed during dinner that Lady Edith looked more tired during her visit than she had before
moving to London, and felt guilty keeping her from sleep. “We can talk in the morning,” Price said when they met by the stairs in the foyer, noting the purple circles under Lady Edith’s eyes.

“I probably won’t sleep even when my head’s on the pillow,” Lady Edith said with a quick blink and a smile. “What did you need?”

Price’s nerves were evident on his face, and Lady Edith instinctively mirrored his look of concern. Price smiled with his lips, but his eyes still had a look of pain. “This is difficult to discuss, and please, feel no obligation to respond. I simply ask that you keep whatever is said between the two of us.”

“Yes, yes, of course I will,” Lady Edith said, taking a step toward Price.

Price swallowed and took slow breaths. He finally spoke quickly before he could change his mind. “My Lady, I’m wondering if your magazine might be in need of an illustrator. If so, I wondered if that person could be me.”

Lady Edith gave Price a look he couldn’t mistake for anything but pity. “Oh, David. I’m so sorry, I wish I had the budget for another full-time illustrator. If I did, you would be the first person I asked. For now we have one on staff, and we’re commissioning other work. I could have you do another commission, if you’d like.”

Price nodded, but couldn’t get his lips to smile. “Yes, I probably should have known that was the case. Please forgive me for taking your time.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for. I’m the sorry one, I truly wish I had an opening. Do you have any interest in doing another piece at least?”

Price shook his head. “I’m sure you have many capable artists already at your disposal. You did me the favor of letting me draw for you. I let myself get carried away with the fantasy of doing it for a living.”

Lily entered the foyer on her way to help Lady Mary and stopped by the entrance. Lady Edith waved her in. “I was just catching up with David on some things I missed since moving away. Thank you, David. I have more to say on this topic, but I should head up now.”

Price left the foyer before Lily could ask any questions and headed straight to his room. He took out his stationary set from his suitcase and penned a quick letter to Eric, then crumpled it and decided a telegram the next morning would be best. Minutes later, a telephone call was the only option, and it had to happen that moment. He requested Mr. Carson’s permission and called Eric’s boarding house. He dialed every number but the last, then grunted and hung up, slamming the receiver.

Price passed through the kitchen on his way back to his room. He asked Daisy for some kind of treat he could take with him. She filled a kitchen towel with biscuits intended for the next day’s tea and handed them over, asking quietly if he was alright as the towel passed hands. He nodded and thanked her, then grabbed a glass of water and went to room C.

Thomas finished with Lord Grantham even later than the previous nights, and expected Price to be in his pajamas and under the covers. Instead, Price sat on the floor between the beds, his back against Thomas’s bed frame. He has a biscuit halfway into his mouth as Thomas opened the door.

Thomas noted the towel laid on the ground, half a dozen biscuits on top. “Are you having a late night picnic?”
Price brushed crumbs from his chest and took a sip of water. “This is instead of alcohol.”

Thomas sat on the floor by Price. “Dare I ask?”

“I took your advice,” Price started. He hung his head, unable to continue without breaking down.

“Easy,” Thomas said, petting Price’s knee. “What advice was that?”

“I talked with Lady Edith,” Price replied without looking up. “Unfortunately, she has no budget for another full time illustrator.”

Thomas put his arm around Price’s shoulders and pulled him close. “Then we have to find a way for the other illustrator to meet an unfortunate demise.”

Price laughed into Thomas’s shoulder, then sniffled. “Really, though. You thought it was such a sure thing. Now what will I do?”

“You said Eric had an idea.”

“But I haven't heard from him about it.”

“Then you’ll give him some more time,” Thomas said. He ran his fingers through Price’s hair slowly. “All isn’t lost.”

Price felt around on the floor for the towel, then grabbed a biscuit. He bit off half, and held the other to Thomas’s lips. Thomas bit the biscuit from Price’s fingers, then kissed Price’s cheek while he chewed.

Price sniffled again and wiped his lip. “Now would be a good time to play valet.”

“While you’re sad, crying, and eating biscuits off of the floor?”

“I could use a pick me up, don’t you agree?”

Thomas began to untie Price’s bowtie. “If you insist,” he purred.

“Wait,” Price said, putting his hand over Thomas’s. “You’ve had to do this so many times for other people. Why don’t I be your valet?”

“And then we’ll switch off?”

“No. Let’s make tonight about you.”

Thomas followed Price’s direction to stand. Price carried the lantern from the nightstand to the dresser and placed it close to the mirror, turning it down to a low glow. He called Thomas to him and ran his hands down Thomas’s jacket lapels.

“So tell me, how may I assist you this evening, Lord Barrow?”

Thomas laughed bashfully and looked at the floor. “Don’t be silly, David.”

“So just Mr. Barrow tonight?”

“Stop it,” Thomas laughed, nearly giggling.

“Why does that embarrass you?”
Thomas chewed his bottom lip to stop smiling. “I’m not sure, it’s just funny for you to call me those things.”

“I call you Mr. Barrow all day.”

“Not when it’s just us. Anyway, you don’t have to actually be my valet. Just undress me so we can move on to other things.”

“But the undressing is the fun part,” Price said with a sweet smile. He started with Thomas’s accessories, removing his pocket watch from his waistcoat, then each onyx cufflink. He took Thomas’s jacket and waistcoat, and stopped Thomas as Thomas's hands went to his braces. “This is my duty. Let me tend to you.”

“Fine, fine, go ahead.”

Price slipped his fingers under Thomas’s braces at the shoulders. “It’s hard not to wrap my hands around these and pull you to the bed.”

“Why are you resisting?”

“Because,” Price said, taking Thomas’s braces off his shoulders, “you know, romance. For once!”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Price unfastened and removed Thomas’s collar, then loosened his tie, pulling it carefully over Thomas’s head to avoid messing his hair. He petted a few rogue hairs back into place, then unbuttoned Thomas’s shirt, keeping eye contact as his hands made their way from the button at Thomas’s throat to the one by his trousers. He held Thomas’s gloved hand next. “Off or on?”

“Off,” Thomas said. He held his hand out, wrist facing up, so Price could unfasten the button at the bottom of his glove.

Price slipped off the glove and laid it on the dresser, then kissed Thomas’s hand. “You know, if my hand were in a glove all day it would be clammy. How is your hand always so soft and dry?”

“Because I wash my hands periodically. Is that not something you do throughout the day?”

Price untucked Thomas’s shirt from his waistband. “Now now, Mr. Barrow, you don't have to be cheeky.” He removed Thomas’s shirt and put it with his jacket and waistcoat, all on hangers hung from pegs on the wall. He returned and ran his fingertips up and down Thomas’s forearms, tickling the soft skin by the inside of his elbows.

“That isn’t something I would customarily do for Lord Grantham.”

“Arm tickles?”

“Usually not, no.”

Price pulled Thomas’s wrist to his lips and kissed the underside of his arm, all the way to the sleeve of his undershirt. “What about that?”

“Usually not.”

“You smell as good as you taste.”

“I probably wouldn't say that, either.”
Price helped Thomas out of his undershirt, letting him pull it over his head. He let Thomas unbutton his trousers as well, then pulled them to Thomas’s ankles, pulling his underwear along with them. Thomas stepped out of both and watched as Price hung his trousers on the wall. Price turned back and admired Thomas standing by the dresser, freed from all of his clothing except his socks and garters.

“What about these? Do I take care of these myself?”

Price knelt in front of Thomas and rested his cheek on Thomas’s thigh as he removed the last bits of clothing. He looked up at Thomas while trailing his fingers from Thomas’s ankle to the back of his knee. “You don’t take care of a thing. Now that you’re undressed, what else can I do for you, Lord Barrow? Comb your hair? Help with a shave? Lay at your clothing for tomorrow?”

Thomas both hands through Price’s hair, pushing it back from Price’s forehead. He guided Price’s head to his hips.

“Oh, I see. Are you sure you wouldn’t rather a romantic massage? Let me rub you down from your temples to your toes?”

Thomas held himself near Price’s lips. “That sounds lovely, but so does this.”

“Lay on your bed.”

Thomas groaned, then followed direction, lying face down when Price corrected him.

Price grabbed a bottle from his drawer and stood beside the bed. “Oil,” he explained when Thomas gave him a curious look. “It was for Valentine’s Day but let’s not wait.” He dripped a generous amount onto his palm, then rubbed hands together while Thomas settled in and closed his eyes. Price started with Thomas’s neck, rubbing in long strokes from Thomas’s ears to his shoulders, adjusting the pressure when he felt knots caused by long days of labor and short nights of sleep on weak pillows. Thomas gasped as Price reached a tight spot deep along his shoulder blade, telling Price to keep going despite the pain. After an uncomfortable minute of kneading, the knot relented, and Thomas moaned into his pillow as Price’s fingers slid easily along the same spot.

“I might fall asleep,” Thomas murmured after Price fixed several more spots Thomas hadn’t even realized hurt so badly until Price found them.

“That would be a compliment. Relax, love.”

“No one’s ever spent this much time massaging my back before.”

Price added more oil to his palm and let it get warm before rubbing Thomas’s lower back. “I still have the rest of your back, and all of your limbs, fingers, and toes.”

“There’s no way I’ll stay awake.”

“You don’t need to.”

Thomas sunk into sleep somewhere between Price rubbing his calves and his ankles. He awoke for a moment when Price nudged him to turn over, and moved his limbs slowly and clumsily as Price helped him under the covers. Price sat on the edge of the bed and took Thomas’s hand in his own, rubbing it from wrist to fingertips, pulling and stretching each finger, one at a time. Thomas began to fall asleep again as Price rubbed his forearm, more tension he hadn’t noticed melting away.

Thomas woke up a final time as Price pulled back the covers and set his warm lips on Thomas,
followed by his tongue. Thomas’s hands felt too heavy to even hold Price’s hair, and he lay still, moaning softly, flexing his fingers and toes as Price took him all the way into his mouth. Every part of Thomas tingled, the mix of pleasure and drowsiness making Price’s licking feel like an exquisite dream. He relaxed when his orgasm coursed through his body, rather than tensing like usual, and he thought he may open his eyes to find himself floating somewhere above the room. He sighed as Price kissed his hips and stomach, then laid the covers back over him, patting Thomas’s cheek before stepping away.

Thomas rolled his head to the side in the direction he thought Price may have gone. “I gave Mr. Carson my notice today,” he whispered.

Price came back to the bedside and knelt on the floor. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You were upset, and then all this,” Thomas replied, groping for Price’s hand.

“How did he take it?”

“He was surprised,” Thomas said, raising his eyebrows, recalling Mr. Carson’s expression. “He didn’t have much to say, really, since he was taken aback. I promised to help him find a suitable footman. You’ll need to train whoever we find, if you’re still around.”

“Did you tell Lord Grantham?”

“No,” Thomas replied after yawning. “I told Mr. Carson I’ll start sharing the news after Valentine’s Day. I’m not ready for whatever cockahoop there may be over it. Or maybe I’m just not prepared if there’s no cockahoop because nobody cares.”

“They’ll care, Thomas.”

“Doesn’t matter either way. Things can be normal a few days longer while longer before I really let change unfold. Are you going to get in this bed so we can go to sleep?”

“I’m still dressed, Lord Barrow.”

“Fix that and get in here.”

“Whatsoever you require, m’Lord,” Price said. He kissed Thomas’s shoulder and undressed quickly, but when he finished Thomas was back asleep, sprawled across the small bed. Price brought the lantern back to the nightstand and let it burn, laying on his side in his own bed, watching Thomas sleep until he took one last blink, falling asleep himself.

--------------------

Valentine’s were saved for the last post of the day. Mrs. Hughes arranged them neatly in a box sorted by recipient, and Mr. Carson passed them out at the beginning of the servant’s tea, starting with the kitchen staff, and then went around the table. He handed six envelopes to Thomas next, and continued around the table, with three for Lily, a few for each hallboy and house maid, and so on, saving Price for last. He handed Price the box with all remaining cards.

Mr. Molesley looked into the box. “Are those all for you?”

Price blushed and put the box on the floor by his feet. “Seems that way.”

“How many were in there?” Thomas asked, looking quickly under the table.
“A dozen at least,” Mr. Molesley replied.

Lily tapped her spoon on her saucer and arranged her cards with her other hand. “And here I was excited to get three.”

Thomas stood and nodded to Lily and Miss Baxter. “While David's reading his dozen Valentine's, we ought to get everyone ready for their outing so we can all get ready for ours.”

“Are you coming with us after all, Mr. Barrow?” Miss Baxter asked.

“No,” Thomas answered, pulling Lily’s chair out as she stood. “I meant our separate outings. Where did you all decide to go?”

“Ice skating,” Daisy said, standing in front of Thomas to clear his plate. “Then back here for a special supper. You’re missing out.”

Thomas smiled at Daisy. “Oh, I think I’ll be alright.”

“Where are you going?” Daisy asked Thomas as she stacked other plates on his.

“Kait and I have plans,” Thomas replied.

“And what were your plans again, David?” Lily asked.

Price handed Daisy his plate. “To watch Sam’s children as I said before, why?”

“I’d forgotten, that’s all.”

Price gave Lily a skeptical look before excusing himself to go get ready.

Thomas met Price in room C once Lord Grantham was dressed for the evening. He dressed himself, then sifted through the box of Price’s Valentines. “Aren’t you going to open them?”

Price scooped the cards from the box and tossed them onto his bed. “They’re probably all from Daisy.”

“One’s from me.”

“Well yes, I hope you sent me a Valentine.”

Thomas sorted through his cards, deciding which to open first. “And I got you a gift.”

“I got you a little something, too,” Price said, opening the top dresser drawer.

“No, let’s open our cards first,” Thomas said, sitting on his bed as he selected the first card to open.

Price sat on his bed and picked a random card, reading it quickly before moving on to the next. He looked up when he heard a chuckle from Thomas.

“I assume this one is from you,” Thomas said.

“What does it say?”

“The outside says, ‘You remind me of a warm summer day’, ” Thomas began, showing Price the front of the card, which had a picture of a beach. “And inside it says, ‘because you make me very
Price smiled and opened another card. “That could be from anyone.” He looked up a moment later when Thomas laughed again.

“This one is definitely from you.”

“How do you know?”

“Because the outside is blank, and the inside says nothing. It’s just a drawing of a penis with a heart next to it.”

Price giggled and opened another card.

Thomas clicked his tongue. “You’re lucky I didn’t open these downstairs.”

“I knew you wouldn’t. That’s not just any penis, it's yours.”

Thomas looked closer at the drawing. “So it is.”

“It’s my form of poetry.”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Enough cards,” Price said, pushing the letters to the side. “Can we trade gifts now?”

Thomas opened one of his designated drawers in the dresser and took out two packages for Price. “Like I said, just a little something. I’ll pay for everything this evening, that’s the rest of your gift.”

“Everything?” Price asked as he accepted the boxes. “How many things are we doing?”

“I just mean the night’s on me.”

“I don’t mind splitting it.”

“Well I do. Open your gifts.

Price opened the top box and chuckled. “You remembered I said that I liked cigars, eh?”

“It’s really more a gift for me. I want to watch you smoke them.”

“Naughty.”

“The other’s definitely for you.”

Price placed the second box on the dresser and opened it, revealing a pocket watch tucked carefully into folded tissue paper. He lifted it with delicate fingers. “This is beautiful. It has to be at least fifty years old.”

“It is. It was my grandfather’s.”

Price looked up from the watch with wide eyes. “And you’re giving it to me?”

“I have your father’s ring, and now you have my grandfather’s watch. It was mother’s father’s, and I liked him very much. Jennie’s been hanging onto it for me for safe keeping all these years. I had her bring it when she was here.”
“I didn’t think I’d ever like a gift more than my necklace, but you’ve outdone yourself. I can’t even cry, I’m so touched that I’m stunned.”

“Come here, you,” Thomas said, grabbing Price’s cheeks, planting a hard kiss against Price’s lips. “I can’t wait to get you out tonight. Give me your gift so we can hit the town.”

Price opened his drawer in the dresser. “It seems a little inappropriate in light of your gift.”

“I love inappropriate gifts from you.”

“Then you’ll love this,” Price said, handing Thomas a thick envelope.

Thomas opened the envelope and pulled out a short stack of photographs. He flipped through them quickly once, then examined each slowly, one by one. They were of Price in various states of undress and arousal, clearly taken in Kait’s living room with natural sunlight from her large windows. Thomas also recognized the wingback chair of Kait’s that Price reclined on in two of the images.

“You’re absolutely right. I love these. When did you have time for them?”

“When I told you I was going for a walk with Marie.”

“I’m so glad I didn’t push you on that matter. I’m sure Kait thought of this as a gift for her, too.”

“Let’s just say I only asked for one picture, and she insisted on all of these. She dropped them off just yesterday while you were running errands.”

Thomas sat on the bed and looked through the pictures again. “You are such a beautiful man, David.”

“Look who’s talking. You can familiarize yourself with them later, let’s get going.”

“I need a minute before we can get going.”

“Ooh. You do like them.”

Thomas handed Price the pictures to put away safely. “I plan to become quite familiar with those, indeed.”

“One little thing,” Price said as he closed the dresser drawer. “I was hoping now that you have these pictures of me, you don’t need that picture of Eric.”

Thomas adjusted his trousers. “I’d forgotten I had it.”

“Liar,” Price said, smacking Thomas’s bottom.

“Truly. I don’t see him that way anymore, and I haven’t thought about that picture in a while.”

“Well, I don’t care if you’re lying. I like hearing you say that.”

Thomas checked his watch. “Are you ready?”

“I was ready five minutes ago.”

“Then let’s go, shall we?” Thomas asked with a grin. He helped Price into his overcoat and then put on his own. “Are we leaving at the same time, or is that too suspicious?”
“Five minutes apart. Chat with Lily for a while, she’ll like that. Meet you on the corner by the bakery.”

“Will you be eating biscuits while you wait?”

“I hadn’t thought of that, but maybe.”

Thomas went downstairs first and joined Lily in the kitchen. She was looking on while Daisy dipped formed balls of caramel in chocolate. Daisy told Thomas he couldn’t have any since he wasn’t spending the evening with the rest of them, which prompted Lily to take one and chew it with a smile while Thomas pretended to pout.

Price left while Thomas was engaged in the kitchen. He leaned against a lamp post by the bakery, which was still open despite being past the typical closing hour. People rushed in and out for last minute treats for their sweethearts, young and old, male and female. The warm atmosphere inside the bakery could be felt through the windows, and Price was too tempted not to go inside. He entered behind a young man who looked panic-stricken. The young man looked back at him and admitted that he had no idea what to buy for a first date. Price learned after chatting that it was the young man’s first date ever. He helped the stranger select a box of treats that no one could possibly dislike, then helped a woman struggling to balance her boxes while opening the door to leave. He liked the buzz and business of the bakery, and for a moment wondered if he was making a mistake not working in a shop like his brother. He didn’t have time to think about the subject much longer, as Thomas tapped him on the shoulder and led him back out to the street.

They walked several blocks to a bus terminal, and Price followed Thomas onto a bus without asking questions. He looked at all the couples holding hands and tried to be happy for them, rather than his usual jealousy for not being able to hold Thomas’s hand so boldly. He looked down at Thomas’s hand and imagined the warmth of Thomas’s palm against his. He noticed Thomas’s glove was slightly different than his others, including the button closure, which was mother-of-pearl.

“A gift from my sister for helping her,” Thomas explained when he noticed Price’s eyes on his hand. “She’s trying to get back into sewing.”

“It’s nice.”

“I’ll tell her you said so.”

The bus came to a stop at a busy intersection, and Price followed Thomas through a throng of couples until they reached quieter side streets. Price looked left and right into shop windows, then stopped under a large poster plastered to a brick wall. It said “Australia” in capital letters, with colorful images of a beach, trees, animals, and a city skyline.

“I read your book, and now there’s this poster. Australia is calling to me.”

“That’s quite the trek from England, don’t you think?”

“Would you go with me?”

Thom as rolled his eyes and continued walking. “Oh I see, we’re playing pretend again?”

Price caught up with Thomas, then jumped in front of him and walked backward. He took a deep breath and blew slowly through his lips, the cold air making it so he could see his breath. “Look, I’m you,” he said, scowling while holding an imaginary cigarette to his lips.
“I preferred the other pretend you were playing,” Thomas said, speeding up and stepping around Price. “We’re almost there.”

Thomas turned a corner into an ally and lead Price to a nondescript door, with no sign and just a single lamp above it. “And, now, we’re here.”

Price looked at the door doubtfully. Thomas knocked, and then said something quietly to the man who answered. The man looked Price over, then let the two inside. There was little light once the door shut, and nothing much to see in what light there was.

Thomas took off his hat and then removed Price’s. “Have you been here before?”

“This dark, empty room? No, I can’t say that I have.”

Thomas smiled in the dark. He lead Price to a hallway with a coat check. He handed their hats, overcoats, and scarves to the woman behind the half door, then grabbed Price’s hand.

Price jumped and pulled his hand back, looking quickly to see if the coat check woman was looking. She was, and she giggled.

“He’s never been here,” Thomas explained.

“What does that mean?” Price asked, looking at the woman again as Thomas took his hand a second time.

Thomas pulled Price by the hand down the rest of the hallway he’d been lead down by Eric several months before. Price stopped when he heard music, and Thomas tugged on his hand, pulling him along without looking back. They came to the curtain and Thomas squeezed Price’s hand as he pulled it aside. He continued to lead Price until they were at the edge of the dance floor before looking at Price’s face.

Flickering light from the stage danced on Price’s face as he watched the couples on the floor, making his eyes look like they were flashing in time to the music. Thomas let Price take in the scene for a minute until he couldn’t resist talking any longer.

“You promise you haven’t been here?” Thomas asked loudly over the music.

Price blinked but kept his eyes on the crowd. “Never anywhere like it.”

Thomas kept Price’s hand in his, and cradled Price’s cheek in the other.

Price’s heart sped from a trot to a gallop as he looked into Thomas’s eyes. He eyelids fluttered as Thomas leaned in, his legs suddenly unstable as Thomas’s lips grazed his.

Thomas let his lips graze Price’s cheek, and then his earlobe. “Do you want to kiss me?”

Price turned his head and caught Thomas’s lips with his, kissing him quickly, over and over. He inhaled as Thomas’s hands found their way to his waist, and exhaled as Thomas’s tongue found its way between his lips. Thomas walked backward, pulling Price as they kissed, bumping against other bodies until they were on the dance floor. Thomas’s hands felt their way to Price’s shoulder and palm, and he began dancing, pulling away from the kiss as they fell in step with the music.

No words were necessary, Price thought as he looked up into Thomas’s eyes, which had little smile lines gathered at the corners. Thomas looked more satisfied than when he’d gazed at the Bates’s new baby, and Price felt nearly weightless being lead in time to the music while Thomas looked at
him with such joyful contentment. He kissed Thomas again as the song ended, and let Thomas
sweep him up again as the next song started. They danced closer to the stage, and Price looked up
at the singer, who looked down at him and smiled. The singer seemed to radiate in the light
between her sequin gown and jeweled headband. Maybe everything was just glowing, Price
thought as he looked around. Or maybe this is just what being truly happy feels like.

“Do you want a drink?” Thomas asked when the song ended.

“You don’t like it when I drink.”

“That’s true under certain circumstances. I don’t think this is one of those times, though, do you?”

“No,” Price said, standing on his toes to try and see the bar. “Only good things will come of this
evening. I’d love a drink.”

“A sidecar?”

“Adorable, you remembered.” Price caught sight of the bar at the other end of the club. He put his
arm through Thomas’s and pulled him toward it.

Thomas leaned onto the bar and ordered drinks before the person beside him could order first. He
nodded toward the balcony. “Want to go up there and sit while we drink?”

“Can I sit in your lap?”

Thomas laughed louder and with a bigger smile than Price had ever seen on Thomas’s lips.

“What?”

“You’re just funny, David,” he said with another big smile.

Price took the drinks from the bartender and waited for Thomas to pay. “Thank you!” he said,
raising the glasses to Thomas.

Thomas took his glass and clinked it against Price’s. He took Price’s hand again and brought him
to the balcony, and picked a small table overlooking the dance floor. The tables were packed in
tight, a glass luminary in the center of each. The balcony was mostly dark except for the
luminaries, and all faces were lit mostly by the intimate little light on each table. Thomas pulled a
chair out for Price, but he nodded for Thomas to sit, and then sat sideways on Thomas’s lap.

Price held his glass to Thomas’s lips. “Want a taste?”

“I’ll taste it on your lips,” Thomas said with a flirtatious grin. He kissed Price softly, then licked
Price’s lower lip lightly.

“Yummy?”

“Very.”

Price wrapped his arm around Thomas and looked down at the busy dance floor. Many people
were dressed in theme, with fabric and paper hearts and garlands pinned to suits and dresses. The
lights above the dance floor slowly transitioned between colors, from red, to yellow, to blue,
washing everyone in a glow of strange light. It all felt dreamlike to Price, especially while perched
on Thomas’s lap with no one batted an eye.

Thomas had no interest in watching the crowd. His gaze stayed on Price, watching him watch the
others. He rubbed Price’s knee with his gloved hand and sipped his whiskey from the other. A minute later, he looked up as the chair beside him was pulled from the table.

Eric bent at the knee so Thomas could hear him over the music. “May I sit for a minute? I won’t stay long.”

Price’s back was to Eric, and he turned when Thomas spoke into his ear.

“Is it alright if he sits for a moment?” Thomas asked Price.

“Of course it’s alright,” Price said, swiveling on Thomas’s lap to face Eric.

Eric pulled his chair close to the table and set his drink next to Price’s. His jacket was off, collar unfastened, tie undone, and sleeves rolled high. His hair was slightly damp with sweat, and he brushed it from his forehead with the back of his hand, smiling warmly at his two friends occupying the same chair. He unpinned a felt heart from his chest and pinned it to Price’s lapel. “I won’t stay long. I just wanted to say hello.”

“I’m not in a rush to kick you out,” Price said.

“You may when I tell you who I’m here with,” Eric replied. “Only here as friends, I should add.” He leaned onto the table to see over the railing. “He's down there smack in the middle of the floor, dancing with anyone and everyone.”

Price followed Eric’s eyes, knowing exactly who he’d see dancing. Teddy was in the same state of dress as Eric, other than his braces, which he’d dropped to his thighs.

“As friends?” Thomas asked.

Eric nodded and sipped his drink. “Don’t say I said anything, but I tried for more. He’s not interested. I’m fine with it, it’s nice to have a friend who’s a friend and nothing else.”

“He’s making me want to dance again,” Thomas said as he watched Teddy switch dance partners.

“Go dance with him,” Price suggested.

Thomas balked. “Me and him?”

“Go on and do it,” Price said, finishing his drink. “Take advantage while I’m on cloud nine. I'll dance with Eric, which should be amusing since he’s even taller than you are.”

“I haven’t danced with Ted myself since getting here,” Eric said, finishing his drink as well.

“We can all take a turn,” Thomas said.

“Maybe not me,” Price replied.

Eric stood, then took Price’s hand to help him stand. “It may do you both good to have a dance together.”

“We’ll see how the night goes.”

Teddy parted with his partner when he saw Eric approach. He took Eric’s arm, then saw Thomas and Price standing beside him. He smiled at both and swallowed his disappointment that Thomas was arm in arm with Price.
“I thought maybe we could switch partners,” Eric told Teddy. He held Teddy’s arm out for Thomas to take, and took Price into his own.

Thomas was whisked back to New Year’s once Teddy’s arms were on him, the scent of Teddy’s cologne and tobacco now on him as well. The same flustered, boyish feelings he’d had for Teddy during the New Year’s visit were back, but Thomas accepted them for what they were. A simple crush, he told himself. He looked to his left and saw Price and Eric laughing as they tried to match steps, then looked back to Teddy, finally meeting his eyes.

“I see you’re still styling your hair the way I taught you,” Thomas said casually.

“Every day since leaving Downton. Do you have any of the cigarettes left that I gave you, or did you use them up right away?”

“One left.”

“Saving it for a special occasion?”

Thomas looked up at the stage, needing a moment to look at something other than Teddy’s azure eyes. “I didn’t want to finish them all. I like having one available should I ever need to taste that tobacco again.”

“Or you could have just called or written for more. You know how to contact me.”

“Looks like I didn’t have to, we’re here together now, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” Teddy said, squeezing Thomas's hand. “It seems fate’s done me a favor.”

Thomas’s cheeks grew warm, and he was a bit annoyed that flattery from a handsome man still made him blush at his age. “David’s here, too. Maybe fate wants you to dance with him.”

“Then fate can go suck a lemon.”

Thomas laughed as hard as he’d laughed at the bar earlier.

“Heavens,” Teddy said with awe, “you are so incredibly beautiful when you laugh.”

“Thank you, but you may want to stop flirting. My boyfriend is right over there.”

“Fate can suck a lemon about that, too.”

Thomas lead Teddy to Price and Eric. “Switch,” he said, letting go of Teddy as he reached for Eric’s hand.

Eric gave Price a wink and handed him off to Teddy. Eric lead Thomas in a fox trot, trotting away from Price and Teddy.

Price held his hand out for Teddy to take.

“No, thank you.”

“Would an apology help?” Price asked with his hand still extended.

“If I thought you’d ever mean an apology.”

Price grabbed Teddy’s hand pulled Teddy toward him. He waited for Teddy to position his hands
to lead. They stood ready to dance, but stayed still. “I treated you poorly. You didn’t deserve it. I have reasons I could explain, but I believe I know you well enough to know you’d rather not hear them. I’m sorry, Teddy.”

Teddy lead Price in a slow waltz. His expression was stoic, and Price wasn’t sure if Teddy had even heard him as minutes passed in silence. Teddy finally cleared his throat and looked down at Price. “It’s hard to hold you this close without missing you terribly.”

“We can stop.”

Teddy shook his head. “I want friendships with Eric and Thomas, and that means I’m stuck with you now, too. I need to get used to it.”

“There are worse people to be stuck with, surely.”

“Not one who hurt me like you have.”

Price sighed and looked over Teddy’s shoulder. “I’ve never had someone dance angrily with me before.”

“I’m bitter, not angry. You smell as good as ever, and it’s hard to resist touching your hair to see what the new haircut feels like. It’s difficult not to turn this dance into an embrace, and then into a kiss. I don’t want to love you anymore, David, but clearly I can’t stop.”

“Are these similar to the things you’ve said to Thomas.”

Teddy huffed. “No, I’m not in love with him. Though I could see that happening easily under different circumstances. What about you? Do you actually think you’re in love with him?”

“I know I am,” Price answered resolutely. “I love him dearly. If we lived in a world that was like this club, I’d have proposed to him and we’d have probably walked down the aisle by now.”

“Good, then. He clearly deserves nothing less than devotion.”

The song ended and Teddy let go of Price. He beckoned Eric and Thomas back, then danced away with Eric.

“Well?” Thomas asked, pulling Price close.

“Awkward, but better than I anticipated. Bare in mind, I anticipated his hands around my throat rather than my shoulder.”

Teddy was glad to put distance between him and Price, but felt somewhat positive about the exchange, hoping it might be another step toward moving on. He smiled as a bead of sweat rolled from Eric’s cheek, and looked down as it landed on Eric’s shoulder. Something caught his eye, and he moved Eric’s collar aside with his thumb. He stopped dancing and pulled his collar over further.

“What is that?”

Eric touched his skin just under the collar. “Oh, that. A scratch.”

Teddy pulled Eric’s shirt out at the throat and looked down. He could see the top of Eric’s chest, and another mark. “You call those scratches?”

“They’re nothing. Why don’t we get another drink, hmm?”

Teddy followed Eric to the bar, but just before they reached it, he grabbed him by the arm and
pulled him to the restroom. Another man left as they entered, and Teddy pushed Eric in and locked the door. “I want to see. Tug up your shirt up.”

Eric breathed quickly and deeply. “There’s nothing to see.”

“Then prove it.”

Eric tugged his shirt from his trousers, then pulled it and his undershirt up to his ribs. He revealed no less than a dozen marks on his stomach, some healing, some relatively fresh.

“Eric, what in Heaven's name is all that?”

Eric pulled his shirt down again and held it in place. “It’s nothing you need to worry about.”

“No? You’ve been beaten, on what looks like multiple occasions, but I should go along my merry way and ignore it?”

Eric looked into Teddy’s eyes silently.


Eric laughed. “Just be glad you have no real interest in me and my twisted ways. I asked for those marks,” he explained. “I paid for them,” he whispered.

Teddy moved Eric’s hand from his shirt and lifted it again slowly. He examined the marks lightly with the tips of his fingers. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand.”

Eric watched Teddy run his fingers over his injured flesh. “You don’t need to hear about it.”

“I say I do.”

“I wish you could read between the lines and not make me say it.”

“I would if I could, but I can’t figure why you’d pay someone to hurt you.”

Eric pulled down his braces and then unbuttoned and removed his shirt, revealing marks on his chest. He turned to the side and showed Teddy his back, which made his stomach look like child’s play by comparison. “It’s sexual, Ted.”

Teddy kept his eyes on Eric’s back, but wanted to look away. “God, you don’t mean a prostitute, do you? To do this?”

Eric put his shirt back on and tucked it back into his trousers. “That and more.”

“But why?”

“I’m sure there’s some explanation, but I’ve yet to figure it out. Even when I was young, I misbehaved just to get paddled after school.”

Teddy pictured Eric as an adolescent boy, giving himself over to a beating rather than cowering from one. He couldn’t bring himself to imagine whatever Eric was doing with strange men in the night. He met Eric’s eyes, and it was as if an entirely different person was looking back in light of his revelation. “I wish I could say I understand.”

Eric fixed his tie and pulled his braces back over his shoulders. “I wouldn’t expect you to.”
“How often do you do this?”

“I used to go a few times a year, maybe every other month at most. I’ve been down lately. I went twice this week.”

Teddy buttoned the top button of Eric’s shirt and then tied his tie for him. “So it’s not sexual. You’re going because you feel down.”

“It’s both.”

“No,” Teddy said, taking Eric’s hands in his. “Sex can’t heal your heart, if that’s what’s hurting.”

Eric rubbed his thumbs on the backs of Teddy’s hands. “You know very little about what I do, or who I am, really. I want you to know more, but I probably just ruined the chances of that ever happening.”

“On the contrary. I need to know more now.”

“I’d rather not say more, at least not tonight. This is already more than I’ve ever told anyone.”

Teddy hugged Eric. “Then I’ll talk. The next time you’re down, and want to get hurt, telephone me instead. Just try it, just once, if not for you then for me.”

Someone knocked on the door, and Eric moved to open it.

Teddy blocked Eric’s path and held him by the shoulders. “Will you promise to call me next time instead of calling whoever does this to you?”

“Well it’s sexual, as I said, and you’re not interested in me that way.”

“That’s a little part of whatever this is. Promise me.”

Eric moved past Teddy as the knocking grew louder. “Alright, alright, I promise you, but it could be as soon as tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow’s fine if that’s what you need. I might need a distraction myself after having to spend time cheek to cheek with David, anyhow.”

Teddy took Eric to the bar and bought him the drink he promised before their talk in the restroom. He bought another per Eric’s request, then another, and then deciding Eric had enough, brought him up to the balcony.

“Thomas doesn’t know,” Eric mumbled as Teddy took him up the spiral metal staircase.

“About your escapades?”

“Yes. I stopped going when we started sending letters back and forth. I started again when David came fully into the picture.”

Teddy put his arm around Eric’s shoulder as they searched for a free table. He found Thomas and Price sitting side by side, two empty chairs across from them. “Mind if we drop in?”

“Not at all,” Thomas said, pushing out the chair by his side.

Teddy helped Eric into the chair and patted his shoulders. “No more dancing for him tonight, I’m afraid.”
“Him, neither,” Thomas said, jerking his thumb in Price’s direction. Price was humming to the music with his eyes closed as he swayed slowly in his chair.

“Do you think they’ll survive a few minutes if the two of us sober chaps take another turn on the dance floor?”

“Can you sit in this chair until I get back?” Thomas asked Price.

Price nodded, his head lolling as though it were too heavy for his neck.

“Keep an eye on him,” Thomas told Eric before following Teddy back to the dance floor.

“I’m perfectly fine, I’d just prefer to sit a while,” Eric called after them, then slid from his chair to the one Thomas had occupied. He put his elbow on the table and propped his chin up with his fist, and watched Price enjoy the music.

Price finally felt Eric’s presence and opened his eyes, one at a time. “Where’d he go?”

Eric nodded his chin to the dance floor.

Price searched the faces in the crowd until he saw Thomas’s glossy hair reflecting the colorful lights. “Why do they have to dance so close together?”

“That’s usually a requirement for dancing.”

“No. Not like that. I don’t like it.”

Eric leaned closer to Price. “Thomas is going home with you regardless, so what does it matter if he has a little fun on the floor?”

“Unless stupid Teddy seduces him.”

“Goodness, ‘stupid’? Don’t let teacher catch you using that word.”

“I hate him.”

Eric tapped Price’s nose with his knuckle. “You’re adorable.”

Price leaned closer to Eric. “You’re not so bad, either,” he said, grinning at Eric’s sweaty hair and flushed cheeks.

Eric tapped Price’s nose again, then patted his cheek. “The look on your face right now is the one I mistook for interest. You get a playful little gleam in your eye, and if you weren’t so taken I’d think you wanted to eat me whole right now.”

Price scratched his head and looked away. “That’s just my face.”

“Then you should be cautious of your face if you don’t want people getting the wrong idea.”

“I’ll take your advice under consideration.”

Eric rested his arm on the back of Price’s chair and cocked his head. “You look like a young man I met in Switzerland. I made an excuse for a second trip just to see him again.”

“You’ve been so many places,” Price said. “I only ever traveled because the government made me, and it certainly wasn’t an enjoyable experience.”
A waitress stopped at the table to see if either man needed a drink. Eric cut off Price’s order and asked for two glasses of water. “You can go places if that’s what you want. You should go places. Take your art to new heights.”

“While I climb the Swiss alps?”

“Climb whatever you want, wherever you want.”

“That’s a lovely fantasy, but it’s a big world and I’m a very small person. I barely have the means to travel the length of England, nevermind venture across her borders.”

Eric pointed to the dance floor. “You think the world is that large? Look how the four of us wound up in our strange friendship. It’s like that when you leave this country, too. The more you open your heart to people, the smaller the world feels. It’s not a big, imposing place, so don’t be intimidated.”

“Travel with what means? I suppose I could join a traveling circus, possibly something in the side show. I could learn to swallow swords, I’ve a bit of practice in that department.”

Eric chuckled. “That’s a bit crass.”

“I’m a bit crass, so I’ve been told.”

Eric kept his arm around the chair, despite wanting to move it to Price’s shoulders. “If I could find a way for you to travel with me, would you do it?”

The waitress returned with water, and asked again if there was something stronger she could get them. Price reluctantly declined, then played with his water glass.

“You didn’t answer me.”

“How could I travel with you, even if I were interested?”

Eric let his arm go to Price’s shoulder, though only to emphasize his next words. “I’m working on it, but before I go any further, I need to know. Would you travel with me for six months? A year? It’d put a flame under your art career if you illustrated a series of stories, not just a column here or there.”

Price turned away from Eric and looked at the dance floor.

“Thomas would wait for you,” Eric said, knowing exactly what Price was thinking. ‘He’d wait forever for you, you know that.”

“I don’t want to make him wait.”

“I know he’d rather you follow your dreams than follow him like a puppy.”

Price looked back to Eric. “But I am his puppy.”

“No you are not, you’re his equal. That’s one of the many things I’m sure he loves about you,” Eric assured him. He slid his arm from Price back to the chair. “Spring is coming, and things will get busier for me. Perhaps by the summer you can join me. There’s time to figure all of that out, but for now, just tell me if I should keep working to make it a reality.”

Price gulped his water and pushed the glass to the center of the table. “This is a lot to take in, especially when I’ve taken in so much alcohol.”
“You sound sober enough.”

“Years of practice,” Price side with a smile. “Have you mentioned any of this to Thomas?”

“No, should I have?”

“I just want to know what he thinks.”

“He’d be glad for you.”

“I don’t know if he would. He can be jealous.”

Eric noticed Thomas and Teddy were returning, and switched back to the chair Teddy left him in. “Then he’ll have to learn to work on that.”

Thomas took his seat again, but Teddy stood behind Eric and squeezed his shoulders. “Is it time to get you home, or can you stay out a bit longer?”

Eric patted Teddy’s hands. “I should probably get some sleep. I have to be up early.”

“Not as early as the two of us, I bet,” Thomas said, grabbing Price’s hand.

Price squeezed Thomas’s hand in return. “Then maybe we should get back, too.”

The music changed to a different tempo and the dance floor cleared. A man and woman stepped into the center of the floor hand in hand, then began dancing a tango. The four friends in the balcony all leaned toward the railing to watch.

“Is that a dance you ever learned?” Price asked Thomas.

“No, that wasn’t popular here until my mum was long gone.”


“I don’t think I’m that coordinated,” Price said, pulling Thomas closer to his side.

“You won’t know until you try,” Eric said.

Teddy sunk into the chair next to Eric. “Do you know it?”

“I learned it in its birthplace.”

“Argentina?” Teddy asked, impressed.

“Buenos Aires herself.”


“He’s trying to woo Teddy. Let him.”

They all applauded when the dancers finished their routine. Next, a singer came from backstage, dressed in a short, revealing dress and feather boa. She moved her hips to the rhythm of the drums, punctuated by wailing horns.

“Boring,” Price lamented. “I’d rather watch a man move his hips while wearing feathers.”
Eric leaned on the banister, a distant look in his eye. “I don’t know, I quite like watching her.”

“Of course you do,” Thomas replied under his breath.

Price slid his arm around Thomas’s waist. “Another beautiful evening, thanks to you.”

“Even with our uninvited guests?” Thomas asked.

“Nothing could tarnish tonight, not a thousand Teddys.”

Thomas chuckled, then kissed Price’s cheek. He waited for Price to turn and look at him, then caught his lips, kissing him lightly. Price knew the evening was coming to a close, and that he might not be back to the club for some time. He seized the final moment to embrace Thomas in public and returned Thomas’s kiss fervently, caressing Thomas’s tongue with his own, pulling Thomas toward him by the waist. Thomas chuckled as Price’s fingers slid from his waist under his waistband.

“Ah ah ah,” Thomas said, holding Price’s hand. He raised it to his lips and kissed the tips of Price’s fingers. “I don’t think they allow that here, no matter how relaxed the atmosphere may seem.”

Eric rested his chin against Thomas’s shoulder, opposite Price. “I wouldn’t mind.”

“Oh please,” Teddy said, pulling Eric from Thomas gently, “you’d buy tickets to the show.”

Price smiled at Eric. “First row seats for you.”

“And I think that’s our cue to leave,” Thomas said, pulling Price to his feet.

Teddy stood as well. “I’m driving Eric home. Could you both use a lift?”

“We probably shouldn’t arrive home together,” Thomas said.

“Then I’ll drop you a few blocks away. Let’s go.”

Price dawdled as they left, lagging behind, taking in every group and couple they passed. A young woman blew him a kiss, and he spun around to blow one back, then blew kisses to other strangers before passing back through the curtains to the darkened hallway.

Thomas and Teddy retrieved the checked items and helped their dates into their coats and hats. Teddy’s car was brought around, a different model than he had driven to Downton. “It’s his special occasion car,” Price explained.

“Have you ridden in it?” Thomas asked.

“Once or twice,” Price answered.

Thomas opened the back door for Price, then slid in beside him. Thomas gave Teddy directions from the back seat, but otherwise the ride back to the Crawley’s London home was quiet, everyone enjoying the silence after several hours in the rowdy, boisterous club. Teddy asked Eric to light two cigarettes, one for himself and one for Thomas. Eric passed Thomas’s cigarette over his shoulder and offered one to Price.

“He’d never smoke those, even if he smoked,” Teddy told Eric.

“Oh. I never knew that.”

Well I knew that, Thomas thought. He rolled his window down a crack and held the cigarette by the opening for Price’s benefit. He looked at Price, who was watching the shop windows whiz by as they drove, then to Eric, who was staring dreamily at Teddy, and Teddy, who pretended to ignore Eric’s gaze while smiling a bit about it. Thomas realized he’d never driven around with a group of friends. He took off his hat and rested his head against the window, inhaling the cold air when he wasn’t inhaling his cigarette.

Price leaned across the seat and tapped Thomas’s shoulder. “In a few weeks, you won’t even have to worry about getting back at a certain time after a night like this. Your life will be yours to do with it as you please.”

“We’ll see if your brother agrees when I show up to work groggy the next morning.” Thomas replied. He looked back out his window and smiled, knowing Price was right, and that he would be Lord of his own life in just a few weeks time.
While dressing Lord Grantham for the day, Thomas shared the news that he would be leaving employment shortly after they returned to Downton. Lord Grantham asked which house had enticed Thomas to leave the Crawley family, assuming Thomas finally found a role as butler in another home, and was surprised to learn Thomas was leaving service altogether.

“I suppose you’re just the start of a trend,” Lord Grantham said as he watched Thomas brush his lapel. “Service isn’t as prestigious as it used to be.”

“I wouldn’t say that, my Lord,” Thomas replied, his voice light, a reassuring smile on his lips. “I’ll never hold a position more prestigious than the one I have now.”

“Then why leave?”

Thomas stopped brushing and met Lord Grantham’s eyes.

“I didn’t mean to sound harsh.”

“You didn’t,” Thomas said, resuming brushing. He moved on to the back of Lord Grantham’s jacket. “It’s just time for me to try something new.”

“How did you find this new job?”

There was no reason to sidestep the truth, Thomas thought. “I’ll be working for David’s brother at his watchmaking shop.”

“So David’s to blame for us losing our Barrow?” Lord Grantham chuckled.

“I suppose he is,” Thomas replied while he put the brush away. “Is there anything else I can help with before you head down?”

“No thank you,” Lord Grantham said, taking his handkerchief from his dressing table. He tucked it into his pocket while looking at Thomas thoughtfully. “I remember you once mentioning that you weren’t popular downstairs. How are the other staff reacting to the news that you’re leaving?”

Thomas began tidying up the small dressing room. “Most of them don’t know yet. I plan to tell a few today and let the news spread while I’m out on my half day. I assume everyone will know by the time I return. Saves me the trouble of having to tell people myself.”

“You don’t want to tell people?”

“As you said, I’m not exactly popular. I’m content with people whispering their relief that I’m leaving behind my back rather than having to see it in their eyes when I tell them.”

“You may be surprised,” Lord Grantham said, watching Thomas fold his pajamas with crisp, clean
motions. “It was a long time ago that we had that conversation. Things may have changed. In fact, Lady Grantham has many kind things to say about you these days.”

“I appreciate you saying that, my Lord.”

Lord Grantham checked himself in the mirror one last time before heading to breakfast. “If you really don’t want to be the one to tell people, I’ll tell Lady Mary. Then we can be sure everyone’s heard the news before you’re back this evening.”

Thomas smiled. “I shouldn’t comment on that. I have a similar reputation.”

“Would you like me to tell her?”

Thomas straightened his back, imagining Lady Mary spreading the gossip, making the news seem more exciting than it was. “Sure,” he said with a grin, “why not?”

Thomas visited Price and Son that afternoon, trudging against a heavy snow, pushing the door closed behind himself against the angry wind.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d make it today,” Sam said, greeting Thomas with a handshake.

“A plague of frogs or locusts wouldn’t have stopped me,” Thomas said, shaking off his hat. “It can get suffocating being so packed in that little house.”

Sam laughed. “I love that you think of that mansion as a little house. You’re in for a bit of a culture shock, aren’t you?”

“I didn’t mean it that way. If you’d seen how your brother and I lived, you’d know I’m stepping up in the world by stepping out of there.”

“Not everything is gilded in the mansion?”

“No. Nothing glimmers in the dormitory.”

Sam poured a hot cup of tea for Thomas, then took him on a tour of the shop. He showed Thomas the cases of watches and where he kept the keys, the tools up front, the workspace in back, the cash register and the instructions for how to use it, and then finished by showing him a drawer full of slips of paper.

“Bills,” Sam explained. “Marie was going to come today to help me sort through them, but the weather’s not child-friendly, so she’s home in front of the fire with the little ones.”

Thomas pulled the stack of paper from the drawer and flipped through it. “What was she going to do, exactly, that you can’t on your own?”

Sam plopped onto a tall stool behind the counter and motioned for Thomas to sit on another. “I’m simply terrible with numbers. Budgets. Deadlines. Fine job for someone like me, this one is,” Sam laughed, a hint of nerves in the chuckle.

“You’ve made it this far.”

“Despite myself.”

Thomas took a closer look at each bill. “A few of these are overdue.”

“I know it.”
“And yet you haven’t taken the time to send a few checks?” Thomas asked with the same light but disapproving tone he gave the hallboys when they goofed off instead of following his orders.

Sam hung his head and looked up at Thomas. “In truth, I need you here to manage me more than anything else. It’s not a lack of money that keeps me from paying the bills, so don’t worry about anything like that. It’s just me. If I’ve learned anything since my dad passed, it’s that I’m not someone who should be a leader.”

“I think you may be being a bit too hard on yourself.”

Sam shrugged. “I’m just facing facts. I guess it’s why I’m so worried about you changing your mind. I might if I were you.”

“Are you trying to turn me away?” Thomas asked with the same tone again.

“No, never think that.” Sam hopped off the stool and plugged in an electric kettle. “More tea?”

Thomas slid off his stool and joined Sam by the kettle. “I can tend to this if you’d like. I’m sure there’s plenty you should be doing right now besides making me tea.”

Sam put up his hand and shook his head. “You shouldn’t have to serve tea ever again if you don’t want to.”

Thomas took two tea cups from the top of a precarious stack and set them on the counter. “It’s kind of you to say that, but I don’t mind. Now, get back to work so I can watch before I have to leave.”

Thomas prepared tea while Sam settled in at the workstation behind the counter. He stayed an hour and watched Sam work, looking back and forth between Sam’s hands and the pile of bills, sorting them in order by which bills Sam should pay first.

The wind and snow let up over the course of Thomas’s visit. He chose to walk a slightly longer route back to the house, and as he passed a restaurant window, he noticed Lady Mary having tea with Lady Edith. Lady Edith’s shoulders were rounded as she spoke, and Lady Mary had a look of genuine interest on her face as she listened. Thomas wished he could walk in and join them for tea, listening to whatever story Lady Edith was sharing that engaged her generally aloof sister.

Lady Edith had been relating exactly how difficult life was off on her own. She couldn’t find a nanny she truly trusted, and had already gone through two. She hired a part time cook when food preparation was much harder than she anticipated, and a woman to come and clean every few days. The magazine was running her ragged, especially the finances, something that seemed to work like magic before she became aware of the particulars.

“No one ever prepared us for a world like this,” Lady Edith told her sister. “I can hold my own in polite society, and that’s about it. I’m a little bitter, frankly. Learning some skills to function in the real world would have done me more good than, say, seven years of embroidery instruction, or twelve years of piano lessons.”

“You can’t blame mama and papa,” Lady Mary said as she replenished tea for Lady Edith, and then herself. “They prepared us for the world we were meant to live in. It’s the world that changed things. I don’t think you should feel too sorry for your situation. You just need to find the right help. You’re lucky that’s even an option. How many people are living in the ‘real world’ without things like nannies or cooks or cleaners?”

Lady Edith sighed and pulled her tea cup and saucer closer. “I know all of that, but it doesn’t change my life. All of those people were given the skills to take care of themselves. I’m learning it
all as an adult. At least Marigold will learn how to be independent.” Lady Edith laughed at herself and shook her head. “Even getting dressed, I thought I’d been doing it myself so long I’d have no trouble on my own. I never thought about the laundering and care of my clothing. I’ve taken so much for granted in my life.”

Lady Mary’s eyebrows raised slightly as a thought occurred to her. “You could hire Miss Benham. We’ll no longer need her when Anna is back to work, and I believe she can do more than just the tasks of a lady’s maid. Perhaps she could help with Marigold, for example. You should come back to the house and talk with her.”

Lady Edith considered the possibility of hiring Lily. “Shouldn’t I talk to Mrs. Hughes first?”

“Why? Miss Benham is soon to be unemployed, what’s to ask? If you’re truly concerned about that, I can talk to Mrs. Hughes.”

“Or maybe you should ask Miss Benham first, before I talk with her, to know if she’d even be interested.”

Lady Mary rolled her eyes as she took a finger sandwich from the platter set in the center of the table. “Excuses, excuses. Talk to her for yourself. You’ll never become an independent person if you can’t even talk directly to the help.”

Back at the house, Lily was pressing her lips together to prevent a smile as Price modeled his new glasses for her.

“You don’t like them?” he frowned, looking at his reflection in the window.

“Will you have to wear them all the time?”

“Just for reading,” Price said, taking the gold-framed spectacles from his face. He folded the wire arms carefully and tucked the glasses back into the leather pouch they came in.

“Then who cares how they look?” Lily said, letting the smile spread to her dimples.

“You’re just trying to make me think I look silly. I bet I look fine.”

“If you’re so certain, but them back on and ask around, especially whoever you may want to impress. Like Lady Edith, maybe?”

Price looked around, hoping no one heard the comment. “Why on earth would you say something like that? Joking and teasing is fine, but if someone thought you were serious I could get in trouble.”

“Maybe I am being serious,” Lily said, nodding to a further corner of the hall. “It seems like you might have a little thing for her,” she whispered once she and Price were further from anyone who may overhear. “I just want to make sure you’re being careful.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Several reasons,” Lily said, straightening her spine. “This afternoon, for one. When she arrived unannounced, your face lit up like a Christmas tree.”

Price crossed his arms and stuffed his hands under his elbows. “I like her, but not in that way. Don’t suggest it again. Really, Lily, it could cause problems for me, and for her.”
“I’m more concerned your feelings may cause problems. What if someone else saw the look on your face?”

“Lily, I swear to you, I have no inappropriate feelings about a single Crawley. It’s actually sweet that you care enough to be concerned.”

“I wouldn’t call it ‘caring’.”

“You care about me,” Price whispered in a teasing sing-song voice.

“Who do you care about if it’s not… her?”

Price dropped his sing-song voice and the smile that had come with it. “Why?”

“Curiosity. Is it… someone in the kitchen? When Sam was here it sure sounded like he might have known a little something about your feelings and… the other woman in the staff named after a flower besides me.”

“No, and why are you avoiding Daisy’s name?”

“I’m being thoughtfully cautious.”

“Yes, it’s so thoughtful putting me on the spot like this.”

“Fine, don’t tell me,” Lily said, twisting on the ball of her foot.

“I feel nothing romantic about any women here, alright? I’m still not sure why you care, but since it seems like you do, that’s the truth.” Price pulled his glasses from their pouch and put them on, letting them rest on the end of his nose. “But they’ll all have romantic feelings for me when they get a look at me in these.”

Lily carefully adjusted Price’s glasses so that they were in place, and then adjusted them again until they were straight. She fixed his hair and then patted his shoulder. “I think at least one of them already has those feelings. The flower one.”

“Well that’s no secret.”

“Are you sure you have none for her?”

“Lily, why?” Price said, purposely setting his glasses askew. “You don’t still have feelings for me, do you? Do I need to walk around like this until I’m no longer attractive to you?”

“Oh, please!” Lily said, giggling. “We’re friends by now, I just want to make sure you’re not causing problems for yourself.”

“I’m not,” Price said, taking off the glasses. He placed them over Lily’s ears and then slid them up the bridge of her nose. “Very pretty.”

Lily looked at her reflection in the window. “Oh good Heavens, I look like my mother.”

Price looked at Lily’s reflection. “My goodness, that you do.”

Lily wrinkled her nose and handed back the glasses. “You’re actually endearing in these. I never like admitting that sort of thing about you.”

“You care about me” Price said again, singing the words, before heading back to work.
Lady Edith spent the evening with her family. She sent for Marigold, who was delighted as always to see everyone, especially the other children. She begged to spend the night, and Lady Edith took advantage of the opportunity to spend a few hours in the office.

The office was almost never empty, and that evening was no exception. Despite the late hour, six staff members were buried in their work, including Eric, who was finishing his latest piece, due in just two days. Lady Edith said a general hello to all before going to her office. Not long after she settled into her work, Eric came to her door with a folder in his hand.

“May I have a moment of your time, Edith?” Eric asked, holding up the folder.

“Always,” Lady Edith said, waving for him to sit.

Eric shut the door and put the folder on the desk before sitting opposite Lady Edith. “I’ve written a proposal. I was going to present it to you next week, but I’ll take the fact that we’re both here at this late hour as a sign that we should discuss it now.”

Lady Edith raised an eyebrow as she took the folder from the desk. “A proposal for what?”

Eric sat forward, resting his forearms on his thighs. He looked serious and intense, the same look he always got when just returning home from a trip, eager to pour his stories out to Lady Edith as soon as he could get her ear. “This summer, I’d like to publish a series of illustrated stories. I know, there’s always an illustration along with each piece, but those are just based on my words. Wouldn’t it be interesting for someone to travel with me and illustrate the story from their perspective? It would be so much more engaging for the reader, don’t you think? And inspiring for me, I know their drawings will shed things in a different light for me, too. The proposal says it better than I’m saying it now, I should stop rambling and let you read it.”

Lady Edith opened the folder and flipped through a few pages. “It sounds like a lovely idea. You didn’t have to go through the trouble of formally presenting it. But, Eric, I just don’t have the budget to send someone with you.”

“You didn’t even read it,” Eric said, walking around the desk. He leaned over Lady Edith’s shoulder and turned to a page full of numbers. “Here, here’s how it can work. Read this.”

Lady Edith humored Eric and read the page. “It’s still more costly than sending you by yourself. I’m sorry you went to so much trouble just for me to say no. Or, at least, no for now. Let’s talk again in six months and see where things are.”

Eric sat on the desk and took Lady Edith’s hand. “This would be a chance for an amatuer artist to turn into a professional. What an incredible experience for their resume. And wasn’t that what was most important to Michael Gregson? To give amateurs a chance to be heard? To be seen?”

Lady Edith took a deep breath and then took her hand from Eric’s. “We’re friends, but you’re beginning to cross the line.”

Eric hopped to his feet and then fell to his knees beside Lady Edith. He grabbed the arm of her chair with both hands. “I’m just reminding you of the roots of this magazine. You’re so focused on the operations, with good reason, but we’re about art, entertainment, information. The passion is as important as the business side of things, isn’t it? Maybe more so?”

Lady Edith patted Eric’s arm and handed him back his folder. “I’m sorry, it’s just not in the budget right now, no matter how much I’d like to help.”

Eric rose to his feet. “What if I took a cut in pay?”
"You’re so determined," Lady Edith said with a light laugh. "Perhaps in the fall," she said, turning back to her work.

Eric put the folder on the edge of Lady Edith’s desk and went to the door. "What if I found another way to finance an illustrator, at least in part?"

Lady Edith looked up and sighed, giving a small shrug. "Then we could talk about it sooner than the fall."

Eric took the proposal from the desk before leaving, encouraged by a sudden new idea to help Price.

________

Thomas strolled through the halls downstairs leaving smiles in his wake as he handed out the pictures Kate took during her visit. Mrs. Hughes covered her smile with her hand and went off to find Mr. Carson. Mrs. Patmore smiled warmly at the picture of herself, Daisy, and Ellie, all with their arms around one another.

He saved his picture with Price for when they were alone that evening. After both men changed into pajamas, Thomas joined Price on his bed and handed him the picture, smiling as Price pulled out his new glasses to get a better look.

"Aren’t we a handsome couple?" Price said, looking up at Thomas over his frames. "Which one of us gets to keep it?"

"She sent two, that one’s yours," Thomas said, pushing Price’s glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"You’ll add it to the collection I gave you for Valentine’s?"

Thomas grinned thinking of the pictures hiding in his drawer. "Yes, and you’ll keep yours close?"

"Mmm hmm. It’ll keep my spirits up while we’re apart."

Thomas lifted Price’s hand and kissed his wrist, then his forearm, his bicep, and finally his neck. "The time will pass so quickly," he said, letting his lips travel over Price’s cheek and jaw.

Price closed his eyes. "Does everyone know you’re leaving by now?"

Thomas nibbled Price’s earlobe, causing goosebumps to rise on Price’s arms as Thomas breathed into his ear. "Just about."

"How does it feel now that the secret’s out?"

Thomas wrapped his hand under Price’s knee and slid him to the center of the bed. "Liberating."

"Just a few more nights like this," Price said as he wrapped his legs around Thomas’s hips.

"For now," Thomas said. He rested his weight on his forearms and kissed Price slowly. "But then later, it’ll be like this every night."

Price looked up into Thomas’s eyes, a lump forming in his throat. "I wish I was as sure as you."

Thomas brushed loose hair from Price’s forehead and kissed him between the eyebrows. "So long as at least one of us is confident at a time, we’ll get through this."
“What about when some handsome gent comes in the shop to get his watch fixed, and fixes his sights on you?”

Thomas’s brow furrowed. “Don’t think like that.”

“I can’t help it if thoughts pop into my head.”

Thomas held Price’s face in his hand and squished Price’s cheeks until his lips pursed. “You can control how you react to those thoughts,” Thomas said, placing a firm kiss on Price’s lips before letting go of Price’s cheeks.

“Easier said than done,” Price said with a smile.

“Then put some effort in,” Thomas said, pinching Price’s side before letting his hands explore lower.

“Every night like this, you say?” Price asked as he raised his hips so Thomas could pull off his pajama bottoms.

Thomas looked up at Price. “There’ll be no need for pajamas when we’re living together,” he purred with eyebrows raised.

Price slid his glasses to the tip of his nose to see Thomas better. “I can hardly wait to watch this with perfect vision.”

“So tonight’s not a good night to tease you, I should get right to it?” Thomas asked. He ran the tip of his tongue as lightly as possible from Price’s base to his tip.

“Oh no, no, you can tease,” Price replied, “but please keep eye contact while you’re doing it.”

Thomas licked Price again with the same delicate stroke of his tongue, the corners of his lips turning up as Price shivered and raised his hips. “Every night, just like this,” he whispered.

“Just like this,” Price repeated, his cheeks getting warm.

Thomas took Price into his mouth, sliding his tongue around Price, keeping eye contact as Price requested.

Price pretended to hold a camera up to his eye and clicked his tongue as he released the imaginary shutter. “If only I had a picture like this to hold me over.”

Thomas sighed. “And if you did, you’d lament, ‘if only I had a moving picture’ and then, ‘if only this moving picture had sound’. You’ll never be satisfied.”

“Well there’s no substitute for the real thing when the real thing’s this good.”

Thomas licked Price again, then pushed Price’s thighs apart to lick him lower. “Fair point. I’m quite talented.”

“I bet flicks of you giving this performance would draw enormous crowds.”

Thomas laughed and kissed Price’s thigh. “Can you imagine?”

“I do sometimes,” Price said, grabbing Thomas’s hair to guide Thomas’s lips back between his thighs.
“Fun fantasy,” Thomas commented before setting his tongue back to work.

“It sure is,” Price said, closing his eyes and smiling as he pictured an audience.

-----------------------------

Thomas unpacked Lord Grantham’s belongings with Mr. Bates’s help, pointing out the new items Lord Grantham collected while in London. Afterward, Thomas followed Mr. Bates to the nursery to peek in on J.D., remarking how big he’d gotten in just a few week’s time. The baby stayed with the nanny and children in the nursery as Anna helped Lily unpack, significantly more new items coming home with Lady Mary than had come home with Lord Grantham.

“Lady Mary has the nicest things to say about you,” Anna told Lily as they both hung gowns in the wardrobe.

“Likewise,” Lily replied. “She missed you.”

“Oh, I’m sure you took the same care I would have taken if I were there.”

Lily held a gown high in the air by the shoulder straps as she waited for Anna to produce a hanger. “I don’t mean like that. I can tell you’re both friends, or as close as I’ve ever seen between a Lady and her maid. I hope to have that some day.”

Anna held a hanger up for Lily. “Where will you go from here?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Lily said, hanging the gown with the others. “I thought I’d find something in London, but honestly, I was so preoccupied with life and work in the house that I didn’t so much looking.” She chuckled and began unpacking hats from their boxes. “Maybe I secretly hoped they’d find a place for me here and I wouldn’t have to look again.”

“I can understand why you’d hope for that.”

“I didn’t mean as Lady Mary’s lady’s maid,” Lily said quickly.

Anna smiled and opened a hatbox. “I know, silly. My, look at this. She didn’t have this before she left, I’d have remembered it.”

Lily lifted the hat from the tissue paper in the box, a cloche made of pale pink felt with a crocheted lace ribbon and flower, all adorned with pearls. “I’m friends with a milliner in London who makes the most lovely hats,” Lily said as she adjusted the hat’s flower with careful fingers.

“I’ll need the milliner’s information, I’m sure Lady Mary will want another.”

“I’ll share all of the best secrets,” Lily said. She handed a shoebox to Anna. “Including the person who made these. Wait until you see them.”

Anna opened the box and smiled at Lily. “You’re quite good at this.”

Lily shrugged. “It’s easy to be good at what you love.”

“I hope you find a Lady who appreciates you as much as we’ve appreciated you here.”

Lily shrugged again and smiled, looking at the floor instead of Anna. “I’m sure I will.”

-----------------------------
The courtyard was busy as the servants finished getting Downton back to its proper state. Gardening staff brought plants and flowers, butchers and grocers came and went, wood, coal, and ice were all delivered. Thomas watched it all from the corner of the courtyard, finishing some of his last cigarettes. He planned to buy more tobacco once he was back in London, which was less than twenty four hours away.

Something startled Thomas as it brushed by his leg, and he looked down to find the stable cat winding around his feet.

“It’s nice to see you, too, but I don’t need your hair all over me,” Thomas said, stepping away from the animal. “Go on, then. You can come back when I’m leaving, it won’t matter if there’s fur on my trousers then.”

The cat looked up at Thomas and let out a scratchy meow.

“I’m not petting you, neither. Can you imagine me pouring wine from a glove covered in your dirty fur?”

Mrs. Hughes chuckled from the doorway. “Are you trying to reason with a cat?”

“You don’t know this cat, Mrs. Hughes. She thinks she’s a little person.”

“Why shouldn’t she if you talk to her like she’s human?”

Thomas tapped the cat’s bottom with the toe if his toe. “Go on. Shoo.”

The cat turned and rubbed her nose on Thomas’s shoe.

“Ech, and now I have to clean your snotty nose print off of there. Are you happy?”

The cat meowed once more and sauntered off.

“I’d say she’s quite pleased with herself,” Mrs. Hughes said. “Now finish up and come inside, it’s almost time for tea.”

Thomas tossed his cigarette to the ground and stamped it out. Though he’d asked for no fuss over his departure, mostly out of fear that one wouldn’t be made in the first place, the staff ignored the request. Tea time included a three layer cake, each layer a different flavor, with cards and small gifts from each staff member. Thomas was touched, but distracted by the noticeable absence of Price. Price had slipped a card into the stack of others. It was plain, with the simple message, “It’s too hard to say goodbye with the others. I’ll say it on my own.”

Mr. Carson asked Thomas to his office following tea and handed Thomas an envelope.

“I was a little disappointed not to get a card from you, I must say,” Thomas remarked as he accepted the envelope.

“It’s not a card, Mr. Barrow. It’s your reference, should you ever decide to return to service.”

Thomas’s teasing smile disappeared. “That’s very thoughtful of you, thank you.”

“It’s not thoughtful, it’s the professional thing to do.”

“Well, thank you just the same, Mr. Carson.” Thomas said as he tapped the edge of the card to his forehead in a solute.
“Aren’t you going to read it?” Mr. Carson asked as Thomas turned to leave.

“Here? Now?”

Thomas’s questions were answered by Mr. Carson’s silence.

“Alright, here and now it is.” He read the words to himself, standing straighter as he read on. The letter sung Thomas’s praises in every position he’d held in the house. He read one of the final lines out loud. “‘Mr. Barrow plays a vital part in keeping the heart of Downton beating, and no other member of staff reads her pulse as well as he.’ Is this really how you feel?”

Mr. Carson looked surprised. “Have you ever known me to lie?”

“Well then thank you again, Mr. Carson,” Thomas said, re-reading the last lines to himself again. He looked up to find Mr. Carson’s hand outstretched.

“Heaven knows we’ve had our challenges,” Mr. Carson said as Thomas shook his hand, “but in the end, you’ve grown into someone I’m proud to call Downton’s under-butler.”

“All thanks to you.”

Mr. Carson put his hand over Thomas’s and patted it. “I’ll take some credit, but not all. The rest is yours.”

Thomas pinched himself on the way back to the servant’s hall. The kind of moment he’d waited all his years of service to experience jumped up and surprised him, and he broke into a smile every time he replayed the scene.

Thomas felt more sentimental serving his last meal at Downton than he anticipated. The Lord and Lady, Lady Mary, Mr. Branson, and the Dowager Countess were the only ones in attendance. It felt intimate serving just the family. Mr. Carson whispered to Lord Grantham that it was Thomas’s last service, and that he would be leaving on the milk train the next morning. Lord Grantham thanked Thomas for his service as Thomas poured the next glass of wine.

“And how are you getting to the train?” the Dowager Countess asked Thomas as he refilled her glass.

“The wagonette, my Lady,” Thomas replied.

The Dowager Countess huffed. “I’m sure Lord Grantham can do better than to send you to the train in the wagonette.”

Lord Grantham looked to Mr. Carson for assistance.

“If his Lordship wishes, I’m sure other arrangements can be made,” Mr. Carson said.

“There’s no need to go to any trouble,” Thomas said in response to Mr. Carson’s expectant expression.

“Nonsense,” Lady Mary chimed in. “You’ll go in a car, Barrow.”

“As you wish, my Lady,” Thomas said, looking from Lady Mary to the Dowager Countess.

When the meal ended, the good-byes from the family were appropriately warm; not too sentimental, but fitting for a family who appreciated their staff more than most prominent families.
Lady Mary asked Thomas to stay with her at the bottom of the stairs as the Dowager headed off for her home and the rest of the family headed up to the gallery. She seemed to be fighting with herself to keep her composure, and took a moment before speaking. “This afternoon, I had to explain to Master George that you’re leaving. He said, ‘no, mama, you can’t send away Barrow. He’s my very favorite!’”

Thomas laughed bashfully and smiled. “He’s such a good lad.”

“He’s not the only one who’s upset to see you go.”

Thomas handed Lady Mary his handkerchief as her eyes grew watery.

“Thank you,” Lady Mary laughed in her own bashful way. “I hate when I get misty.”

“I must admit, my Lady, I’m surprised to see tears in your eyes over me.”

Lady Mary dabbed her eye, then kept her eyes on the handkerchief as she twisted it in her fingers. “We were both so young when you started, and now look at us. Look at you. I admire your gumption, you know. Not that I’m pleased,” she added, dabbing her eye again. “I thought you—”

Thomas wasn’t sure what to do as Lady Mary began to cry openly. He finally decided a hand on her shoulder wouldn’t be out of line.

Lady Mary composed herself and looked up at Thomas. “I thought you would be the Mr. Carson in Master George’s life, here beside him as he grows into a young man.”

Thomas thought he may need to borrow back the handkerchief. “That would have been an honor. I’m sorry that I won’t be here to watch him grow into a man who will run this house as well as his mother does. He’ll have Downton to inherit because of your dedication to it and to him. And maybe Mr. Carson will be his Mr. Carson. I have a feeling that man will outlive us all.”

Lady Mary laughed through her tears. “You know there’s always a place for you here if you want to return.”

“That means more than I can say. Thank you, my Lady.”

Lady Mary folded the handkerchief and returned it to Thomas. He placed it back in his pocket, then clasped his hands. The two looked at one another a moment longer until Lady Mary rose up on the balls of her feet and kissed Thomas’s cheek.

“Take care of yourself, Barrow. And don’t tell anyone I cried like this.”

“You know your secrets are always safe with me,” Thomas replied.

“Now that’s not something I would have believed when you first started,” Lady Mary said.

“Me, neither,” Thomas replied. He watched Lady Mary ascend the staircase, then exhaled and looked around the great hall, now quiet and dark. He closed his eyes and listened to the ticking grandfather clock, which chimed the hour just a few moments later. He did know Downton’s heart, he thought, every beat and every tick.

The good-byes after the servant’s supper varied from polite to touching, yet none could compare to Thomas’s good-bye with Lady Mary, not even the moment with Mr. Carson earlier than day. No bigger compliment could be paid than for Lady Mary to wish Thomas meant as much to Master George’s as Mr. Carson meant to Lady Mary.
Price joined for supper but left when the good-byes began. Another note from Price was waiting on Thomas’s pillow. It read, “I’m still not saying fairwell yet. See you in the morning.”

Thomas returned his livery, refusing to have yet another sentimental moment. “It’s just clothing,” he told himself. He didn’t feel sentimental at all about his last night on his lumpy mattress. Even if the next one is lumpy, he thought, at least it will really belong to me.

Thomas awoke to his door pushing open, and expected to see Price enter for a very early morning good-bye, but no one stood in the doorway. Thomas sat up with a start when he realized the doorway was empty, and flinched when something touched his feet. In the moonlight streaming in through his skylight, he could see a furry little body at the foot of the bed. The stable cat met his eyes and meowed, then curled up against his leg.

“How seriously?” Thomas asked in a whisper.

The cat purred in response. Thomas rubbed his knuckle against the cat’s cheek before sliding back under the covers, taking care not to accidentally kick his new roommate.

“This better just be a good-bye,” Thomas said. “Don’t think you’re coming with me.”

The cat awoke and pranced up the bed, curling up against Thomas’s chest before quickly falling back to sleep.

Thomas sighed and put his arm around the cat, then fell asleep to the sound of soft purrs.

He awoke to a kiss on the cheek. The cat looked at Price but stayed in her spot against Thomas. Price was dressed for a day out rather than a day of work. He plucked a few of the cat’s hairs from his sleeve after kissing Thomas on the lips.

“I should have been the one curling up with you on your last night, not this man-stealing little woman,” Price said with a chuckle. He put an envelope on Thomas’s nightstand and then folded his hands in his lap.

“Yet another note?”

“It’s my good-bye. I can’t force myself to say it out loud. I’m sorry, I just can’t.”

Thomas brushed a hair from Price’s sleeve that Price hadn’t noticed. “We’ll be together soon. Don’t be so melodramatic.”

“I know I can be melodramatic, but I’m not today. I truly have no good plan to get to London, and not much hope that I will at the moment.”

Thomas sat up, jostling the cat, who let out a quick meow of annoyance. “Of course you don’t right now. That will take time, but you’ll get there.”

Price’s jaw clenched in the way Thomas’s did when he tried to suppress his emotions. “I’m not going to cry. In fact, I’m not going to say or do much else. I’ve switched my full day off for this month to today so that I don’t stay here and make some kind of scene when you depart.”

“Oh, David, come on,” Thomas said, moving his hand to Price’s. “We’ll see each other soon.”

Price squeezed his eyes shut in response to Thomas’s touch.

“I need you to be strong,” Thomas whispered. He tucked his finger under Price’s collar and pulled
out his necklace, then lifted Price’s hand and put it over the ring hanging from the chain. “I love you, and don’t forget it. Would you look at me?”

Price wrapped his hand around the ring, his eyes still closed. He gritted his teeth, but a sob came out between them. “I told you, I can’t do this.”

Thomas felt a bit guilty for feeling validated by Price’s reaction to their last moments together at Downton. He knew he shouldn’t want Price to hurt this much over his leaving, or for Price to pine desperately in his absence, but it was better to Thomas than worrying Price might move on to another man before they could be together in the next stage of their lives.

Price was thankful for Thomas’s silence, which gave him enough time to compose himself. “Don’t open the envelope ‘til you’re gone. On the train or after, but not before.”

“Yes, sir,” Thomas said, smiling.

“How did she get in here, by the way?” Price asked as he ran his fingertip over the cat’s ear.

“No idea.”

“Take her with you.”

Thomas chuckled. “I’m sure that’s her aim. I could set her up with a plate of fish and a bowl of milk in your brother’s shop. He’d appreciate it, I’m sure. Cat hair floating in the air, settling into the delicate inner-workings of the watches.”

“We’ll both miss you,” Price said quietly.

“I’ll miss you both.”

Price nodded in acknowledgement of Thomas’s words and clenched his jaw again. “Well, I should be off.”

“No kiss?”

Price leaned toward Thomas, then hesitated. His bottom lip quivered as it came closer to Thomas’s, and tears fell when their lips connected. It was a sweet kiss, not the deep or sensual ones Price usually laid on Thomas. When Price pulled away, Thomas thought of the first moment their hands touched in the boot room when Price had sliced his finger while cleaning silverware, and Thomas found tears falling from his eyes as well. He felt for the little scar on Price’s finger, then brought it to his lips.

“I love you, David. More than I’ve loved anyone, more than I ever thought I could.”

Price recalled their first touch, too, as Thomas ran his thumb over the scar. “I felt something about you that day, but I didn’t know what it was, because I’d never felt anything like it before. I thought I had, but I was wrong. You’ve shown me what love really means, and you’re the most loving person I’ve ever known.”

“What does it mean?” Thomas asked, kissing the rest of Price’s fingers.

Price sighed at Thomas’s kisses. He pondered a number of words and phrases, but then said simply, “it means your soul is intertwined with mine.”

Thomas’s lips froze and he met Price’s eyes. “You feel for me that deeply?”
“You know I do.”

“Say more,” Thomas whispered, kissing Price’s fingers again while their eyes remained locked.

Price smiled serenely. “It means a piece of you is staying here, in me, and neither of us will be whole again until we’re reunited.”

“So melodramatic.”

Price laughed. “You asked me to say more when I was perfectly content just watching your lips on my hand.”

“You’re right. I won’t feel complete without you.”

“But you will be happy, which is more important than anything.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

Price patted Thomas’s hip. “Well, I would. And now, I’ll really be off.” Before Thomas could stop him again, Price was on his feet. He tapped the envelope on the nightstand. “Remember, not ‘til the train at least.”

“I remember.”

Price nodded, then walked to the door, and left without looking back.

Thomas had already bid farewell to everyone else the evening before, but Mr. Carson was awake early and waiting by the car that would take Thomas to the train. All the words Mr. Carson wanted to say were already in the letter of reference, and the fact that he was waiting by the car to say a final good-bye was all Thomas ever needed to know that his time at Downton meant more to Mr. Carson than the profession words of the letter. Thomas realized as he was about to get into the car that he hadn’t reciprocated Mr. Carson’s words or actions.

Thomas stood up straight, held his hands by his sides, and said, “This is probably mushy stuff to you, but... my father always kicked me when I was down, but you’ve always put out a hand to pick me back up when I’ve fallen. I don’t think I could count the times. So thank you, Mr. Carson. I don’t know what would have come of me if not for you.”

“That’s very nice to hear, Thomas,” Mr. Carson said, with the kind of smile usually reserved for Lady Mary or Mrs. Hughes.

Thomas smiled as he climbed into the car. “It’s not Mr. Barrow anymore, is it?”

“Not anymore. Good luck. I’m sure we’ll see you back for a visit?”

“Yes, Mr. Carson. A man needs to go home once in awhile.”

The driver shut the car door, and Thomas nodded at Mr. Carson, who smiled and gave a little bow in response.

Thomas looked back and forth between the back seat windows on the ride to the train, picturing how much more life there would be shortly when spring came. The landscape looked ready to awaken, with snow mostly melted and the harshest chill gone until next winter. Thomas watched the farmers and farmhands with their equipment and animals as the car drove past. He noticed a man flailing in anger on his back. Mud had been kicked up from the wheels of a tractor, covering
the man and knocking him over. The driver of the tractor climbed out, but was laughing at the man’s misfortune rather than offering help. Before the car was too far from the scene, Thomas saw that the man in the mud was Sean Moore. He could think of little more satisfying than driving as passenger in one of Lord Grantham’s cars while Sean Moore rolled in the mud.

At the train station, the driver carried Thomas’s bags to the porter, who loaded them beneath the train as Thomas was helped inside. Once seated, he took Price’s envelope from his pocket. Inside was a drawing of a rabbit running through a field, with a passage from “The Velveteen Rabbit” written on the back. The drawing was ink, which Price saved for what he called “important pieces” due to the expense, and it read:

...the little Rabbit sat quite still for a moment and never moved. For when he saw all the wild rabbits dancing around him he suddenly remembered about his hind legs, and he didn't want them to see that he was made all in one piece. He did not know that when the Fairy kissed him that last time she had changed him altogether. And he might have sat there a long time, too shy to move, if just then something hadn't tickled his nose, and before he thought what he was doing he lifted his hind toe to scratch it.

And he found that he actually had hind legs! Instead of dingy velveteen he had brown fur, soft and shiny, his ears twitched by themselves, and his whiskers were so long that they brushed the grass. He gave one leap and the joy of using those hind legs was so great that he went springing about the turf on them, jumping sideways and whirling round as the others did, and he grew so excited that when at last he did stop to look for the Fairy she had gone.

He was a Real Rabbit at last, at home with the other rabbits.

After the passage, Price had written:

Now you’re like the rabbit, wild and free to be your Real self! Only, no one else needed to make you Real, you’ve done it yourself.

With every bit of love I have,
Your David

You’re wrong, Thomas thought. Once settled in his new flat, a long day of errands behind him, he wrote to Price,

My David,

You are like the boy in the story, whose love made the rabbit Real. I’d never be here if not for you. Thank you for understanding me, encouraging me, and believing in me.

All my love,
Your Thomas

Thomas sealed the note in an envelope and placed it by the door to post the next day. He took out another envelope, one with a copy of the picture of Kate took of him with Price. He found a tack in a drawer and pinned the picture to the wall by his new bed.

The flat might have been small by other standards, but to Thomas, it was practically a castle. The furnishings were provided by the landlord, and were well cared for by previous tenants. There was a kitchen that resembled a hallway in its narrowness but still fit a small table and two chairs, a living room with a few comfortable furnishings, and a bedroom with a full size bed.

Thomas never even aspired to a bed that size, and he laid on it like a starfish his first night just
because he could. He was too excited to sleep, wishing he could send pictures of the flat back to the staff at Downton so they could have a look. As he lay on the bed, feeling giddy instead of tired, he remembered another envelope. He jumped off the bed and returned with the pictures Price gave him for Valentine’s day. Clothing was optional now that he was the Lord of his own home, he thought. He pulled off his pajamas, threw them to the floor, and enjoyed the pictures twice over before falling asleep in his very own bed.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

The final chapter! Thank you for reading along with me. This was the first creative piece of writing I put forward in years. It started rough, and you stuck with it, so thank you!

Update: I started a sequel! Please see it under the title Barrow Beyond Under-butler

Thomas stood to greet Eric and Teddy as they entered the diner. Both wanted to treat Thomas to an early breakfast before his first official day of work. Teddy shook Thomas’s hand, and kept it in his while he looked at Thomas’s wrist.

“Lovely watch,” Teddy said, tapping the watch face with his finger. “I suppose the watchmaker needs to set a good example for his patrons.”

“David made it for me,” Thomas told Teddy.

Teddy gave a subtle eye roll and took his seat.

Lucy, the waitress and friend of Price’s, brought menus. She patted her coiffed hair before speaking to the three handsome gentlemen. “I remember you,” she told Thomas as she handed him a menu. “You don’t forget a face like yours.”

“It’s amazing how many people find that face unforgettable,” Teddy told Lucy as he took his menu.

Eric put up his hand. “I don’t need one, thank you.”

“Not eating?” Teddy asked.

“I am, but I always order the same thing when I go out for breakfast.”

“Well you still have to go through the motions,” Teddy told Eric. “Review the entire menu, listen to the specials, and then you can order the same thing you always get.”

Thomas checked the time and tapped his menu on the table. “Well I already know what I’m getting.”

“Ech, the pressure,” Teddy complained to Lucy, who hadn’t left the table. “Two poached eggs, toast, and coffee, I guess.”

“I’ll have the same, but make it double,” Eric requested. “And bacon, please. And sausage. And some tomatoes.”

“That’s not the same thing at all,” Thomas told Eric. “Lucy, I’ll have scrambled eggs, toast, sausage, and tea, thank you.”

Lucy took the menus and raised an eyebrow at Eric. “You sure you want four poached eggs,
double toast, bacon, sausage, tomatoes, and coffee?”

“You know, I’d also like some potatoes.”

“So the entire right hand side of the menu?” Thomas asked.

“Just about,” Eric replied with a smile.

Teddy placed his napkin on his lap and arranged his fork and knife. “Why the feast?”

“I’m preparing for my next trip. It’ll be a physical affair. Lots of bicycling and climbing and hiking. I was hoping for a companion, but it hasn’t worked out in my favor.”

“How do you mean?” Thomas asked as Lucy returned with tea and coffee.

Eric dropped a cube of sugar into his cup and sipped without stirring. “I made an appeal to Edith to let an illustrator accompany me for the trip. I wrote up an entire proposal for nothing. No money, she says. Made it sound like there’s barely enough for me, forget David.”

“David?” Teddy asked as he attempted to grab a sugar cube with tongs. Distracted, he dropped the cube back into the bowl.

Eric scooped the sugar cube with his spoon and put it in Teddy’s cup. “His art deserves an audience.”

“I don’t think David was holding out too much hope, as much as it would be a dream come true,” Thomas said, licking a drop of tea from his lips.

“I guess that’s good, then,” Eric sighed.

“Would David even go along with it?” Teddy asked. “He seems comfortable working in service.”

Eric tipped his chin toward Thomas. “I’m sure he was, mostly, until his beloved left.”

Thomas was quiet until the food arrived; two reasonably sized plates for Thomas and Teddy, and two overfilled plates for Eric.

Teddy cut his eggs with his fork and knife while wrinkling his nose at Eric, who ate an entire egg in two hasty bites while hunched over his plate. “That’s not very attractive, you know,” Teddy commented before taking a small bite.

Eric sat up and rested his wrists on the table. He finished chewing and swallowed hard. “Does that mean, when I’m not eating, you find me attractive?”

“Why did I agree to meet you two for breakfast?” Thomas asked under his breath before biting into his toast.

“Because you deserve a big breakfast with your buddies before your first day,” Eric said as he dug back into his eggs. He traded a smile with Teddy, then ate his second and third eggs more quickly than the first.

When the check arrived, Teddy paid it quickly before Eric could pull his billfold from his jacket. “Good luck on your first day, handsome,” Teddy said once Lucy took the check.

Thomas checked his watch, thanked both men, wiped his lips with his napkin, and headed next door.
The sun was rising across the street and it threw hazy beams of light through the storefront. Sam was already at work, kneeling behind the counter as he set up the display cases. He waved to Thomas from the ground and smiled over the counter. The smile was so much like Price’s that Thomas’s heart fluttered, feeling the weight of how much he missed Price in Sam’s smile.

Besides that first moment in the store, there wasn’t much time for Thomas to lament his distance from Price. Sam had a list of tasks for Thomas written and posted on the wall next to a list of his own. There were few breaks, unlike Thomas’s days at Downton where he snuck in a smoke or a sip of tea whenever he could, but he didn’t mind. By lunchtime, he realized he preferred the pace. There wasn’t time to feel bored between the work already piled up and the customers who passed through the door with increasing frequency over the course of the day.

Though busy, Thomas and Sam had time to chat, and much of the chatter was speckled with chuckles. Sam was nearly as sarcastic as Thomas, and somewhat silly like Price, but with a greater air of maturity. Flirty as Price, too, Thomas thought, whenever an attractive young woman came into the shop.

As the weeks passed, Sam was generally a comforting reminder of Price, though some days Sam would say or do something so similar to Price that it made Thomas’s heart flutter like his first day in the shop. Thomas’s heart ached a bit, too, whenever Sam shared stories of Price from their younger days, or when Marie cooked both men dinner and commented that Price enjoyed the same foods. And his heart nearly broke as letters from Price became darker and Price’s depression over their distance became apparent.

Thomas debated with himself whether to bring up the subject of Price’s letters with Sam. He had worked at the shop nearly two months, and felt like he and Sam were friends and partners, not employer and employee. Yet it never felt quite right to discuss Price with Sam. If Sam knew of their relationship, he never gave a hint, and so Thomas kept the letters to himself, even though Sam was the only person in Price’s life who may understand his darkness.

-----------------------

Sybbie chased after a marble that had escaped the game she played with Master George and Price. Nanny Rebecca had left Downton weeks before to get married, and the new nanny was too busy with J.D. Bates and his colic to play with the other children.

Price fixed the chalk circle that marked the boundary of the game, as little feet and hands had smudged the edges. With his eyes on the ground, he didn’t see Lily approaching with Marigold until Master George and Sybbie began squealing with delight. He pulled extra marbles from a velvet pouch so that Marigold could join the game, and took a few steps back to stand with Lily once the children were busy at play.

“I can’t say I ever pictured you as the nanny type,” Price said with a teasing half smile.

“Same to you,” Lily said, returning Price’s grin. “Seems I have no need for this coat, the weather couldn’t be more beautiful.”

Price helped Lily out of her coat and laid it carefully on a bench. “Our conversation has devolved to discussing the weather. We used to discuss more important things.”

“Such as?” Lily asked as she sat on the bench.
Price sat between Lily and her coat. He played with the cuff and watched the children flick marbles. “New novels, the news, the latest flicks we’ve seen, our families, our friends. Not the lousy weather.”

Lily gave Price a curious smile. “Do you miss me or something?”

Price chewed his bottom lip and looked at the cuff in his fingers. “I miss everyone. Even my friends still here are preoccupied with their own lives.”

“I was barely here a minute, so it can’t be me making you so glum. Is it the nanny?”

“She’s one of everyone, so yes.”

Marigold ran to Lily and handed her a buttercup. Lily sniffed the little flower and praised Marigold for finding it, and chuckled as Marigold ran back to her game. “I wish I still had that same sense of wonder about the world. A little buttercup just made her entire afternoon.”

Price wasn’t listening, and Lily tickled his ear with the flower. He batted it away and stared ahead with a twisted, sour expression.

“Come on, what is it then? You’re dying to talk to someone about whatever’s on your mind. And it’s not the weather, we’ve established that already.”

“I just feel lonely.”

Lily shrugged. “Who doesn’t in this world?”

“How long are you here for?”

“Until tomorrow.”

“Do you want to go out tonight?”

Lily crossed her legs and straightened the hem of her dress. “Go out where?”

“A drink and a flick.”

“Will Mr. Carson let you?”

Price nodded. “The new footman is a disaster and I’m picking up all the slack. He’ll probably let me do whatever I want once dinner’s served.”

Lily crossed her legs the opposite way, then back again. “Alright, that’s fine I suppose.” She watched Price as he walked to the children and dropped to one knee to join in the game.

“Are you joining?” he called back to Lily.

Lily played with the cuff of her coat as Price had and tried not to blush. “No, that’s alright. I’ll watch.”

At the pub that evening, Price was just as glum. He’d worn a gray suit that reminded him of something Thomas would wear, thinking it would be comforting, but instead it made him even more aware of Thomas’s absence. Lily tried to engage Price in conversation, but his eyes kept wandering, especially when the barmaid passed. When he flagged her down for his fourth drink, Lily made eye contact with the barmaid and shook her head ‘no’.
Lily wiped lipstick from her wineglass and sighed, fiddling with the stem of her glass and Price fiddled with the handle on his mug.

“You didn’t even notice my makeup,” Lily grumbled.

Price looked Lily over, taking in her lipstick and rouge. “I’m sorry. You look nice.”

Lily’s lip curled. “‘Nice’? No woman wants to hear that she looks nice.”

“Well what were you going for?”

“Pretty, maybe.”

“Well that’s a given,” Price said, watching the crowd again. “You always look pretty.”

“You really think so?”

Price’s eyes snapped to Lily’s as he finally realized she had worn the makeup for him. “It’s just a fact, I mean, objectively speaking.”

Lily wiped off her remaining lipstick with her napkin. “Objectively, of course.”

“Why don’t we head to the theatre?”

“Can you walk straight after drinking like a fish, or should we try swimming there?”

Price put money on the table to cover the tab and helped Lily from her chair. “I can hold my liquor these days. Three’s a warm up.”

“If that was meant to sound reassuring, it wasn’t.”

Price offered his arm for the walk to the theatre, but Lily declined, holding her purse handle in both hands instead.

“Lovely night,” Price observed.

“Let’s not talk about the weather. I’ve been told that’s a boring subject.”

Price bought Lily a box of popcorn and a pop despite the fact that she declined both. They found seats in the dark theatre, and Price laid his arm on the armrest with the box of popcorn in hand. Lily took a kernel at a time and watched the crowd, keeping her eyes averted from Price’s.

“You’ll eat my food but you won’t even look at me?”

Lily crunched a kernel between her molars and met Price’s eyes. “Everything I say gets cheek in response. Or worse, no response. You’re the one who asked me out in case you’d forgotten.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Be more thoughtful.”

The theatre lights dimmed even lower as the house band tuned their instruments. Lily sipped her pop through a paper straw between bites of popcorn. She reached for what she thought was the final piece, but Price had placed the empty box on the floor, and so Lily touched Price’s hand instead. She retracted her hand quickly and tucked it under her thigh. She looked out of the corner of her eye at Price, but he seemed unphased and was still watching the film attentively.
“Do you want some pop?” Lily asked in a whisper, holding the bottle out to Price.

Without taking his eyes off of the screen, Price leaned over and took a sip from the straw, then sat back in his chair.

Lily shook her head and sipped her drink. “Ech,” she said, wrinkling her nose, “you got the straw all wet. You can finish this.”

“Oh, thanks,” Price said as he took the bottle.

“Are you even awake?”

“Yes, and I’m trying to watch this.”

Someone a few rows back shushed them both, and Price and Lily sunk into their seats.

At the film’s climax, a couple was parting ways, not sure when they would meet again. Lily thought the acting was overly dramatic and turned to Price to laugh, but she froze when she saw tears on his cheeks, the light from the flickering film making the tears glitter.

Price wiped his cheek with the back of his hand and looked sideways at Lily. Neither said a word and returned their attention to the screen. The silence continued on the walk back to Downton until Lily pulled Price to the same bench they sat on that afternoon, now speckled with dew as the evening air began to cool. She held her pocketbook in her lap and set sympathetic eyes on Price.

“What were you thinking about in the theatre?”

“Believe me when I say you won’t like the answer.”

Lily squeezed the handle of her pocketbook. “Let me decide that, won’t you?”

“Fine,” Price said, shifting his body to face Lily. “I’m in love, but that person’s gone away.”

Lily smiled at Price. “Why couldn’t you say this earlier? It makes a lot more sense than just feeling lonely. It was the nanny, wasn’t it?”

Price tossed his hat on the bench and raked his hand through his hair. “No, Lily, not her.”

“For Pete’s sake, I’ve been asking for ages,” Lily said, leaning closer to Price. “Just tell me.”

Price hunched over and took shallow breaths, like an animal too comfortable in his cage to walk through the open door.

“Look at you, this is ludicrous! I won’t tell anyone, if it’s supposed to be some sort of secret. Is she married? Oh, goodness, is it Anna?”

Price looked up at Lily with watery eyes. “It’s not Daisy or Rebecca. It’s not Anna or Lady Edith. It’s no woman, not before, not now, not ever! It’s Mr. Barrow, Lily!”

Lily stared at Price, and he looked back at her, breathing hard, not sure what to do since she hadn’t yelled back at him. He had anticipated shouting, or tears, or both, but Lily looked stoic, with her hands still on her purse. Then she started to look as though she might laugh.

“You’ve nothing to say to that?” Price finally asked when the silence became too much for him.

Lily’s voice was even. “When you broke off our engagement, it made me question everything
about myself. It cut me to the quick, it stripped away all of my self esteem. It took years for me to rebuild myself, though I’ll never be the same person I was before. I’m more vulnerable, I have a hard time trusting people. And this entire time, it wasn’t me at all. It could have been any girl you chose for your experiment.”

Price shook his head. “It wasn’t an experiment. I thought I could change, especially for a woman like you.”

“Don’t try and flatter me.”

“I can’t tell you how much I wanted it to work.”

Lily’s voice finally cracked and she looked away from him. “But, David, when it wasn’t going to work, and you knew it, you should have told me the truth.”

Price waited for Lily to look him in the eye again. “I could be jailed for being who I am. I couldn’t tell you when you were angry with me, what if you told other people?”

“Then later, when I was less angry,” Lily said, her voice cracking again. “Maybe even when I came for my interview here. Any day before today would have been better than believing I was unlovable this whole time.”

Price put his hand on Lily’s. “Of course you’re lovable.”

“Not ‘of course’!” Lily yelled, though she didn’t pull her hand away. She waited to speak again until she could do so calmly. “The man I loved didn’t love me back.”

“I love you in my own way.”

“You still should have told me.”

“You’re right.”

Lily looked at the ground, and Price followed her eyes. They listened to the crickets chirping and watched a frog leap across the gravel walkway, quite a ways from the pond.

“He looks lost,” Lily said quietly.

“I know that feeling.”

Lily tipped her head up. “I think I knew.”

“About me?”

“Yes. Maybe that’s why I pushed so hard for you to tell me.”

“How did you know?”

Lily leaned back on the bench. “The fact that you had to close your eyes when we were naked should have been a hint.”

“They weren’t closed the whole time. You have a nice body, objectively speaking.”

Lily elbowed Price. “Be kind, I still haven’t decided if we can be friends.”

“Of course we’re friends.”
“Not ‘of course’.”

“Then how do we become friends?”

Lily reached up to sweep a curl from her forehead. “I don’t know. I’ll have to think about it. This is a lot to think about.”

“I understand.”

“You can’t possibly,” Lily said quickly, her fingers still in her hair. “You don’t understand how I feel, not one bit.” She screeched and pulled her feet onto the bench. The little frog had leapt onto her foot, and then on Price’s.

Price laughed and scooped up the frog, closing his hands around the little animal. “Don’t scare him away. What if he’s your Prince Charming?”

“Not funny!” Lily complained as she hit Price with her purse.

Price opened his hands just enough for the frog to poke out its face. “He likes you.”

“Stop, David.”

Price held his hands to his ear and then nodded. “He says, ‘give us a little kiss’.”

“I mean it,” Lily said, winding up her arm to hit Price with her bag again.

Price made a smooching sound and held the frog’s face near Lily’s lips. She screeched again and jumped to her feet, then hit Price on the shoulder with her purse.

“Stop! You’ll scare him!”

“If you want to be my friend, you’ll stop torturing me with that toad.”

Price closed his hands again. “It’s a frog, not a toad. If you won’t kiss him, let’s at least walk him back to his home.”

“Fine, he’s a frog. You’re a toad.”

Price stood and held his elbow out to Lily. “Fancy a walk to the pond?”

Lily closed her eyes and sighed. With her eyes still closed, she took Price’s arm. “Do not open your hands until we’re at the pond or you’ll regret it,” she said, opening her eyes, narrowing them at Price.

“You can trust me,” Price replied with a smile. He kept Lily’s gaze and all signs of teasing left his lips. “I hope you know that.”

Lily began walking and pulled Price along. “You’ll need to prove it. You can start by keeping your word that the frog stays in your hands until we get there.”

“I can do that,” Price said as he caught up with Lily’s pace. “He’s still sad that you won’t kiss him.”

“I’ve already kissed one frog in my day,” Lily said with her chin raised.

Price chuckled and pulled Lily closer to his side. “I deserve that.”
Lily didn’t reply, but she walked with Price to the pond, waved goodbye to the little frog when he finally made it to the water, and accepted Price’s arm when he offered it for the walk back.

-------------

Marie had begun inviting Thomas to dinner at least once a week. The children enjoyed Thomas’s company, and Sam never seemed to tire of Thomas’s presence despite spending long hours together in the shop. Thomas had enough training and confidence to man the shop without Sam, and when he arrived for dinner, he had just finished his first full day at the shop alone. Sam listened to Thomas’s stories from the day, and both men laughed about some of the demanding and finicky customers Thomas handled that day with ease. After dessert, they both helped Marie with the dishes, and then went outside for a smoke.

It was a humid summer evening in the city, and both men had their jackets off and shirtsleeves rolled to the elbow. Sam produced cigarettes and Thomas retrieved his lighter, and both went to the table in the backyard to relax, each with their remaining wine from dessert.

“You did a good job today,” Sam said as he watched Marie finishing the dishes through the kitchen window. “I don’t know if David could have handled things like you do.”

Price was rarely the topic of conversation, and never in relation to the business. Thomas took a drag and tapped his cigarette in the ashtray on the table. “He handles things well under pressure at Downton.”

Sam let his gaze travel from Marie to the moon, which was bright and nearly full. “That’s good to hear. I worried David would repeat his old behaviors being so far from home, from me and Marie and the girls. From dad, at the time. I’m glad I was wrong.”

“What behaviors?” Thomas asked as evenly as he could, attempting to mask his curiosity.

Sam smiled up at the moon. “If he didn’t tell you, I guess it’s not my place to say anything.”

“He told me about how hard it was for him after the war.”

Sam nodded slowly and took a sip of his wine. “Hard indeed. He came back after watching so many men die, I thought he’d have an even greater appreciation for life.”

“Well war impacts every man differently,” Thomas said, looking at Sam from the corner of his eye.

Sam nodded again. “Right. No one else’s big brother who returned from the war got arrested as many times as mine,” he laughed.

Thomas swirled his wine around his tongue and swallowed. “How many times was it again?”

Sam shrugged. “Six, maybe seven. He told you, didn’t he?” he asked, his eyes shifting from the moon to Thomas’s.

Thomas nodded. “Yes, of course,” Thomas said with a convincing smile, though he set his eyes on his wine glass in case they belied his lips.

“He was so self destructive,” Sam said, shaking his head. “I still worry about him. You say he has other friends at Downton besides yourself?”

Thomas looked up from the glass. “Everyone is David’s friend.”
“Thank goodness,” Sam sighed. “She worries, too,” he said, looking at Marie in the window.

Thomas took a long drag. “I’m sure he’s taking care of himself.”

“Tell me if you hear otherwise.”

“I will,” Thomas promised. He inhaled deeply and exhaled slowly, and decided he would write a letter the next day asking Price to find a way to visit as soon as he was able.

---------------

The new footman still hadn’t found his footing, and so there were little excuses good enough for Price to take more than half a day away from Downton. After receiving Thomas’s letter, Price practiced his story in the mirror, and then delivered news of a dear aunt passing to Mrs. Hughes. She frowned and patted Price’s back, then spoke to Mr. Carson. Price was on a train to London the next morning.

Price knew Thomas was working when he arrived, but he didn’t go to the shop, fearing he wouldn’t be able to hide his excitement over seeing Thomas in front of his brother. Instead, he went to the library and took out three books; one on illustration, one on painting, and one on charcoal. He let himself into Thomas’s flat with a key left for him under the mat. After giving himself a tour, and laying on Thomas’s bed for a few minutes, he made himself a cup of tea and read his books at the kitchen table.

He jumped at every footstep he heard in the hall, and finally, the steps he heard came up to the door. As a key turned in the lock, he closed his book and sprinted across the flat. He didn’t wait for Thomas to remove his hat, and barely waited for the door to shut before pressing his body to Thomas’s as he reached for his cheeks.

“My love,” Price said in a whisper before kissing Thomas deeply.

Thomas dropped his keys on the floor and tossed his hat. “Have you missed me?”

Price kissed Thomas feverishly, as if he were starving and Thomas’s lips were the first food he’d tasted in weeks. He began tugging at Thomas’s clothes, and Thomas laughed and held him at arm’s length.

“Do I get a ‘hello’?”

Price shook his head, “There’s no time. I need you. Now.” Price began pulling off his own clothes, first his braces and then the buttons of his shirt, before Thomas grabbed his hands.

“There’s no need to rush.”

Price panted and looked up at Thomas with begging eyes. “I need you.”

“My little darling,” Thomas cooed, placing light kisses on Price’s knuckles. “We have all night.”

Price watched Thomas’s lips on his hands and his lips involuntarily parted, his tongue sliding across them slowly. He shivered as Thomas’s lips kissed their way to his palms, his veins throbbing beneath the delicate skin of his wrist. Thomas traced Price’s blue veins with his tongue, and Price moaned softly as he undid his cufflink. He rolled up his sleeve and Thomas kissed each part of his skin that revealed itself, until he reached the crook of Price’s elbow. Thomas let his tongue slide slowly back down Price’s arm, to his wrist, and back up. Price groaned and sighed, and then whimpered as Thomas repeated the same action on his other arm.
Thomas undid Price’s collar and tossed it in the direction of his hat, and then undid each button on Price’s shirt, kissing Price’s neck as his fingers worked their way to Price’s navel. The shirt went the way of the collar, and then Price’s undershirt followed. Thomas trailed his fingers up and down Price’s torso, sighing as his fingertips became reacquainted with Price’s skin. He pulled Price close as his hands traveled slowly from Price’s shoulders to the small of his back.

“I need you,” Price repeated, barely audibly.

“I need you, too,” Thomas whispered.

Price worked more quickly than Thomas to remove Thomas’s shirt and undershirt, and when Thomas was down to his trousers and socks, Price stopped and looked Thomas over. Being busy at the shop, and away from Daisy’s treats, had resulted in a slimmer Thomas.

“Where’s that tummy going?” Price asked as he held Thomas’s sides.

Thomas looked down at himself and smiled. “You’re complaining that I lost weight?”

“I’d never complain about your body,” Price said, tugging Thomas closer by the loose waist of his trousers. “I just hadn’t considered your body changing in such a short amount of time.”

“I promise to eat plenty of biscuits, just for you.”

“Don’t change a thing for me,” Price said as he grinned up at Thomas. “I love you whatever way you come.”

Thomas closed his eyes and pressed himself against Price. “How about inside you?”

Price chuckled. “That sounds like something I would say.”

Price pulled Thomas’s face down to his and wrapped his arms behind Thomas’s neck. “To the bedroom, or should we try out the sofa?”

“Bedroom first,” Thomas said, hoisting Price up. “Maybe sofa later.”

Price wrapped his legs around Thomas and held on tight as Thomas carried him to the bedroom. Price had already lit the lamp on the dresser and closed the window in anticipation of finding his way to the bedroom quickly once Thomas was home. The bulb was dim under a thick, yellow shade, but it provided enough light so the two could see one another.

Thomas laid Price on the bed, and Price scooted back until his head reached the pillows. Thomas opened the drawer on his nightstand and pulled out an envelope. “Your pictures,” he said with a smile, shaking the envelope. “They keep me company almost nightly.”

“I have a confession,” Price said, biting his knuckle for effect.

“What?”

Price rolled onto his stomach and looked up at Thomas. “I made some drawings of you,” he whispered. “They keep me company, usually more than once a night.”

Thomas ruffled Price’s hair and put the envelope back in the drawer. “You’ll have to erase some of
“the lines and redraw them now that I’m thinner.”

“What else is in that drawer?” Price asked, lifting himself onto his forearms for a better look.

“Your favorite thing.”

“What’s in that drawer?”

Thomas groaned at the joke. “Fine, second favorite,” he said as he pulled a tube from the drawer.

Price gasped, grabbed it, and hugged it to his chest. “It’s more romantic than flowers!” He hopped onto his knees and patted the pillow. “Lay down and we’ll see how you like it,” he said as he tucked the tube into his pocket.

“It’s for you, I figured you’d want to use it first.”

“It’s for me, and I get to say who uses it first.”

Thomas sighed, closed the drawer, and laid on the bed.

Price straddled Thomas and settled his weight carefully across Thomas’s hips, then sat back slowly onto him.

“Shouldn’t we take our trousers off?” Thomas asked as he undid Price’s top button.

Price took Thomas’s hands in his and shook his head. He moved his hips slowly, feeling Thomas harden beneath him.

Thomas pulled the waistband of Price’s trousers and underwear forward, just enough for Price’s cock to shift and stand straight up underneath his clothes. Thomas squeezed Price through his trousers while pushing himself into Price from below. As Thomas continued to rub and stroke, Price’s cock pushed its way past his waistband, enough for Thomas to see exactly how eager it was becoming, hard as ever and glistening with precum.

“Are you sure you don’t want them off?” Thomas asked.

Price shook his head again and moaned as Thomas stroked faster. He could feel Thomas’s heat through the layers of their clothes and rocked himself harder against Thomas as Thomas rubbed harder in return.

“Don’t you want to try out your gift?” Thomas asked as he rolled Price over and switched places, sitting across Price’s hips, letting Price press into him as he stroked himself through his trousers.

Price put the tube on his stomach, then undid Thomas’s trousers and eased them over Thomas’s cock. While holding the trousers down in one hand, he gripped the tube in the other and twisted the cap off, then held it above Thomas and waited for it to drip.

Thomas let out a low “ooh” as the liquid made contact, and exhaled through parted lips as Price rubbed it in with his palm. “But it’s supposed to be for you,” Thomas breathed.

“It is,” Price replied.

Thomas was quickly lost in the sensation of Price’s hand gliding easily along him. He had used it on himself the night before, as a test, but it was nothing compared to Price’s expert fingers, which knew exactly when to switch between long slow strokes and short quick ones. “It’s an art,” Price had once joked, but Thomas agreed. Price knew how to take him to the edge and bring him back,
over and over, so that when it was finally time, Thomas’s entire being was ready to give itself over.

Thomas looked down at Price, already dewy with sweat and flushed from his own excitement. Thomas’s riding on top of Price had pushed Price’s trousers down, enough for cock to slip out a bit again. “Do you want mine off?” Thomas asked as he fumbled for his buttons.

“No need,” Price panted as he held the tube above Thomas again. He pushed himself up against Thomas and massaged Thomas with both hands, one and then the other, back and forth. Price suddenly looked at the nightstand and then back to Thomas. “Would you smoke while we do this?”

“What?” Thomas asked, the haze of sex clearing briefly as he tried to understand the request.

“I just pictured you smoking, shirtless, riding me. Will you do it?”

“I didn’t think you liked my smoking,” Thomas said with a grin as he reached for his cigarettes and lighter.

Price’s hips jerked against Thomas as he lit a cigarette. “I didn’t think I did, either,” Price said. He looked down at himself and then back at the cigarette between Thomas’s lips. “I guess I do.”

Thomas took a long drag and then held the cigarette out to the side. He exhaled first between pursed lips, and then slowly with his mouth open, the smoke dancing across his tongue. Price took the cigarette from Thomas and then took a drag, and handed it back as he exhaled through his nose.

“So now you’re smoking?” Thomas asked before taking a long drag again.

Price watched the smoke trail from Thomas’s lips again. “I do now, occasionally. It’s the closest I can get to tasting you when we’re apart.”

Thomas put his hand over Price’s and helped him pump. “Do you do it while enjoying your drawings?”

Price smiled as though his hand were caught in the cookie jar. “I might.”

“Well, I bought a bottle of your cologne to remind me of you.”

“Really, now?” Price asked, letting Thomas take over the pace of their pumping. “You left an undershirt of yours in the laundry before you left. I often wear it to bed.”

Thomas leaned down and, while exhalting, whispered in Price’s ear, “one of your silk ties got mixed in with mine when we were in London. Sometimes I wear that, and only that, while I enjoy your pictures.”

Price turned his head and kissed Thomas, then nodded to the cigarette. Thomas held it to Price’s lips and let him take a drag. Price exhaled, and then kissed Thomas again. “Where is it?”

“The tie?”

“Mmm hmm.”

“The drawer.”

“Put it on.”

Thomas tucked the cigarette between Price’s lips and reached to the drawer again and produced a
navy blue tie. He tied it loosely while smiling down at Price, then took the cigarette back. “How does it look?”.

Price rocked his hips and looked up at Thomas from under heavy eyelids. “So, so sexy.” Price let Thomas continue stroking himself and let his hands travel up Thomas’s stomach to his chest. He held the tie in both hands and sighed. “I’ve never known a man to erotically put clothes on rather than take them off.”

“I wasn’t trying to be erotic.”

“You can’t help being erotic.”

Thomas smiled at the compliment and took another drag.

“Exhale slowly,” Price panted, pressing against Thomas rhythmically. He held the tie a little more firmly and pressed harder against Thomas.

Thomas sat back, resting more weight against Price, and exhaled as slowly as he could, running his tongue along his lower lip as did so.

Price gasped and grabbed the sheets to avoid gripping the tie too tightly.

“Wait, you’re finishing already?”

“Uh huh,” was all Price could manage to utter. His trousers were just low enough that when he climaxed, there was no fabric blocking it, and he came across his stomach and chest in four successive bursts.

“Blimey, David,” Thomas laughed, not expecting such a show.

“Your turn,” Price said, licking his lips, replacing Thomas’s hand with both of his own. “Come for me.”

“If you insist,” Thomas replied. Price took him to the edge again, and this time, Thomas gave in. His grey eyes rolled back into his head as his orgasm traveled from his abdomen, through his body, all the way to the fingertips holding his fading cigarette. He came across Price’s stomach and chest, and then Price’s throat and cheek as well, as surprised by his own show as much as he’d been by Price’s.

Thomas took the last drag of his cigarette and snuffed it out in the ashtray on his nightstand, all while keeping his eyes on Price. He loosened the tie and pulled it over his head, then smoothed his hair back into place.

“I think you need a little more cleanup than a quick fix of the hair,” Price teased. “I’ll get the basin, you relax.”

Thomas didn’t protest. He laid on the bed, his hands behind his head, and let Price take care of the cleaning. Price wet a washcloth and wiped Thomas’s brow and cheeks first, getting every drop of sweat, then dipped the cloth in the basin and wrung it out before continuing.

“I feel like a mother cat,” Price said quietly as he washed Thomas’s stomach.

“How is my friend the calico?”

Price smiled and wrung out the cloth. “I think she misses you.”
“I miss her a bit. It was nice sleeping with her that night.”

“I’m no kitty but at least you have me to cuddle with this evening.”

“Right, because you’re a puppy.”

Price growled playfully as he finished cleaning Thomas. He moved onto himself while Thomas watched, then got a glass of water to share before turning in.

“I’d like to ask you something before we go to sleep,” Thomas said as Price joined him in bed.

“This sounds serious.”

“Nothing major, but, your brother mentioned something in passing that I want to know more about.”

Price chewed his lip and nodded. “Alright. Go on.”

“He said after the war, you were arrested numerous times. But you never mentioned that to me before.”

Price’s brow furrowed. “Arrests?”

Thomas’s brow furrowed in response. “Yes. Half a dozen or so.”

Price looked down into his water glass for such a long time that Thomas wondered whether he was falling asleep. He finally looked back up, his brows still knitted together. “I forgot. I truly forgot until just now. How is that possible?”

The fear in Price’s eyes reminded Thomas of the same he saw in men on the battlefield. He felt sick having stirred it up, though he couldn’t have known Price had buried the memories. “To protect yourself, maybe. Do you remember what they were for?”

“Fighting,” Price said, his voice distant. “My father appealed to the police and had it stricken from my record, and then I suppose I struck it from my own,” he said with a twisted smile.

“I’m sorry I said anything.”

“Don’t be,” Price said, putting his hand up. “I’m sorry my brain’s so broken I’d forget a thing like that.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I don’t think I can talk about this any more tonight.”

Thomas nodded. “I won’t say another thing.”

Price drank his water quickly and then slid beneath the covers. Thomas turned out the light and pulled Price close to him. He fell asleep with Price in his arms, but Price stayed awake for hours, his eyes open and heart pounding.

Thomas awoke early to make breakfast for Price before work, but found the bed beside him empty. Price sat on the sofa, his legs tucked underneath himself, staring blankly out of the window. The sun was only just coming up, and there wasn’t much to see besides the fire escape and the building across the alley.
“What’re you looking at?” Thomas asked from the doorway.

“What,” Price said without looking away from the window.

“Then what’re you thinking about?” Thomas asked as he sat in the chair next to the sofa.

Price slowly turned to Thomas, his expression still blank. “Why do you waste your time on me?”

“You’re tired,” Thomas said as he leaned forward and placed his hand on Price’s. “You look like you didn’t sleep.”

“Think of everything you could do out there if I weren’t in your way,” Price said, returning his gaze to the window.

“You’re not in my way.”

“You could be with someone who was actually here, not a sad little footman up in Yorkshire.”

“You should go back to bed.”

Price sniffled, but didn’t cry. “Maybe you could have that mé·nage à trois you fantasized about.”

“That’s enough, David,” Thomas said sharply.

Price rubbed his eye. “I’m not going to amount to anything, and do you know why? Because everything about me is a lie, even to myself.”

“Back to bed.”

“It’s a front, it’s phony. I’m a fraud. I make people like me, but if they knew me - really knew me - they’d despise me. Imagine Mr. Carson finding out I was arrested for fighting. Not once, not twice, but at least six times. Or, or, or Daisy finding out I don’t want to court her because she’s - because she’s a ‘she’. Picture her face if she knew exactly how many ‘he’s’ there’d been in my past.” Price ran his fingers through his hair and then down his face. “God, Anna partly named her child after me. There’s a baby tied to me for life. He deserves better. They all do. You do.”

Thomas ran his fingers through his own hair, still tired himself. “I shouldn’t have said anything, I set you off. Get a little rest, eat something, and you’ll feel better.”

Price grunted and pounded his fist against the arm of the sofa. “Admit it, Thomas. Admit I’m a fraud.”

“You’re not.”

“I’m not even an artist. I’ve been pretending that, too.”

“Explain to me how you pretend to have talent, talent others can see with their own eyes?”

“I’ve submitted work to every outlet I could think of. Magazines, papers, galleries, even schools. No one wants me.”

Thomas stood, pulled Price to his feet, and led him back to bed. “Once one person recognizes your talent, others will see it, too,” Thomas said as he shuffled Price under the sheets. “Just because the right person hasn’t recognized you doesn’t mean you’re not good at what you do.”

“I’m pathetic,” Price said as he closed his eyes.
“You’re acting a bit pathetically, but you’re not pathetic,” Thomas teased. He kissed Price’s forehead and pulled the sheets up to Price’s chin. “I’ll forget you said any of this if you promise to try and sleep this off.”

Price opened one eye and looked up at Thomas. “When are you leaving?”

“Sooner than I want, but your brother gave me the afternoon off, and then I’ll be back. We can play with your little gift some more before your train tonight.”

“I’m sorry,” Price said as he closed his eyes.

“You’ll be sorry if I come back and you’re still talking about yourself like this,” Thomas said lightly. He kissed Price’s cheek and then turned out the light.

When he returned that afternoon, Price was better, but too down to enjoy another round in bed with Thomas. They held each other instead, then read together on the sofa, then had tea before it was time for Price to head to the train. Thomas made Price promise to try and come back soon, and promised to do his best to make it to Downton. Neither situation was very realistic with their busy schedules.

Thomas returned the books Price had borrowed from the library, but not before reading them himself. He began borrowing art and art history books and wrote to Price about things he read and learned, and asked questions he had about the time period or the artist. His goal was to engage Price and help him focus on something more positive, and it worked. Price began reading more again, and drawing with more passion. Thomas wasn’t particularly interested in the art when his little project started, but after a month, he started regretting not reading the books Price recommended in Lord Grantham’s library when he had the chance.

Thomas spent an afternoon off seeking a book on contemporary illustration in the hopes of finding some true inspiration for Price. After poking through shelf after shelf, he asked for help from the librarian. Together, he and the young woman found half a dozen books, and Thomas carried the stack to the desk.

“‘The Art of Illustration in Children’s Literature’? A familiar voice read over Thomas’s shoulder. “New career goals already?”

Thomas traded a smile with Teddy and placed the stack on the desk. “Just trying to learn a bit about all that stuff our friend enjoys.”

“Your friend, maybe,” Teddy said as he read the spines of the books. “Out and about in the afternoon, does that mean you’re free today?”

“I was planning to take these to the park and do some reading.”

“No, that won’t do,” Teddy replied.

The librarian eyed them both, then checked the books out for Thomas.

Thomas adjusted his hat brim and played with his lighter in his pocket. “What do you suggest, then?”

Teddy leaned on the desk and looked up as he pictured the rest of the day. “You could come over, I don’t live far from here. We could have some tea, take a walk, get a bite to eat, maybe… gamble a little? You’re a gambling man.”
“Sometimes.”

“Then this could be one of those times. Come to my place. You’ve never been, you know. I always come to you or Eric.”

Thomas was aware he hadn’t visited Teddy’s home. He wasn’t sure if he was quite ready to see exactly how well off his friend was, or more likely, whether he was ready to picture Teddy and Price together in Teddy’s home. “I suppose I can read these later,” Thomas said, deciding it was time to bite the bullet. “Are we walking?”

“Riding,” Teddy said with a smile, producing his key from his pocket. The car was new, or at least one Thomas hadn’t yet ridden in with Teddy. Thomas wondered how many cars there were at Teddy’s home, and then pictured Teddy and Price making love in Teddy’s garage the way he and Price had in the garage at Downton. The thoughts made him wonder if an afternoon and evening with Teddy was a good idea. Usually Eric was there when they were together, but Eric was traveling, and so Thomas couldn’t suggest they include him in their plans.

While Thomas was aware from the start that Teddy was wealthy, Thomas couldn’t stop himself from feeling embarrassed about hosting Teddy’s company in his flat once they pulled up to Teddy’s mansion. And it was a mansion, by all definitions. They drove past the front of the building, which boasted a massive stone staircase, a lush green garden, and fountains. They came around the side, with another significant garden, more fountains, as well as statues and topiaries. They pulled up to the garage, where Thomas counted at least ten cars, and Teddy rolled to a stop. He hopped out and then opened Thomas’s door. Thomas tried not to stare up at the grand building or over at the cars, or the young men working on them. Teddy led Thomas to the back door and they entered through the kitchen so that Teddy could request what he wanted for tea directly from his kitchen staff. Thomas stood still and straight as he felt the eyes of the staff on him.

“This is my friend, Mr. Thomas Barrow,” Teddy said as he took a scone from a cooling rack. He handed one to Thomas, who took it carefully and didn’t bite in.

The staff nodded and said hello, and Thomas returned the greeting. He felt his cheeks get warm, realizing he had much more in common with the people surrounding him than his friend. A young footman entered and Teddy greeted him with eyes that made Thomas wonder if this man was the new Price in Teddy’s life. I’ll find out later, I suppose, Thomas thought, and followed Teddy upstairs.

“So what’s your pleasure?” Teddy asked as they climbed the stairs. “A walk? A bike ride? A swim?”

“Tea’s fine for now.”

Teddy let Thomas into his library, smaller than Downton’s but packed with what seemed like just as many books.

“If you have this many books, what are you doing at the public library?” Thomas asked as he perused the shelves.

“I know you go there sometimes, so I checked while I was in the neighborhood.”

Thomas felt his cheeks warm again and decided he should stay facing the books a little longer. “And here I thought it was mere coincidence.”

“There aren’t many true coincidences in life.”
The handsome footman brought in a tray of tea and set it by the window. He brought a cup to Thomas, and Thomas casually looked the man over. He couldn’t have been more than twenty, but had several features reminiscent of Price’s; light hair, green eyes, full lips.

Thomas thanked the man and then watched him serve a cup to Teddy. The smiles seemed a little more than employer and employee. Thomas smiled himself when the man finally left them alone. “Is he a favorite employee of yours?” Thomas asked, tipping his head in the direction the young man had just left.

Teddy looked down into his tea, almost bashfully, Thomas thought. “He might be.”

“He’s awfully young.”

“I’m young myself. It’s nothing, though, just a bit of flirting. I didn’t even hire him myself, the butler selected him.”

“Perhaps the butler knows your taste.”

“Cheeky,” Teddy said as he fell into an overstuffed chair. “Come to think of it, I think there’s more of an age difference between you and your footman than me and mine.”

Thomas sat in the chair across from Teddy. “That’s different.”

Teddy nodded. “Yes, it is. Your footman is probably even less mature than mine.”

“Don’t get spiky,” Thomas warned with a grin. “Or jealous.”

“You can have him,” Teddy said with a flourish of his wrist. “Or did you mean, I’m jealous that he has you?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Well, I am.”

“I can’t figure why when you have Eric falling more in love with you each time you’re together.”

Teddy clicked his tongue and looked away from Thomas. “He’s not in love with me, please. Or if he is, it’s only because he’s in love with everyone. I think he was coming on to one of the statues outside before I pointed out that it wasn’t human.”

Thomas wondered how many times Eric had been at the mansion, or how many times the two saw one another without him present. “That’s a little harsh. Funny, and somewhat true, but a bit harsh. Is he here often?”

“More often lately. I have so much space, and his boarding house is so depressing, you know? I hate that he has to spend money renting that godawful little excuse for a room when he spends more than half of the year traveling anyhow.”

“So have him move in here.”

Teddy tapped his fingers on the handle of his cup. “That may send the wrong message.”

“According to you, everything sends the wrong message as far as he’s concerned.”

Teddy turned quiet as he considered Thomas’s off-hand suggestion. “Has he ever told you about the… the ‘friend’ he visits?”
“I’m not sure I know what you mean.”

“Nothing, then. Maybe it would be good for him to be here, that’s all I’m thinking.”

Thomas put his cup on the table as the young footman returned with sandwiches and biscuits. He felt the man sizing him up and wondered if he was being considered competition. You have nothing to fear, Thomas thought.

After finishing tea, Teddy gave Thomas a tour of the mansion, including rooms Teddy was in the process of redecorating to replace what he considered outdated adornments. The rooms had sleek lines, metal and mirrored furniture, and geometric patterns. Thomas couldn’t decide if was garish or beautiful, but it seemed out of place in a home so historic.

“I want it to feel like it’s mine,” Teddy explained. “I always felt like I was just living here, and that it belonged to ghosts of ancestors I never even met.”

“But you don’t want to erase that history.”

“I’m not changing everything. Just enough to make it really feel like home.”

Thomas took a closer look at a table made of mirror, even the legs. “I spent a long time in a house that prided itself on honoring the past. I suppose it rubbed off on me.”

“I didn’t change anything about the pool, it’s all original. Why don’t we go there next?”

Thomas raised his eyebrows. “It doesn’t make much sense to ruin our hair if we’re going out tonight.”

“Fine, no swimming. It’s nicer in the evening anyway, maybe after you’ve had a few drinks...”

“Ted, are you just trying to get me out of my clothes?”

Teddy began leading Thomas on the rest of the tour. “I can still admire you, even if you are taken by that little scoundrel.”

“Be kind,” Thomas said as he followed Teddy. “As you know, I’m fond of that little scoundrel.”

“Yes, I know. A mystery for the ages.”

“You were fond of him once.”

“Please, don’t remind me.” Teddy brought Thomas to another wing of the mansion, and passed by every door until he came to the end of the hallway. He pushed open a pair of double doors to reveal his personal suite. Teddy’s bed was the size of Thomas’s bedroom, and was on a platform up three steps on each side, with curtains falling down around it. A spiral staircase led up to a second level where Thomas could see cabinets, drawers, and hooks; a wardrobe he could only dream of, and seemed wasted on a man who didn’t even know how to properly style his hair until Thomas came along. Of course, he couldn’t help picturing Price walking up the platform to the bed, or laying on the chaise lounge, or bobbing in the pool just below the window while Teddy looked on from above.

Teddy was busy picturing Thomas in the bed.

“Has Eric seen this room yet?” Thomas asked, popping Teddy’s fantasy bubble.

Teddy poured himself a shot of whisky and put the bottle away when Thomas put up a hand to
decline. “He has, why do you ask?”

“If he moved in, there’s plenty of room in here for you to share.”

Teddy approached Thomas and downed his drink. He put the glass on a table and ran his fingers across Thomas’s cheekbone. “Are you playing matchmaker because you think Eric and I make a good pair, or to distract me so that I stop thinking about what a great pair we would make?”

“Both.”

Teddy chuckled. “There’s plenty of room for you here, too. If watchmaking doesn’t work out, I could use help with all of that,” Teddy said, waving to the loft.

“I’m confused. Do you want me as your friend, your man, or your valet?”

“My man, first and foremost. You know I’m besotted,” Teddy said, running his fingers across Thomas’s other cheek.

“Even though you also know that I’m taken?”

“Taken, yet standing here while I touch you.”

“Maybe I should go.”

Teddy took his cigarettes from his jacket and handed one to Thomas. “Don’t take me too seriously, please.”

Thomas took the cigarette and let Teddy light it for him. “A little respect for David’s all I ask.”

Teddy inhaled and ignored the comment, then took Thomas on the rest of the tour, stopping midway to ask the butler to make a dinner reservation on his behalf. After accepting the task, the butler handed Teddy the day’s second post. He nearly put it down without reading any of the letters until one caught his eye. He apologized for needing a moment and stepped away to read it in private, but Thomas was familiar enough with envelopes from Eric to know exactly who it was from.

The restaurant was the nicest Teddy had taken Thomas to since moving to London. Thomas longed to dance like the couples on the floor, but settled for watching and memorizing a few of the moves to try with Price during their next visit together. Teddy had one drink for every two of Thomas’s, and Thomas was glad by the fifth course that Teddy opted for a chauffeur that evening and wasn’t responsible for driving.

“There’re tables upstairs,” Teddy told Thomas. “Cards and the like.”

“Don’t you think you’re a bit squiffy to start throwing money around?”

“That’s why you’ll do the playing, I’ll do the paying. You can keep any winnings.”

Thomas wanted to politely decline the offer, but his wages at the shop were just enough to get by, and the possibility of a little extra money was tempting. After the meal, Teddy brought Thomas to the game room, which was larger than the great hall at Downton and much more crowded than Thomas expected.

“What’s your game of choice?” Teddy asked Thomas over the din of the crowd.

“I prefer games of skill over games of chance.”
“Blackjack? Poker?”

“Poker.”

Teddy pushed in next to Thomas at the poker table, quite close, which garnered a look from a woman at the table who was sitting with her man. Thomas elbowed Teddy gently until Teddy took the hint, but Teddy’s eyes were on Thomas’s fingers throughout the game, and then on Thomas’s lips while he talked around his cigarette. Thomas could feel the woman’s eyes on them again, and he told Teddy to take a walk while he finished playing.

“Did you win?” Teddy asked when Thomas met up with him at the roulette table.

“Of course I did.”

“Why don’t you keep playing, then?”

“No need to be greedy, and you don’t want to draw attention to yourself when it comes to gambling. Don’t tell me you’re waiting to play roulette.”

Teddy gave Thomas a pouty frown. “I already played. Suffice it to say, I didn’t win.”

“Then I think now’s a good time to take our leave.”

Teddy sipped the last of his wine and handed his glass over as a waiter walked by. “You’ll come back home with me for that swim, won’t you?”

Thomas looked around at the people dressed as finely as anyone who would have attended dinner at Downton. He thought over his dinner and the poker winnings in his pocket, and then all of the other meals and entertainment Teddy provided him since moving to London. Teddy wasn’t asking for much, just a dip in the pool, and probably some heavy-handed flirting along with it. But he never pushed when Thomas said no, and Thomas had no means to return any of the favors Teddy paid him, and so he reasoned that going back home with Teddy was the least that he could do.

“What will you do with the money you won?” Teddy asked while they waited for the car to pull around.

Buy something for Price, Thomas thought. “I haven’t decided. It’s not often I come into any extra money.”

Teddy reached for the car door handle twice before finally grabbing hold. “I should drink less next time.”

“You’re always the one pulling drinks away from Eric, and here you are, worse than him tonight.”

“Don’t tell,” Teddy said once they were both in the back of the car. “He’ll want me to keep up with him, and I shouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“You know why,” Teddy said after telling the driver he could bring them both back home.

“But I’ll need a ride to my flat later,” Thomas told the driver.

They entered through the front of the mansion this time, up the imposing stairs, and Thomas lent his elbow to Teddy so he could steady himself as they ascended.
“Are you hungry?” Teddy asked.

“I don’t think I’ll be hungry for a long time after a meal like we just had.”

“Thirsty?”

“You’ve drunk enough for us both.”

“Just some pop, then. I’ll go ask for some, you can go out to the pool house. There’s a place to hang your clothes.”

“And what will I wear in the pool?”

Teddy looked Thomas over slowly, from his shoes to his lips. “The water’s so warm, you don’t need to wear anything at all,” Teddy said quietly.

“You know nothing will happen between us beyond friendship.”

Teddy took a heavy breath, his eyes not leaving Thomas’s lips. “My eyes will be the only thing on you, I promise.”

“If you can keep that promise, I’ll stay and swim.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Teddy whispered, closing his eyes. “I promise, I swear.”

Thomas imagined Price’s reaction to him wading into the water in front of a waiting Teddy, but it was nothing Price wouldn’t do, Thomas thought, especially with the promise of the other man keeping his hands to himself. He followed Teddy’s directions to the pool house, which was a small building mostly obscured by tall hedges at the edge of the pool. It was a complete guest house, with kitchenette, bedroom and living room furniture, and a large bathroom. Thomas hung his suit and shirt on hooks by the bathtub, folded a few of his garments and placed them on a bench below the hooks, wrapped a towel around his waist, and went back into the main room.

The room looked out on the pool, and Thomas saw Teddy approach in a robe. Teddy waited for the footman to leave the drinks he requested, then untied the belt of his robe and let it fall straight to the ground at his feet. Thomas had already seen Teddy disrobe at Downton, but Teddy was even more attractive in the moonlight. He waited for Teddy to get waist-deep in the water before leaving the pool house.

Thomas sat at the edge of the pool, towel still on, and dipped his feet in. “I once watched David swim nude,” Thomas said as he moved his feet slowly in the water.

Teddy disappeared under the water briefly and smoothed his hair back as he came up. “Oh?”

“He didn’t know I was watching, neither. It was the first time I saw him without any clothes on.”

Teddy swam up to Thomas and rolled onto his back. “I first undressed him in front of a fireplace,” Teddy said while looking up at Thomas. “The air was cold, but the fire was warm, and so was every inch of his skin.”

Thomas’s breath halted and he clenched his jaw.

Teddy smiled up at Thomas and moved his arms slowly to stay afloat. “What was it like with Eric?”

Thomas forced his eyes to stay above Teddy’s waist. “The man knows what he’s doing.”
Teddy grabbed onto the side of the pool and hopped up, sitting himself by Thomas. “Tell me more.”

Thomas slid out of his towel, into the pool, and looked up at Teddy. “What do you want to know?”

“Was he romantic?”

“Yes.”

“Was he rough?”

“Rough?”

“Nevermind. Is he… big?”

Thomas laughed. “Big enough. Why don’t you find out for yourself?”

Teddy leaned back and rested on his palms. “He’s not my type.”

“And I am?”

“The very definition of my type, yes.” Teddy leaned back further and took a bottle from a table behind him. “Would you like your pop?”

Thomas took the bottle from Teddy and ignored Teddy’s lingering fingers. He took a long swig and then set the half empty bottle on the edge of the pool.

“Oh, to be that bottle,” Teddy mused. “I wish the moon was brighter so I could see more of you.”

“You’re especially bold this evening.”

Teddy stood with his toes at the very edge of the pool, then dove in. He popped up from under the water next to Thomas. “Maybe I’m just not ready to give up.”

“It’s futile.”

“Don’t you find me handsome?”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Don’t you enjoy my company?”

“Very much.”

“Then forget about you-know-who,” Teddy said as he moved closer to Thomas. “I would share everything I have with you, just like when we go out. You wouldn’t need to work if you didn’t want to. We could do anything, go anywhere.”

“You can’t buy affection.”

Teddy smirked. “I bought the affection of your scoundrel.”

Thomas glowered. “He’s not like that now.”

Teddy’s smirk turned into a laugh. “The things I could tell you about him, Thomas.”

“Alright, enlighten me, then. What do you think you know that I don’t?”
Teddy wiped beads of water from his cheek. “He’ll never be satisfied with one man. I highly doubt he’s staying true to you up at Downton. I’m sorry, it’s not malicious on his part, it’s just some kind of compulsion. He eats a man up and tosses the carcass aside, then moves on to the next.”

Thomas’s upper lip curled as he responded. “You think you know him, but you don’t. He’s spent years trying to find ways to cope with what the war did to him, and one of those ways was finding comfort in other men. You can’t blame him for that.”

“He can’t use the war as an excuse for acting like a trollop.”

Thomas’s voice rose nearly an octave. “I’m sorry, I didn’t remember you saying that you served in the war.”

Teddy stuttered before replying. “I didn’t.”

“Then you don’t have the right to an opinion on how David’s dealt with things.”

“I do, because he dealt with things by breaking my heart.”

Thomas’s scowl was nearly a sneer. “You were probably swimming in here while he was swimming in blood. Your heart will heal soon enough, but he still has a long road to go.”

Teddy softened his tone and tried to smile. “But why bother with him if he’s so damaged?”

“It may be a long road, but he’s trying to go in the right direction. If your view of him wasn’t so myopic, you would see that. Part of you must see the good in him or you wouldn’t still be so bitter that he left you in the first place.”

Teddy felt small under Thomas’s glare. “Do you really think he’ll make it in the right direction, Thomas? From what Eric’s told me, it sounds like he’s going the other way now that you’re out of the picture.”

“I’m not out of the picture, there’s only physical distance between us, and that won’t be forever. I believe in Eric, and I know he’ll find a way to get David out there with him.”

“He’d be out there without you, though. How would that be any different? If he’s better with you, he should find a way to be here with you.”

“This just shows how little you understand about him, about life, and about love. You think you’re so much more mature than him, but you’re showing every bit of the fact that you’re not.”

“Educate me, then,” Teddy whispered sincerely.

Thomas looked around. “It’s like this pool, Ted. David looks like he’s floating through life to you, but he’s kicking frantically to stay afloat. I see that, and Eric does, too. David just needs the means to get out there, and he’ll push forward. I’d rather go without him for months and know he was finally chasing the dreams that have eluded him his whole life, rather than have him nearby but unhappy.”

“And you would trust him gone that long?”

“Of course. And I think you could benefit from more travel, yourself, while I’m being honest. The world you’re living in is a bit too far from reality.”
“How so?”

Thomas spoke evenly again. “You think you can show me a good time, show me your luxury, and get me to stay with the promise of more. Love doesn’t care about those kinds of things, and you’ll just keep finding yourself with your so-called man-eaters if you keep going about it this way.”

The butler announced himself from the gate of the pool and said he had a message. Teddy called him over, and Thomas took the opportunity to swim closer to the side of the pool.

The butler looked at Thomas quickly, and then to Teddy. “Would you like me to give you the message privately, my Lord?”

“No, thank you. I don’t mind if my friend hears my messages.”

“Very well, then. Mr. Weatherbee telephoned to say that he returned this evening. He wondered if you would like him to come to Pembroke Manor tonight.”

“Please phone him back and tell him yes, I would.”

When the butler was gone, Thomas hopped out of the pool and began to towel dry.

“You’re staying, aren’t you?”

“No. Enjoy time with Eric.”

“I wanted us all to enjoy time together.”

“I have work tomorrow, Ted,” Thomas said as he wrapped the towel around his waist. “I’ll request the car myself, you don’t have to get out.”

Teddy sank into the water up to his chin and watched Thomas walk to the pool house. He stayed in the water by himself for another hour, until he heard footsteps on the pathway leading to the pool. Eric waved to Teddy from the gate.

“Do you want to come in?”

“No, but I’m happy to keep you company from the side.”

“Your trip sounded arduous from your letters.”

Eric took off his jacket and then kicked off his shoes. “It was exhausting, and the trip home was no exception,” he said as he took off his socks and rolled up his trousers. He walked to the stairs leading into the pool and sat at the very top, putting his feet on the first step.

Teddy swam over and sat on the bottom step, the water just up to his shoulders. He looked over at Eric’s leg and something caught his attention. He put a finger under Eric’s rolled pant leg and pulled it up. “Tell me this wound is from hiking or biking or something.”

Eric patted Teddy’s head and pulled the leg of his pants up higher. “I visited somewhere else before coming here.”

“Eric, why?” Teddy asked while inspecting Eric’s other leg, and then his wrists. “I thought you were going to call me whenever you felt the need to go to him.”

“I went straight to him when I got into town. I called you as soon as I got home.”
Teddy climbed up to the top step and sat next to Eric’s feet. He turned his torso and looked up at Eric. “I want you to move in.”

Eric laughed and looked at the reflection of the stars in the water. “I’ll call you first next time, no need to watch over me night and day.”

Teddy ran his fingers from Eric’s ankle, up Eric’s pant leg to his calf and rubbed it slowly with his fingertips. “You’d do me a favor by being here when you’re not traveling or at the office. I love your company,” he said as his fingers moved back to Eric’s ankle. “Why should you rent that little room when you could have your pick of rooms here?”

Eric ran his fingers through Teddy’s wet hair, plucking strands from Teddy’s forehead and smoothing them in place. “Am I your charity case?”

“Not a bit.”

“A little bit?”

“I’d have to pity you for that, and I don’t. But part of me wants to take care of you, and don’t you think there’s a part of you that needs taking care of?”

Eric sunk onto the step next to Teddy, clothes and all. “What if I still have the desire to go to him? You’ll want me to move out.”

“No, I’d never do that to you. There are no strings attached. Still, I hope that you’ll feel less of a pull to go to him when you’re coming home to…”

“Home to you?” Eric asked, inching over until his hip touched Teddy’s.

“Yes, home to me.”

Eric looked down between Teddy’s legs. “No swimsuit?”

Teddy put his finger under Eric’s chin and pushed it up. “No peering.”

“You’re the nude one, Teddy. You could have gotten something on when you knew I was coming. You chose to wait for me like this.”

“You make it sound like I was laying in wait for you.”

“Throw me a bone, let me pretend you were.”

“Your trousers are all wet.”

Eric put his arms out and swam into the water. He went under and swam the length of the pool, tapped the wall, and then swam to the middle. “Now my shirt’s wet, too,” he called to Teddy.

Teddy laughed and met Eric in the middle of the pool, the water up to their shoulders. “And your tie, and your waistcoat, and your undergarments.”

“My cufflinks, my billfold, my handkerchief,” Eric said as he pulled Teddy toward him by the forearm.

Teddy rolled his eyes, but let Eric pull him closer. He closed his eyes when Eric’s lips grazed his earlobe, and let out a sigh as Eric pulled him in into a hug. He played with Eric’s soaked shirt beneath the surface of the water, his eyes still closed as Eric’s lips laid feather-light kisses on his
Eric kissed the other side of Teddy’s neck, and then put the tip of his nose against Teddy’s. “Do you want me to keep going?”

Teddy’s eyes were still closed, and he breathed heavily but didn’t respond.

“I need to hear you say yes if you want me to continue.”

Teddy opened his eyes and looked into Eric’s. “Yes.”

“Yes,” Eric repeated.

“Yes.”

“Yes,” Eric said again, kissing beads of pool water from Teddy’s lips.

“Yes,” Teddy said, kissing droplets of water from Eric’s cheek. He found Eric’s lips again and kissed them lightly. Eric attempted to put his hand between Teddy’s legs, but Teddy held his wrist and shook his head. “Let’s not jump to that just yet. There’s a lot more to explore before we get there. Your tongue, for example. I haven’t even tasted it yet.”

Eric put his hands on Teddy’s hips and smiled. “Would you care for a taste?”

“Yes,” Teddy laughed. “Just a taste.”

Eric nibbled Teddy’s lower lip, then slipped his tongue past it, rubbing it along Teddy’s slowly.

Teddy kissed Eric back, inhaling as his mouth opened to let Eric in further. He pressed his body against Eric’s, and stopped Eric as he began touching Teddy’s backside. “One more thing before this becomes too distracting and I forget to say something.”

“I’m listening, but I can’t promise for long, because this is already too distracting for me.”

Teddy ran his thumb along Eric’s jaw as he spoke. “I want to pay for David to go with you on your next trip, but I don’t want anyone to know where it came from. Tell your magazine you secured private financing, and tell Thomas and David the magazine found the funding.”

Eric grinned and kissed Teddy. “What inspired this offer?”

“Does it matter?”

Eric shook his head, little drops of water jumping into the pool from the ends of his curly hair. “I don’t need to know. You’re a generous friend, Teddy.”

“I may not be good at being a friend, but at least I share what I have.”

Eric shook his head again and ran his fingers down Teddy’s spine. “You’re so silly. I think you may be the best friend I’ve ever had. I trust you more than I’ve trusted anyone.”

“Why?” Teddy asked, his back arching in response to Eric’s touch.

“Because you have a kind heart and a warm soul. I’ve crossed the paths of many people, I’m good at telling the good from the bad, and you’re one of the best.”

“You’re just flirting.”
“You know I’m not.”

“You know,” Teddy said, going for Eric’s buttons, “you don’t need these heavy, wet clothes on.”

Eric helped Teddy get him out of his clothing, throwing each item to the side of the pool as he broke free from it.

When their bodies finally connected beneath the water, they both let out a gasp, experiencing something like a little shared zap of electricity. It made their hands move faster, their lips press together more firmly, their tongues find their way deeper past one another’s lips.

Eric flinched as Teddy grazed a fresh wound on his abdomen, the second time he’d flinched since they started kissing.

Teddy broke their kiss. “We should stop if this is going to hurt you,” he said with heavy breath.

“I’m used to it,” Eric said, diving back into Teddy’s lips.

“No,” Teddy said, holding Eric’s face steady. “I can’t hurt you.”

“What do we do, then?”

Teddy looked up at his bedroom window. “We go upstairs, dry each other off - carefully. I call for some wine, we lay in my bed, and we kiss each other gently between sips. We wake up tomorrow, you move your things in here, and we spend every night the same until you’re healed.” Teddy paused to kiss Eric’s cheek. “And when you are, we can get back in here and finish what we started.”

“What happens if I crack? If I go to him again even after I’ve moved in here?”

“I think you can stop yourself before that happens,” Teddy said as he rested his cheek against Eric’s, “but if you go to him, you can still come back to me,” he whispered into Eric’s ear.

“I don’t think it’s so bad. He stops when I want him to.”

Teddy kissed Eric’s wet hair. “I can support playing rough, Eric, if that’s what you like, but that’s not what you’re doing. It’s the difference between people who can tolerate their alcohol and alcoholics.”

Eric nestled his cheek into Teddy’s. “Won’t your staff find it odd if I move in?”

“I pay them to serve me, not judge me. I don’t care what they think as long as they’re doing their jobs.”

“The cute young one might be unhappy. You don’t care about that?”

Teddy shook with a naughty little laugh. “He may be quite happy, in fact.”

“What does that mean?”

“Move in and find out.”

Eric nibbled Teddy’s earlobe. “Consider my belongings packed.”

---------------------------
Thomas was distracted from his work. A letter from Anna had the gears in his head spinning like the open watch in his hand. Lady Mary had told Anna that Price wasn’t riding horses with her as often, and when pressed, said his heart ached too much to enjoy much of anything. Anna thought Thomas should know, since she assumed the heartache was linked to him, and that he should also know because Price may becoming so depressed that he could do something drastic. Thomas believed Anna may be right, especially as Price’s latest letter had been quite dark.

Thomas was so distracted, in fact, that he didn’t notice Eric enter the shop. Sam had gone out for lunch, and Eric stepped behind the counter and sat on a stool. After a minute, Thomas finally looked up at his friend.

“I’m back from my trip.”

“I see that. Welcome home.”

“I come bearing good news,” Eric said as he swiveled on the stool.

“Do tell. I could use some today.”

Eric hopped off the stool and walked to where Thomas was sitting. He leaned against the counter and smiled. “I got it. I got the money for David to travel.”

Thomas’s mouth opened and it took him a few seconds before he could respond. “What changed Lady Edith’s mind?”

“Who knows? Who cares? The fact is, I’m leaving in a month and David’s coming with me. Whatever materials he needs, he’ll get, and then he can use them to capture our trip. I just hope he likes Australia, since we’ll be there for twelve weeks.”

Thomas set the watch down on the counter since it was now rattling in his hands. “Did you choose the destination before or after you knew David was coming?”

“Before, why do you ask?”

“Because he’s mentioned feeling drawn there.”

“Then I suppose he was right to feel that way,” Eric said, basking in Thomas’s astonishment.

“Does he know yet?”

“I’m going from here to Downton to tell him.”

“I wish I could see the look on his face when you tell him.”

“Probably similar to yours right now. I’ll make sure he gets to spend at least a night in London before the trip.”

“You’re a wonderful friend, Eric.”

“And to think,” Eric said as he saw Sam coming down the sidewalk, “we’d never be here if you didn’t take me up on the indecent favor I asked the first night we met.”

“Leave it to you to bring it all back to that.”

“I’m simply saying David has our libidos to thank for the fact that his life’s about to change.”
“Please don’t share that when you deliver the news to him.”

----------------

Price called Thomas after Eric’s visit, which quickly lead to an argument when Price said he was considering declining Eric’s offer.

“You’re just scared,” Thomas said.

“Fear is more powerful than any emotion,” Price retorted.

“That doesn’t give you an excuse to let it overpower you.”

The two went back and forth, and when the call ended, Price thought he may truly decline and continue down his current path, the easier path, the one that could likely get him a job at least related to service in the city where his beloved lived. When his beloved wasn’t being a bastard, he thought.

Price was thinking about the conversation while out on a ride with Lady Mary, and she could see he was distracted, which he always seemed to be those days. She pulled into a clearing and he followed.

“Are you hurt?” Price asked as he guided his horse alongside Lady Mary’s.

“No. Do you want to go back? Riding a horse in a bad state of mind isn’t a wise idea.”

“I think I’m going to leave Downton,” Price blurted.

Lady Mary’s brow twitched in a brief furrow. “To go where?”

Price petted his horse’s mane and took in a deep breath through his nose. “Lady Edith’s magazine, to draw the illustrations for a travel piece.”

“Is that what you want?” Lady Mary asked, pushing herself not to dwell on the jealousy of Lady Edith getting Lily and now Price.

Price held his hand out to a moth, which fluttered for a moment and then landed on his knuckle. “I’d be in nature all day for months.”

“We could find you a job on the grounds or the farms if that’s what you want.”

“You don’t think I should go?”

Lady Mary wondered how much power her words would have over Price’s decision. If she said no, would that make him stay? “You should think hard about a decision like that. Have you discussed it with Mr Carson.”

“No. I don’t want to worry him if it’s for nothing,” Price replied as he watched the moth’s wings tremble as it walked along the back of his hand.

“I don’t think there’s anywhere in the world better than Downton, and you have the makings of a long career here if you want it.”

Price nodded and watched the moth fly away.

“But,” Lady Mary said, sitting a bit higher in the saddle, “if you’re going to spend that career
looking as downtrodden and distracted as you have these past few months, then perhaps you should go. No one can decide for you, though, David.”

“Can’t you?” Price asked with a smile. “You’d do me a great favor if you could.”

“Alright,” Lady Mary replied, the edges of her lips turning up slightly, “if it’s up to me, we get to keep you here.”

Price chuckled. “Forever?”

“Forever and ever. But it’s not up to me, or Lady Edith, or anyone else.”

“What if I fail?”

“What if you succeed?”

Price pressed his lips together while the four simple words bounced around in his brain. He continued processing them while riding back to the stable, and during dinner service, and while lying in bed that evening. The next morning, he was in Mr. Carson’s office to announce that he would be leaving.

Price gave a month’s notice, and there was only a small window of a day between leaving Downton and starting his trip with Eric. Eric rounded up all the supplies Price requested, and even went to the village and met with Price at a tea room to make sure everything was up to his standards. During the short visit, he promised Price what he’d promised Thomas; at least one day for them to both be together before they left. Eric made a second promise to not flirt with him during their travels.

“It’s just part of who I am,” Eric explained, “but I have the chance for a real friendship with you, not something mixed up with sex or romance.”

Price laughed, “or it’s that I’m taken.”

“Or that I’m now taken,” Eric admitted.

Price wasn’t surprised by the other party in the relationship, once Eric confessed who it was, but it still seemed strange to have now shared two of the same men with Eric. It also seemed funny to him that Teddy wanted Thomas, and Eric wanted Price, and the whole thing could come full circle if he or Thomas were willing. He expressed as much to Eric.

“It’s not weird,” Eric replied. “We’re all such different men, but there’s so much at the core that draws us together. It makes sense that we’d all fall for each other at different times and in different ways.”

“Hold on there, I haven’t fallen for you,” Price teased.

Eric smirked. “You fell a little bit along the way to friendship, David.”

“Doesn’t matter now anyway,” Price said, taking another look at the supplies Eric brought. “We’re friends, which is much better than the fling we probably would have had under different circumstances.”

“We’d make a terrible couple.”

“Why do you say that?”
Eric sipped his tea and watched Price compare pencils. “We cling too hard to others. We’d be like
drowning men, pulling each other down.”

“That’s quite dark.”

“I’ve thought about it. Dark, but true.”

“So you’ve thought about me?”

Eric took a pencil and poked Price’s hand lightly. “I promised not to flirt, which means you need to
do the same.”

“Alright. Friendship with no flirting.”

“We’re both going to break this rule many, many times,” Eric said, pointing the pencil at Price.

“I know,” Price said, pointing one back.

The good-byes at Downton weren’t as elaborate as the ones for Thomas, nor should they have been
as Price served a fraction of the time there as Thomas. But they were heartfelt, and Price’s absence
would be missed by everyone, especially Mr. Carson who now had to hire another two men to
make up for the absence of Price.

Price’s train to London was delayed due to torrential rain, and when he finally arrived at Thomas’s
flat, he was tired and drenched. Thomas had planned a dinner out, but Price looked so exhausted
and tousled that he decided to make Price a dinner at home. Price changed into a dry pair of
pajamas while Thomas searched for something to make.

“I don’t think you’ve ever cooked dinner for me before,” Price said as Thomas heated a pan on the
stove.

“Set your standards low,” Thomas told him, “I don’t want to disappoint.

Disappoint he did not; he’d spent enough years around food to learn a few things, which he hadn’t
realized until tasked with making his own meals. It was a simple meat and potatoes meal, but
seasoned and cooked properly, and absolutely delicious to Price. They ate at Thomas’s little table,
a candle lit in the center between two glasses of wine.

“To the cook,” Price said, raising his glass.

Thomas raised his and tapped it against Price’s. “Does it taste alright?”

“It’s perfectly wonderful, my love,” Price replied as he bit into a slice of potato.

“I don’t really have anything for pudding since I was planning to take you out. There’s a couple
peaches, but not much else that’s sweet.”

“Ooh,” Price said with a playful gasp. “Remember when I wanted you to be my ripe peach?” He
closed his eyes and pictured the scene in the boot room. “Oh, to watch you bite in and then lick the
juice. I can think of no better dessert.”

Thomas looked over at the kitchen counter. “I’m not going to be able to focus on the rest of the
meal now.”

Price put down his fork and knife and wiped his lips with his napkin. He walked slowly to the
kitchen, a hand on his waist, pushing his hips out as he walked like one of the women he’d seen in
pictures.

Thomas looked on, smiling from his seat.

Price turned on his heel and picked up one of the peaches between his middle finger and thumb. His other hand still on his waist, he held the peach up to his lips and licked the skin with the very tip of his tongue. “Mmm, so soft, just like your skin.”

“More like yours with the fuzz. Mine’s no peach skin.”

“Oh, certain places are. And every place is just as delicious. Come over here so I can get a taste.”

Thomas put his utensils down and joined Price at the counter.

Price patted the counter. “Up here, little peach.”

Thomas hopped up onto the counter, and Price handed him the piece of fruit. Thomas bit in, the ripe flesh giving way below velvet skin, juice immediately dripping from his lips. Price licked the drops from Thomas’s bottom lip, and Thomas held the fruit above Price’s neck and let it dribble onto him. He chased the drops with his tongue, and then licked some that had escaped the peach and traveled down his fingers.

Price kissed the knuckles on Thomas’s other hand, then removed Thomas’s glove. He took the peach from Thomas’s right hand and put it in Thomas’s left palm. While looking up into Thomas’s eyes, he took a bite. More juice flowed, running down Thomas’s palm to his wrist, and in the other direction down his fingers. Price licked Thomas’s wrist, then his fingers, then put the peach on the counter and licked the scars on Thomas’s palm, and then the back of his hand.

Thomas put two fingers to Price’s lips and sighed as Price drew them into his mouth. Price held Thomas’s wrist and sucked Thomas’s fingers, moaning into them as his lips reached Thomas’s knuckles and Thomas’s fingertips grazed the back of his throat. He pushed his hips between Thomas’s legs, spreading them, and then began to unfasten Thomas’s trousers, Thomas’s fingers still sliding in and out of his mouth.

Thomas unbuttoned and pulled off his shirt as Price got him out of his trousers, and quickly he was sitting atop the counter as naked as the peach next to him. Price kissed Thomas’s thighs, stomach, and chest, and then pulled Thomas’s face down to his. Their tongues were both sweet, their lips sticky, their breath raspy and warm. Thomas spread his thighs further apart, hinting and hoping for Price to touch him, but Price’s hands were busy running through Thomas’s chest hair, his fingertips grazing Thomas’s nipples lightly.

Thomas moaned, and Price giggled mischievously. He licked one nipple, then the other, then nibbled lightly. Thomas thrust his hips forward in response, and Price nibbled harder. He followed with a quick kiss before kissing his way across Thomas’s chest, repeating the actions on the other side. Thomas closed his eyes as his head lolled to the side, enjoying the sensation. He ran his fingers through Price’s hair and panted as Price lapped at his neck.

“Not higher, lick lower,” Thomas groaned.

“You want my tongue on your cock?” Price whispered into Thomas’s ear.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Thomas whispered back.

Price looked down. “It’s already juicy like the peach.”
Thomas flexed involuntarily, his cock bobbing and dripping.

“Velvety like it, too,” Price said, running the tip of his finger over Thomas.

Thomas arched his back and shivered.

Price picked up the peach from the counter and held it in front of his face. “You’re as pink as this little bit of skin right here,” Price said, licking the side of the peach.

“That’s not fair,” Thomas panted.

Price kissed the peach while looking Thomas in the eye, then licked the cleft in the side of it. He giggled as Thomas humped the air and gazed longingly at Price’s tongue.

“Stop taking so much pleasure in my misery,” Thomas said, though he was smiling ear to ear.

“You’re so hard,” Price cooed as he took a bite.

“You’re killing me.”

“I know. I love it.”

Thomas yanked the peach from Price’s hand and pitched it across the kitchen into the sink. He licked Price’s palm and fingers clean, then went back over them again with his tongue before placing them on his cock. He held Price’s wrist and moaned between closed lips as Price pumped up and down.

Price bent at the waist and kissed Thomas’s tip before licking him in long strokes. He took Thomas deep into his mouth, moaning to make his tongue vibrate against Thomas. Thomas moaned just as loud in response and gripped the edge of the counter. He pushed himself in and out of Price’s mouth while rolling his hips in a circle, feeling deliciously desirable while Price’s hands trailed over his calves and thighs. Price always seemed to enjoy giving as much as receiving, and as hungry to please Thomas as to be pleased himself. His moaning was as satisfied as Thomas’s even though nothing was in contact with his cock besides his pajama bottoms.

Thomas patted Price’s cheek and gently pushed him back by the shoulder, then hopped off the counter and turned around. He bent over, leaning on the counter with his elbows.

Price stood bolt upright, looked at Thomas with wide eyes, then ran to the bedroom for the little tube in Thomas’s drawer. He returned seconds later, his pajamas gone and tube in hand.

Thomas laughed at the speed at which Price was naked, armed, and ready, and at the sight of him dashing across the flat disrobed, but his laugh faded to a sigh as Price made himself slick, and then rubbed wet fingers on Thomas’s backside. He reached around and gripped Thomas, then positioned himself behind. Thomas looked over his shoulder and waited for a kiss, which Price placed tenderly on his lips. Price kissed Thomas’s ear, then neck, then nibbled Thomas’s shoulder blade as he pushed his tip into Thomas.

“Oh fuck,” Price gasped.

“Oh god,” Thomas moaned as Price pushed all the way inside.

“It doesn’t hurt, does it?” Price asked as Thomas pushed back against him.

“No,” Thomas breathed, “especially not since I’ve been using… something… to make sure I was
Price’s eyes were wide again. “Really? Where is it? I need to see!”

Thomas shook his head. “When you’re back from your trip, I’ll show you.”

Price slapped Thomas’s rear. “You tease! That’s positively evil!”

Thomas grunted and closed his eyes. “Do that again.”

Price squeezed Thomas’s behind and then slapped it lightly. “Like that?”

“Mmm.”

Price ran his fingers up Thomas’s back, then around to his chest. He pinched Thomas’s nipples, then kept his fingers on one while he stroked Thomas with the other hand.

“Yes,” Thomas hissed, dragging out the word.

“You’re so sexy, Thomas.”

“You’re so good at this, you make me believe you when you say that.”

“Oh stop, you know you are,” Price said, slapping Thomas lightly again.

Thomas put his forehead down the counter and groaned as Price picked up speed.

Price ran his thumb over the head of Thomas’s cock and used the precum to help pump faster, and then stayed still so Thomas could control the rhythm, pumping into Price’s hand, and then out of it while pushing back on Price’s cock.

“God, look at you!” Price groaned. “I love every fucking inch of you.”

“I love every inch of you,” Thomas said, pushing back until Price was as deep as he could go.

Price gasped a string of obscenities mixed with declarations of love. He kissed Thomas’s shoulders and wrapped his arms around Thomas’s ribs, letting Thomas take over stroking his own cock.

Thomas leaned into Price’s lips as Price brought the swear words, pet names, and compliments up to Thomas’s ear, whispering them between moans.


Thomas chuckled, his eyes closed as Price’s breath tickled his ear. “Do you practice these things before you say them?”

“On the contrary, I’m not able to think at all right now. My brain is filled with Thomas, Thomas, Thomas.”

“I’m sorry, with what?” Thomas asked with mock innocence.

“Thomas, Thomas, Thomas,” Price breathed.

“Come again?”

Price shuddered as Thomas squeezed around his cock. “Thomas, Thomas, Thomas. Christ,
Thomas pushed his palm into the counter and raised up on his toes. “Right there,” he said as he stroked himself faster in the other hand.

Price slowed his pace, making sure to hit Thomas exactly where he wanted; in the place that was making him gasp, his fingers turning white as they dug into the counter. Price steadied himself by gripping Thomas’s shoulders, watching himself glide in and out as Thomas continued to gasp and sigh.

“Yes!” Thomas cried, high pitched and blissful.

Price leaned over Thomas and kissed behind his ear, the scent of peach still lingering on his lips as he whispered, “I love you, Thomas.”

Thomas cried out again and smiled, repeating “David, David, David,” as he came.

Price wrapped his arms around Thomas, repeating Thomas’s name as well, pressing his cheek into Thomas’s neck as he climaxed. He continued to hold onto Thomas as he slid out carefully, then fell to his knees and kissed the backs of Thomas’s legs.

“We’re a bit messy,” Thomas laughed.

Price looked up, then resumed kissing Thomas thigh. “You don’t say?”

“A bath is probably in order.”

Price sat up in a start, then dashed to the bathroom. The water was already running by the time Thomas could walk across the small flat. Price sat on the edge of the tub, cleaning himself off before he plugged the drain and let the tub fill. He looked over his shoulder at Thomas and smiled, then returned to his task.

Thomas leaned against the doorframe and watched Price. The pretty young man who loved him more deeply than anyone else, despite all the other men who would love to see Price perched nude on their tub. Thomas smiled to himself, then approached Price, who had finally plugged the drain and slid into the building water.

Thomas was about to climb in, but sat on the edge instead. Price’s relaxed body in the porcelain tub made Thomas remember the first night he met Eric, and the power he enjoyed having over the man he assumed, albeit wrongly, was one of the elite. He realized that he no longer felt like the kind of man who needed those kind of games in his life any longer. He had friends, a job, his own flat, and a partner, and without the pretty man in the rising water below him, none of that would have likely been possible.

Price was content to look up at Thomas in silence, the steam from the bath and remaining endorphins from his orgasm making him more relaxed than he been in months. He gave Thomas a dreamy smile and pulled his knees up. “There’s room for one more.”

Thomas tested the water with his fingers, then ran his wet fingertips lightly over Price’s knee, then down his thigh, then between them.

“Again already?” Price laughed, but his laugh quieted as he saw something serious behind Thomas’s eyes.

“You’ve changed me. I’m a better man because of you,” Thomas said as he wrapped his fingers
around Price.

Price watched Thomas’s hand move beneath the water. “I’d like to think I bring out the best in you, but you do the same for me”

“I could be a nasty old sod in my day.”

“Same here,” Price shrugged.

“Probably not as bad as me.”

Price sank deeper into the water as his legs fell further apart until they touched the sides of the tub. “Probably worse. And I can still be nasty, but I try to be better every day, and that’s all thanks to you. You’re a good man, Thomas.”

“You’re only saying that because your cock is in my hand.”

Price laughed and splashed Thomas’s arm. “I guess you’re still a tiny bit nasty.”

“I wouldn’t be myself otherwise.”

They both fell quiet again, and Price closed his eyes, simultaneously soothed and excited by Thomas’s touch.

Thomas remembered leaving Eric begging in the bath, Eric unable to chase Thomas in his state of undress. He recalled his subsequent visits with Eric, which left him feeling in charge. Though Price was needy, and vulnerable, and could come unglued at times, in his heart, Thomas only ever wanted to be Price’s equal. He used to push others down to raise himself up, but he didn’t need that any longer, because he was in charge of his own life.

Price opened his eyes to find a teary Thomas looking down at him. He sat up and cupped Thomas’s face. “What? What did I say?”

Thomas closed his eyes and rubbed his nose against Price’s. “Nothing. I’m just happy.”

“Funny way of showing it,” Price teased as he wiped Thomas’s cheek with his thumb.

“Lay back down.”

“Yes, Mr. Barrow.”

Thomas put his other hand in the tub and poked Price’s side. “Don’t start that now.”

“Get in here with me.”

“There isn’t enough room.”

Price slid forward. “You’re thinner every time I see you, you’ll fit behind me.”

Thomas eased himself in slowly behind Price and spread his legs so Price could lay between them.

“See? I told you we’d fit.”

Thomas pulled Price backward until Price was laying against him and nestled his cheek into Price’s shoulder. It felt right to be in the tub with Price; not sitting on the edge, clothed, able to walk away if he wanted. Equally exposed and unguarded was so much more satisfying.
The first letter Thomas received from Price arrived, but Thomas was too nervous to read it. What if Price was disappointed, he worried. He worked a full day with the letter in his waistcoat, his fingers finding it a few times throughout the day, but his nerves still winning out. When he was finally home, he poured himself a glass of wine, stepped out onto the fire escape, and lit a cigarette. The sun dropped behind the rooftops, the clouds glowing pink and gold, the streets beginning to hum with nighttime activity.

Thomas took in a breath and removed the letter on the exhale. The back of the envelope was decorated with drawings of little animals, and Thomas was careful as he opened the flap. Their communication when apart had been mostly by telephone or postcard. Price hadn’t written a full letter to him before the one he now held in his hands. The first page had a sketch of Eric writing in a notebook on the top left corner, and little drawing of a man diving from a cliff in the bottom right. Thomas touched the ink with his fingers, then brought the page to his face and inhaled, hoping it might smell like Price.

He turned to the next page, took a drink of wine, and began reading.

Love,

I’ve experienced sweeping landscapes and giant cities, people of all walks of life, animals I didn’t know existed, the sky in colors I’ve never seen. I’ve fallen asleep under the stars, woken up to strange bird calls, tasted flavors I never experienced, smelled spices I can’t quite pronounce, heard languages that sound like music. And I draw, Thomas. My hand moves and I hardly have to think, I just make things. I trust myself and I let my brain and body connect without interfering with worry or fear or whatever else has stood in my way all of these years.

All of it, everything, everywhere, I feel you beside me. I’ve never been further from you and I’ve never felt closer. You are the blood in my veins. You are my heart. You ignited a life force inside me and now it’s burning. I’ve never burned brighter. I only wish I could reach beside me, where I feel you, and really have you beneath my fingers.

The drawing of the man jumping from the cliff is me. It was nighttime when we first arrived, and our camp was set near a cliff. The moon was so intensely bright that we could see the ocean well a few stories below us, despite what became a driving rain. I don’t know why, I needed to jump. So I did, Thomas. I stood there in the rain, in the dark, in my clothes, and I dove into the water. I scared Eric to pieces, but it was worth it for that moment (my apologies to Eric). I asked my dark thoughts to stay in the murky water and looked to the moon for lighter thoughts, and let the rain wash over me, and floated there in the ocean until I felt like coming ashore. It felt like the world was holding me. Not rejecting me. Accepting me. Loving me. Just like you do, Thomas.

Thank you for leading me to the edge so that I could leap.

I love you,
Your David

Thomas wiped his eye and took a drag of his cigarette. He looked back down at the street, at all the people making their way home or heading out into the warm night. He climbed back into the flat through the window and went to his bedroom, pinned the drawing to the wall next to Price’s pictures, then finished his wine before dialing Kait. A night on the town seemed in order.

“I’d love to go out!” Kait exclaimed. “Where to?”
“I don’t know. Can we let the night take us where it wants?”

“Always.”

On the walk to Kait’s flat, Thomas was distracted by a travel advertisement for Australia. He chuckled, pulled a pen from his pocket, and drew a cigarette in the mouth of one of the men on the poster, and then a watch on the other. He stood back and looked the poster over, then drew a glove on the man with a cigarette. He put the pen back in his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. He smiled to himself, walking with a bounce in his step as he joined the flow of people on the sidewalk. There were so many options in front of him for the evening, and every evening thereafter. He could do practically anything he wanted to do, because his rules and his life were his for the making. Thank you for leading me to the edge, too, David, he thought. It feels so good to have finally jumped.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!