### Something Worth Having

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences  
**Archive Warning:** No Archive Warnings Apply  
**Category:** F/M  
**Fandom:** Downton Abbey  
**Relationship:** Richard Carlisle/Mary Crawley, Edith Crawley/Michael Gregson, Mary Crawley/Matthew Crawley, Edith Crawley/Evelyn Napier  
**Character:** Richard Carlisle, Mary Crawley, Isobel Crawley, Rosamund Painswick, Michael Gregson, George Crawley, Edith Crawley, Tom Branson, Cora Crawley, Evelyn Napier, Original Male Character(s), Original Female Character(s), Anthony Gillingham, Jack Ross, Robert Crawley, Violet Crawley, Rose MacClare, Mark Carlisle, Mabel Lane Fox, Viscount Branksome, Anthony Foyle, Charles Carson, Anna Smith, Charles Blake, Sarah Bunting, Thomas Barrow  
**Additional Tags:** Widowed, Past Relationship(s), Second Chances, Season/Series 03, Post-Canon, London, Grief/Mourning, Jazz Age, Music, 1920s, Dancing, Season/Series 04, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Don't copy to another site  
**Stats:** Published: 2013-02-23 Completed: 2015-02-12 Chapters: 33/33 Words: 159042

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**Something Worth Having**  
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**Summary**

When Mary moves to London to escape painful memories of Matthew at Downton, she must face more than grief as former suitors and her estranged sister come back into her life.

**Notes**

Many thanks to [Vladnyrki](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Vladnyrki) for beta reading.
Gloves Off

Chapter Summary

Mary receives an unexpected visitor who doesn't handle her grief with kid gloves, and she is even more surprised to find this is exactly the kind of treatment she wants.

Spring, 1922

The rap of the knocker on the front door of Grantham House in London drew Isobel Crawley's gaze from her lap, where her infant grandson gummed away at his first morsel of bread and butter.

"I wonder who that could be?"

She swiveled in her wing backed chair to peer out the bay window overlooking the street, but her crinkled forehead indicated she couldn't make out who stood on the doorstep. Mary had a better vantage point from the sofa, but she made no move to look and sipped her tea as low muffled male tones rumbled through the walls from the entry hall.

"Evelyn Napier, I should imagine," she replied, lowering her cup onto the saucer resting on her knee, the white of the china stark against her black skirt. "He phoned yesterday to say he might drop in some afternoon this week. Though I thought he said he wouldn't be in town for a few days."

"Perhaps he's had a change of plans," Isobel said. "I only met him the once at Downton. He seemed a very pleasant young man. He's never married?"

"He was nearly engaged, before the war."

Isobel smiled, stiffly, and returned her attention to the baby, who had begun to fuss and wriggle in her lap toward the side table where her plate held the enticing buttered bread. Did it upset her, Mary wondered, for her daughter-in-law to receive a call from a former suitor? She hadn't considered that when she'd happily told Evelyn she'd be pleased to receive him. Surely Isobel couldn't think she'd consider rekindling an old flame so soon? They'd scarcely buried Matthew seven months ago.

Not that she'd ever described Evelyn as a flame. They hadn't had so much as a spark between them, and Evelyn knew it. She opened her mouth to explain, but before she could utter a word, Molesley, who'd come with them to serve as butler in Grantham House, opened the drawing room door.

"Sir Richard Carlisle to see you, Lady Mary."

She nearly dropped her teacup. Isobel looked as if she might drop the baby—and she didn't even know the whole sordid tale of the engagement, what had begun it or what brought it to an end, Mary having begged Matthew not to tell. Not after Richard left the way he did, and said what he did, and she felt so awfully about her part in making things so terribly wrong between them. Her stomach twisted now with guilt, so fresh was the memory of that early morning two years ago, and she plucked the baby from her mother-in-law's arms to prevent wringing her hands, too. She half-expected to see the darkening bruise beneath Richard's eye as he strode into the room, dressed in
greatcoat and scarf and carrying his trilby almost exactly as he had then.

Of course she did not. And as further proof that time had passed, she noticed that his hair was a little thiner on top, a little greyer at the temples—though these subtle changes only made him look more distinguished rather than advanced in age.

"Sir Richard," she and Isobel greeted in unison, and he shook their hands in turn.

"Mrs Crawley. Lady Mary. And this must be the future Earl of Grantham. A big title for a little boy," Richard added, reaching out as if to shake the baby's pudgy hand as well; his eyes widened at the pincer grasp that closed around his long index finger.

"Well, we call him Georgie," Isobel said, beaming.

"Yes I received the birth announcement."

Richard looked at Mary as he spoke. She felt Isobel's eyes on her, too, understandably perplexed; Mary wasn't sure even she understood her own reasons for writing to Richard about the birth of her son. Only that it seemed right, somehow, after he'd sent condolences for Sybil.

He'd offered none for Matthew, however. I am a great many things, but not a liar, he rasped in her memory, though his resonant tones filled the small drawing room of the town house.

"George is not a family name, I think."

The remark was innocuous enough for Isobel, but Mary understood his tacit meaning: they hadn't named him for his father.

"We didn't want him to live in anyone else's shadow," she replied.

They hadn't settled on what to call him before the baby came, though they had decided not to name their child for anyone. Mary had stuck by this mutual agreement with her husband even when her family believed she ought to call him Matthew.

"Indeed." Richard's eyebrows pulled together as he leaned in to study George. "I don't see that being an issue with regard to family resemblance, either. I don't see much of either parent in him."

"He looks like himself," Isobel said, a little defensively.

"I mean he's a handsome lad," Richard clarified.

"Thank you, Sir Richard. If you'll excuse me, I'll just take George upstairs for his nap."

Mary handed the baby off to his grandmother—George did not willingly release Richard's finger and let out a loud protest until Isobel popped another morsel of bread in his wide open mouth—then she and Richard seated themselves across the tea table from each other, he in the wing chair where Isobel had been sitting and Mary resuming her place on the sofa. It wasn't until she was handing him a cup of tea that she realised she hadn't had to think about pouring it the way he liked.

"Now Richard," she said, "I think George is very handsome, even if he does look more like his Aunt Edith than he does like me." Or Matthew. "But I never knew you to flatter."
"Then rest assured it's without a trace of flattery that I say I knew you'd look feminine with one of the new French haircuts."

Mary held her teacup to her lips for a moment before she actually sipped; as she swallowed, Richard spoke.

"I'm curious whether you did it before or after your husband—"

"It was after."

He gave her a measured look. "I confess I'm rather surprised you'd go against his wishes when they seemed to be all that mattered to you for so long."

"He missed the birth of our son and then crashed his car an hour later. It was the least I could do to express how I felt."

Richard's eyebrows went up. "You're angry with him."

Who wasn't she angry with? Matthew for dying, herself for being angry with him, her parents for not seeing that she was, Richard for making her admit to it.

"I did think it was rather discourteous of him to die that way after what he put you through during the war," he said, running the tip of his long index finger along the ridge of his trilby where it rested on the side table. At least Mary could take comfort in the fact that he didn't judge her for what she had revealed.

A small comfort.

But enough for her to fix him with her level stare above her teacup. "Says the man who threatened me with ruin if I jilted him."

The lines of his jaw and brow seem to sharpen, and Mary remembered his face, so close to hers, his hands gripping her arms. She tensed at the edge of the sofa as he leaned forward and stretched one hand out toward her, but it was only to grab a sandwich from the tray.

"Admit it, Mary," he said, his face relaxed again as he sat back, crossing one leg over the other. "I treated you abominably, but I never had the power to hurt you the way the late Mr Crawley did."

It was as near as he'd come—or probably ever would come—to an apology. Is that why you never published? she wanted to ask.

Instead she said, "Is that why you're here? Can't stop trying to prove you're better than Matthew?"

"Well I've never crashed a car."

Mary had seen the retort coming in the hard gleam of Richard's eyes, but she flinched anyway, not having braced for so low a blow.

She was equally unprepared for Richard to glance away, his chin jutting slightly, taught, his words equally so when he added in low tones, "I understand, the accident was the other driver's fault. Not Mr Crawley's."
"Is that what they put in the papers?" Mary asked hoarsely, and she too had to look away.

Mercifully, Richard gave her a moment to pretend she was looking out the window at the new Silver Ghost parked on the street as she sipped her tea, and waited until she turned back to pour another cup before he spoke again, this time in a tone more conversational than confrontational as he munched his sandwich.

"How are you finding your stay in town?" He shook his head, declining her offer of more tea; he sat at the edge of his chair, hunched slightly with his hands clasped between his knees. "You never seemed to care much for London life before."

"That was before I had to live in a small village following the sudden tragic death of my husband."

It seemed so silly, in that light, to think of the lengths to which she'd once gone to avoid being an object of pity. Did Richard think the same? She searched his face for some sign that he did, but his features had settled into a bland expression as his gaze drifted just over her shoulder, out the window.

"Your sister resides in London now, too, I believe?"

His eyes swung back to hers, the creases at the corners deepening in the shrewd expression she knew so well. And there it was.

"But not here with you in Hanover Square."

"You know with whom and where better than I do," Mary said, relieved that her voice did not quaver and her teacup did not rattle against the saucer as she set it down. "Is it too much to hope that after keeping my little secret quiet you'll do the same for Edith? Or do you still want to punish my family?"

She had meant to shame him, even the slightest bit, but Richard merely dimpled as he placed his hands on the arms of his chair and pushed to his feet.

"Of course I do, but Lady Edith was the one of you who made an effort at civility." He retrieved his hat from the side table, but did not put it on. "I won't publish a word about her."

"Thank you." Mary reached out to take the hand he extended to her but pulled up short just shy of his fingertips. She had to take a look around her at the familiar drawing room interior of her family's London home to reassure herself she had not been transported back to Richard's Fleet Street office in 1917. "Do you expect me to marry you in return?"

Richard gave a puff of a laugh. "I won't even expect so much as dinner with you."

Mary accepted his handshake then—a brief firm squeeze—but when she felt his grip start to relax around her hand she tightened her grasp, seized by a sudden impulse.

"What if I want to have dinner with you?"

She did, very much. For all this interview had been painful some of the time, and awkward for most of it, it had also been the most authentic she had felt in half a year. Richard had not treated her with kid gloves, but had trusted her not to crumble beneath the weight of truth. He always had given her that, she realised. We're strong and sharp, and we can build something worth having, you and I. If you'll let us.
She didn't know what they could build out of this broken heap, but if there was anything to salvage, Richard would be able to see it.

His expression was a mask, but the tell-tale muscle beneath his cheekbone gave a tremor. "Well, then," he said, donning his hat, "that would be a first."
Dinner with Richard becomes a party of six with a little help from Aunt Rosamund, but Mary is far from at ease as a hostess when her guests bring past grievances to the table. "For a man who professed such a fondness for cocktails before they became fashionable," said Aunt Rosamund, gesturing to Mary with her martini glass, "Sir Richard does make a habit of missing them. How many evenings at Downton did we delay going through to dinner because we were waiting for him to grace us with his presence?"

Her scornful smile faltered for a moment when she saw that Mary did not return it or appear to have any intention of making a reply. As she sipped her cocktail her lips curved upward again and this time she addressed Michael Gregson, who stood with them by the drinks cabinet, where Molesley almost giddily mixed cocktails. Not an altogether wise idea, Mary thought, after his shenanigans at the ghillies ball at Cousin Shrimpy's, but so far her watchful eye had not caught him tippling. "It seemed impossible for him to catch a Friday afternoon train that wasn't late," Rosamund went on, "or not to get tied up with a Saturday or Sunday evening phone call. Long distance, of course."

"I see," Mr Gregson replied into his drink, red-faced and darting desperate eyes across the drawing room to Edith, but she was oblivious to her lover as she bounced her nephew on her lap. "It's not yet eight," said Isobel, who sat next to Edith on the sofa.

Mary looked away from supervising Molesley and found that the mantel clock read so very nearly the hour as to consider Richard not punctual, if not precisely late; Georgie's smiles, apparently, made Isobel generous.

If only this were the case for Aunt Rosamund, who persisted in the face of Mr Gregson's evident embarrassment. "It would seem tardiness is a quality unique to Sir Richard and not particular to all newspaper men. Though I would have thought if any of you was to be chained to his desk it would be the editor, not the publisher."

Mr Gregson rocked slightly backward on his heels as he shrugged. "Well, Sir Richard isn't my publisher."

"Indeed. None of his publications is so respectable as The Sketch."

"Oh, but The Capital Herald--"

Mary did not catch the rest of Mr Gregson's reply as she took her martini and left him to Rosamund. He was her guest, but she felt no compulsion to rescue the man who had led her sister into disgrace; he could fend for himself. She'd invited her aunt to relieve the likely awkwardness of dining with her late husband's mother and a former fiancé, and Rosamund accepted because "it's certain to be great theatre." Though Mary had rolled her eyes at the prospect of being anyone's entertainment, she
hadn't expected Rosamund to participate in the drama herself. Perhaps she ought to have, given her aunt's track record for insinuating herself into Mary's personal affairs.

"I don't mind Sir Richard being late," said Edith as Mary approached the sofa before the fire. "It gives me more time with this little darling before he's put to bed."

Includig Edith and her lover in the dinner party was Rosamund's idea, too. Although it seemed reasonable that having a fellow newspaper man "to provide Sir Richard with some occupation besides giving you surly glares across the table," Mary was not certain she was any more at ease about mending fences with Edith than about doing so with Richard.

For a person who had never done anything in her life that might be deemed spectacular, Edith's departure from Downton could only be described as such. Aside from shaming the family by taking up as a married man's mistress--a newspaper man's mistress, no less; Mary could not cast stones at sexual exploits, but she could at sheer stupidity--even worse was the timing of it. How could Edith hurt Papa this way, when the man he'd loved as dearly as any child of his body was scarcely dead and in the ground?

When Mary and Isobel removed to town after the New Year for a change of scenery, Papa expressly forbade them to have any contact with Edith. Isobel respected his wishes, though she of course disagreed with him. What Mary had not counted on was that Aunt Rosamund thought this approach was wrong, too. Giving Edith the silent treatment when she already suffered the middle child's lot of feeling overlooked by the family could hardly convince her to leave a man who so desperately wanted her, could it? Mary saw her point, along with the other one that Papa would likely be more incensed that the family's acquaintance with Richard Carlisle had been resumed, so they might as well have all the unsuitable dinner guests at once and be done with it.

All this Mary agreed with, yet as she watched Edith kiss and cuddle the baby while reciting *Georgie Porgie* to him in a soppy way Mary never imagined her sister capable of--their mother's daughter she apparently was, despite having inherited none of Mama's looks--her stomach knotted. Their parents were not the only members of the family hurt by Edith's love affair. Mary, too, felt abandoned by Edith, though at first the drama and scandal had been almost a welcome distraction from her grief. When all quieted and Mary was left in the Abbey, the solitary Crawley sister, she couldn't help but wonder whether Edith had planned it so, exacting her revenge at last for Mary wrecking her marriage plans to Anthony Strallan so many years ago, glorying in the death of the darling daughter's dreams. If she'd only been the sister Edith plaintively asked her to be after Sybil died, would she have been more likely to be the one Mary wanted now?

"Mary always says she sees you in Georgie," Isobel's voice interrupted the morose train of thought. "Now you're together, I must admit the resemblance is unmistakable."

"She said the same to me, and I also see it now," a deep, rasping voice joined in the conversation, and they all turned to see Richard stride through the drawing room door, carelessly handing off gloves and top hat to Ben the hall boy who scurried behind, the greatcoat already draped over his gangly arm. "Lady Edith does favour Lord Grantham and the Dowager Countess quite strongly. They must be pleased to see the looks passed down through another generation."

The dimples flashed in his cheeks with a mocking smile Mary knew well. But she also knew his other mannerisms; the way he slipped one hand into his trouser pocket as Molesley inquired what he'd like to drink, and his gaze wavered back to the baby, brows drawing together, suggested there was more behind his sharp words than a well-aimed jab at the family who had once humiliated him. What, she couldn't say, but it prompted her to pluck George from Edith's lap and hold him tightly.
The baby let out a wail of protest.

Meanwhile, Aunt Rosamund greeted Richard. "I didn't think we'd meet again."

"Lady Rosamund." Having drained the whisky sour he'd looked only too relieved for Molesley to bring, he looked himself again as he shook her hand. "What a pity your mother isn't with us tonight to hear you say so."

Aunt Rosamund, of course, had not witnessed Granny's parting words to Richard, but Mary had, and he looked over Rosamund's shoulder to her, pale eyebrows twitching slightly upward in expectation. Mary only drew a long breath and said that she'd ring for Nanny Philips to take the baby upstairs, and then they could go through to dinner.

"Oh don't bother with that," Edith protested as Mary reached for the bell. "I can take him up."

Mary reluctantly relinquished George to her sister, but could not allow Edith to show her up in front of Richard. Or Isobel. "I'll go with you," she said, and after his grandmother kissed the baby goodnight, they left her to see to their other guests.

Pausing in the drawing room doorway to glance back over her shoulder, Mary was relieved to see her mother-in-law shake Richard's hand with genuine warmth, and she had a flash of memory of the pair meeting and getting on quite well that first weekend Richard spent at Downton. Isobel, not saddled with her family's prejudices about the middle class rising through the upper ranks of society, had greeted him with enthusiasm then, too. More confident that this strange assortment of guests was not guaranteed to be a total disaster, as it surely would at Downton—as it had been in the past—Mary continued into the hall and upstairs.

As they climbed, however, Edith cast a more current light on the situation. "How does Cousin Isobel feel about you entertaining Matthew's former rival?"

Matthew never had a rival. Mary always knew that, as had everyone else, Edith included. But Mary considered for the first time that perhaps Isobel had not been privy to that knowledge.

"Matthew was engaged to somebody else, too," she said, but her voice did not sound as confident as she intended as an unexpected knot formed in her chest, choking her, as it had that night years ago when Edith spitefully told her Matthew was bringing his fiancée to Downton.

Strange how all Matthew's assurances…a marriage…a child…had not been enough to erase the pain of having believed the man who had spoiled her for all others preferred another woman, even for a time, to her.

*Not enough.*

The polished oak banister which had glided beneath Mary's palm now snagged her glove as she gripped it tighter.

She would never have enough of the life she'd wanted with Matthew.

"I am lady of this house in Papa's absence," she said, "and I may invite whomever I like to dine with me. Isobel knows that." In fact, her mother-in-law had little to say about the matter of Richard's call and the invitation Mary made him of dining with them. "And she quite agrees, we've kept too much to ourselves of late. She says it's good that I'm taking an interest in society again."
"Surely not the society of the man who once blackmailed you into marrying him!" Edith wheeled around at the top of the staircase, her voice echoing off the high ceiling above.

_But he never published._ Mary did not argue aloud with her sister as she halted on the step below, peering up at Edith for once in their lives. Richard had been humiliated--deservedly or not, it didn't matter--yet he had not taken revenge on her family. Surely that was the most telling thing about his character yet. In many respects, she had only glimpsed the real Richard Carlisle _after_ he had ceased to be a part of her life.

Though it would seem he had not really ceased to be, after all. _Why had she invited him tonight? Why had he called on her in the first place?_

"Mary?"

The sound of her name uttered hesitantly drew her out from her thoughts. Georgie looked down at her in some confusion, fussing sleepily, drool glistening on his barely existent chin, as Edith held him to herself almost as a shield.

"I am sorry that my petty jealousy all those years ago led to…this. If I'd known that horrid Bates woman would find out, I--"

"Still would have written to the Turkish Ambassador." Mary stepped around her on the landing to lead the way down the hall to the nursery. "Anyway it seems I was destined never to be happy, with or without your help."

~*~

Aunt Rosamund's predictions proved correct, that the presence of other journalists kept conversation flowing at dinner as smoothly as the courses. Mary was only too happy to let the talk go on around her without having to participate herself, but by the time Molesley brought the dessert, Rosamund seemed to have grown tired of the discussion being dominated by only half their party, with Isobel's occasional interjections, and seized upon a new topic which interested her and which Mary could not ignore.

"Whatever became of Haxby Park, Sir Richard?" she asked, leaning around Mary to address the man seated to her right. "My brother hasn't complained about any vexing new neighbours, so I can only assume you haven't sold it."

Mary looked up from her marmalade pudding in alarm, just in time to notice an expression flicker briefly in the lines of his face as he took a bite that made her think they could do with the distraction of a salty pudding. He retained his composure, however, chewing slowly and washing it down with a long sip of port before making a reply.

"You assume rightly, Lady Rosamund. I'm sure Lord Grantham has complained about the difficulties of maintaining an ancient estate in the midst of this brave new world."

Though he spoke coolly, the dispassionate tones did not deceive Mary; she'd made the mistake of
meeting his eye and saw the sharp glint as he dealt the words which were sharp enough to feel the insult even without a forceful delivery.

"And you were so confident you'd sell it at a profit," she countered, no longer feeling so sorry as she had the day he left Downton that he'd got stuck with a vulgar mansion and twelve thousand acres.

"I will." Richard added, his voice dropping in resentment along with his gaze into his wine glass. "Eventually." His eyes flicked up again, bright over the rim of his glass. "I've never been one to act in haste, with regard to my investments."

Their gaze held until Rosamund, at Mary's other side, muttered, "So much for avoiding surly glares."

Mary did not look at Richard, and therefore could not see his expression to read whether he'd overhead her aunt. In her periphery she saw him raise his port to his lips, and when he spoke again he did so in tones as dry and dark as the drink.

"The only people who have that kind of money these days are the *nouveau riche*. They're accustomed to making prudent financial investments, and the modernisations I made to the house aren't nearly enough to interest that sort of buyer. The entire estate must be profitable to them, if I'm to profit from it."

"Lord Grantham encountered this at Downton, as well," Isobel pounced on the topic, much to Mary's mortification. Obviously Richard had some idea already of Papa's money woes; Isobel's needn't be explicit about it. "Matthew spent the better part of last year finding ways to restructure the farms to be more productive."

Now Mary's cheeks were not the only part of her that burned; her eyes did, too, as unwanted thoughts arose of how often Matthew and Papa had argued over how the estate should be run. How often she had argued with Matthew for the way he upset Papa, for what he did with the money…So little time they'd had together, and so much of it had been spent arguing.

"--Tom Branson seems to be carrying on admirably as estate manager," Isobel concluded.

Richard coughed as he turned to eye Mary in disbelief. "Your father agreed to allow a socialist from Dublin to manage Downton?"

"You see? We *can* change with the times."

But when his brows hitched in scepticism, Mary felt a twinge at the corner of her mouth; was he thinking, as she was, of how they'd joked together after Sybil's failed elopement about him running the car over the chauffeur?

"*Some* of us can change about *some* things," Edith said, exchanging looks with Gregson, whose arm moved as if to take her hand beneath the table.

"Perhaps you'll change your mind, Sir Richard," said Rosamund, spooning a bit of marmalade pudding. "An estate, after all, must surely be a necessity to a man on his way to a peerage. Not to mention an attractive feature for prospective brides."

"So one would think."

Mary had kept her gaze steadfastly on her plate, cheeks burning before Richard replied to her aunt,
but something in his voice--or rather, the lack of something in his voice, precisely, malice--made her turn her head. The remark had not been one of his well-aimed attacks on her; at least, he was not looking at her now. He did not, in fact, seem aware that her eyes were on him, his thoughts turned inward as he nursed his port.

When the meal concluded shortly after this, the men did not linger in the dining room for cigars, but went through to the drawing room with the ladies. Edith suggested a game of mah-jong, to which Isobel readily agreed, keen to learn the game. Only four could play, and as Richard was not fond of parlour games, Mary felt it was her duty as hostess to keep him company over coffee and spare him more awkward questions from Rosamund. Though as her aunt made up the fourth at the mah-jong table, Mary found herself unable to think of anything to discuss with him than the very subject with which Rosamund had so clearly made him uncomfortable, her curiosity piqued.

If it was curiosity that brought Richard here to see her in the first place, she reasoned, then this was only tit for tat. Turnabout. Fair play, and all of that. And Richard had always set so much store by being on even terms.

"I'm surprised you haven't found a lady to be Mistress of Haxby. I've actually been reading the papers for the past two years, expecting to see your picture in the society wedding of the decade."

Richard's jaw worked as he drank his coffee, then frowned into the cup of black, unsweetened liquid as if he wished it were something much stronger. Molesley, hovering in the corner on tip-toe, looked as if he were about to lurch forward and make just such an offer, when Richard spoke.

"Why? To assuage your guilty conscience about throwing me over?"

Mary looked away, inwardly cursing herself for broaching the subject because yes, the guilt she'd squelched earlier had returned.

"You can't be surprised that the three years prior rather put me off weddings." He added, more quietly, "And you never knew me if you thought I wanted to be married for my house."

_You certainly did a good job giving the opposite impression_, Mary thought, but bit her tongue. She had apologised to him, that morning two years ago, for using him, for letting him go to such drastic lengths for her when she wanted none of it. That had been her punishment for strong-arming her into an engagement, and it seemed he was still paying for it--quite literally. She had no need to continue punishing him. Especially not after his admission: _I really loved you. Much more than you knew._

It still surprised her, after all this time, just as it had then. _When_ had he fallen in love with her? How had she been too blind to see it? If she had, would it have changed anything?

Her consternation must have showed on her face, because Richard gave a snort of a laugh and said, "Don't fret, Mary. It's not for pining that I haven't married."

She turned to him again--in part to escape Aunt Rosamund's watchful eye from across the drawing room--and arched her eyebrows. "You never knew me if you think I'd accuse you of that."

He might have harbored deeper sentiments for her than she'd given him credit for, but nostalgia? Never.

"I've had more affection without formal courtships and engagements than I had during all the time I spent with you." he said.
"You and Mr Gregson have more than newspapers in common, then. Does everyone in the business share the same set of bold and modern values?"

The dints appeared in his cheeks as he looked almost amused. "It's the 20s, Mary. Though I think you became acquainted with such practices at rather an earlier date."

Her temper flared. "Indeed. Such an early date that you hardly could have published without looking desperate and woefully late with your scoop."

"Talking of which," Richard said, looking at the mantel clock and then beckoning to Molesley, "if I linger here any longer, I shall be woefully unpunctual for a date."

"I hope the rest of your evening is very affectionate," Mary said as she accompanied him to the front hall, Molesley scurrying ahead to fetch Richard's coat and hat and summon his chauffeur.

"Jazz clubs generally are," he said, slipping his arms into the sleeves of his greatcoat as Molesley held it. "That isn't to say I haven't appreciated my reception here immensely."

"Have you?"

Richard had stepped out through the door, but paused on the stoop, drawing his black leather gloves from his coat pocket and absently passing them from hand to hand. In her sleeveless black evening gown, Mary hugged herself against the chill night air.

"There's nothing so reassuring as the juxtaposition of the life I might have had against the life I do have."

He touched the edge of his top hat, pushing it down lower over his deep-set eyes, but as he started down the steps Mary called after him.

"You admit it, then? That we never could have built anything worth having?"

He turned his head so that his face was in profile; Mary could just make out his faint smile beneath the shadow of his hat brim cast by the porch light. "That was always entirely up to you."

Every thought she'd had that something about him was different fled at this reminder that Richard Carlisle never pulled a punch.

But cruel as he could be, crueller still was the whisper in her own mind as she lay in bed not long after, that a warm body beside hers and strong arms around her, rather than the ghosts of bedfellows past, no matter how kind, would be something worth having, indeed.
A widow was entitled to take her breakfast in bed, the same as a wife of a living husband, but Mary had not lingered in hers for so much as a cup of tea since Dr Clarkson permitted her to leave it after the birth. Bed was for sleeping and nothing else, and goodness only knew little enough of that had taken place in hers during the past seven months. Although, much as it pained her to acknowledge, sleep came more readily in her bed in London than it had at Downton; here she was lonely, but at least there were no memories of having once occupied it with Matthew to make her lonelier with the longing.

She started down the hall to the staircase, only to hesitate at the top step when Isobel's voice drifted from one of the rooms behind. Mary's fingers closed around the spindle at the end of the banister, her shoulders tightening for a moment before she turned and went back in the direction from which she'd come, past her bedroom to the open doorway of the nursery. Her mother-in-law did not look up from giving George his morning bottle in the rocking chair by the window as Mary stood just inside the door, her hand braced against the moulding, thumb chafing the side of her forefinger.

"Really, Isobel. If you insist on giving George all his bottles, what is Papa paying Nanny Philips for?"

Isobel frequently took charge of George's feedings and had done so since he was born, just as Tom took to giving Sybbie hers now and again after the wet nurse was no longer required. It reminded her of when Matthew was a baby, she said; Dr Crawley's medical practice in Manchester was successful but did not afford a nanny, and Isobel even nursed their son herself for the first few weeks of his infancy, establishing a bond she had suggested might comfort Mary in her bereavement. Even if Mary had wished to, her body did not leave that choice open to her; shock and grief, Dr Clarkson said, prevented her milk from coming in only to be dried up with bandages or other remedies. Thank god, for Mary could not bear the thought of raising her baby in any way she would never have considered otherwise. It was bad enough that she had to bring him up without Matthew.

So she left feeding to the nurse, and silently bore Isobel and Tom pouring their broken hearts into Matthew and Sybil's children, whilst resenting the implication that in her son she would find a replacement for Matthew. "It must be such a comfort to have a bit of your husband to hold on to," too many people said at the funeral. Matthew never felt more out of reach than when her arms were around their son. It shamed her that she could not make herself feel what she had the first moment Dr Clarkson first placed her beautiful boy in her arms, and no one else had seen her in maternal bliss. No one but Matthew.

"You think me nice. No one else does."

"I know the real you."
"I believe at the moment she's washing napkins," Isobel replied.

"I suppose that is worth her salary." Mary stepped further into the room in response to George's bouncing to reach for her with chubby fists, having lost all interest in his bottle at the sound of her voice.

"Indeed. Mind your blouse," Isobel warned as Mary took the baby from her. "He hasn't belched."

Even as she arched her eyebrows at the indelicacy, Mary couldn't help but smile back as Georgie grabbed her necklace and immediately tried to put the pendant into his mouth.

"You're chipper this morning." With some struggle she freed her jewellery from George's grasp, then began to tap her fingertips lightly on his back. At once he lay his head on her shoulder, as if hypnotised by the rhythm. Over his head, she caught Isobel's eye. "You, I mean. More than usual."

Not that her mother-in-law's disposition wasn't naturally enthusiastic, but since the death of her son, Isobel seemed to have aged; she did not zip about, full of vim and vigour.

"Do you know, I believe it was the company?" She rose from the rocker more easily than Mary had seen her do in some time, and slipped a cloth under George's head to protect Mary's blouse just in time for his stomach to emit a noisy gurgle. "I feel a renewed sense of purpose in life. I'm a social creature by nature."

Before Mary could inquire about the practical ramifications of this declaration, Isobel stepped around to face her, concern etched on her brow.

"Are you sure it wasn't too much for you, my dear? Of course I couldn't hear from the mah-jong table, but you appeared to be having words with Sir Richard before he made his rather abrupt departure. Did he say something to distress you?"

"That was one of our more civil discussions."

Mary patted George's back a little more firmly as she felt his stocking feet kick about her hips. The desired outcome still not achieved, he whimpered. She looked to Isobel, but she had turned her back, retrieving the abandoned bottle from the chair and carrying it to the dresser.

"Compared to how things were between you toward the end," she agreed. "But it wasn't always that way, was it? I realise charm can be deceiving, but I thought he genuinely was when we first met. He couldn't have got far in his career if he didn't know how to handle people."

Mary barely smothered a snort. Richard knew how to handle people, all right, and *charm* wasn't the word she'd use for his approach to business. Yet she couldn't deny that until he turned that ruthlessness on her, for personal reasons, it troubled her little.

"If you'll forgive me for saying so," Isobel continued, "I never felt that your family gave him a fair chance to prove his worth, like they gave Matthew."

"That was mostly because they were all as in love with Matthew as I was. And Richard was never as easy to like as Matthew."

Ironically, though, it had taken her much longer to warm to Matthew than it had to Richard, who was indeed all charm when they met at Cliveden. Of course in Richard's favour was that he had not been
a lawyer from Manchester who was to inherit Downton in her stead, the son the Earl of Grantham had always wanted.

George kicked and fussed in earnest now, and Mary bounced him a little as she increased the pace of her tapping to match the tempo of her heartbeat. Was Isobel purposely ignoring her?

"Well I was hardly in his company to form my own opinion of him," she went on, "so I had to rely on the opinions of others. Lavinia seemed intimidated by him, but then she seemed intimidated by all of you. Matthew didn't care much for him, but I assumed that was because he regarded him as a rival for your affections. Though it was obvious you preferred Matthew…And it was that to which I attributed Sir Richard's surliness. He knew it, and was jealous."

Blackmail notwithstanding, that was about the size of it. "You must have found it strange that Richard and I remained engaged as long as we did."

"What has got our little Master Georgie so out of sorts?"

Nanny Philips stroked through the nursery door at that moment, laying her armload of clean pressed napkins on the changing table before plucking her little charge from his mother's arms. Mary supposed she ought to be grateful to have been rescued from the conversation as well as the chore of coaxing gas from an infant, but the sigh that went out of her, making her shoulders slump and weighing down the tips of her fingers, felt more like defeat than relief as she watched the experienced nurse work. She plopped George unceremoniously down on her lap in the rocking chair, the child's tummy leaning forward against the heel of one hand like a ragdoll, she thumped him soundly on the back with the other. It seemed rough, but almost immediately he let out a resonant belch and traded his expression of misery for a gummy baby grin which widened when Isobel, chuckling, deemed the sound very manly.

"They're harder than they look, your ladyship," said Nanny Philips, adding after the baby yawned, "but also in need of a great deal of sleep. Shall we say night-night to Mummy and Nana and take our morning nap?"

When they had kissed Georgie, they left Nanny to change him and lay him in his cot, turning down the hall in a tacit agreement to take their breakfast together. The quiet came as a relief after George's fussing, but Isobel never could remain silent for long.

"I'm sorry, Mary, but I'm afraid I've lost the thread of our conversation. You were saying?"

Her first impulse was to feign forgetfulness as well, but she stopped short of actually giving her mother-in-law the brush off. Isobel's take on the situation did not so much as pique Mary's curiosity as exacerbate the itch that had niggled at the back of her mind since Richard came to call.

"I asked whether you thought it odd that our engagement lasted so long."

"Not really. You accepted him when Matthew intended to marry Lavinia, and even when he was free, he gave you no reason to believe he would change his mind. Why shouldn't you have moved on? It was stranger that Sir Richard would want to go ahead with the marriage when your heart plainly wasn't in it. But I suppose one thing all of you shared in common was that it's difficult to let go of love, isn't it?"

"Did you think Richard loved me?"
Mary halted in the centre of the corridor, and Isobel turned back, her surprise at the question evident. "My dear, I really couldn't say. In any case, it can't have been easy for him to concede to being second choice. Men have their pride, don't they?"

With a puff of a laugh, Mary nodded. Men did, indeed, have their pride--especially men like Richard, who had to fight for everything they'd got. Although in his case, unyielding ego was a more apt description. How ironic that the trait which no doubt made it possible for him to climb to the top of the newspaper business was the very one that caused him to lose whatever tenuous hold he had on her. Did he realise he had been his own worst enemy, not her love for Matthew? Judging by the parting shot he fired at her last night, he did not.

At the emergence of the housemaid, Lilly, from Mary's room, they resumed walking, keeping silent until they reached the stairs.

Mary apologised as they descended. "I hope I haven't spoiled your mood by talking about a sadder time." A time that had been wasted. "If you'd rather I didn't see Richard again because of that, I won't."

"It's only natural that grief makes us think of the past. Especially situations that lack resolution. If you feel that Sir Richard is part of you finding your way forward, then it's not for me to tell you not to see him."

They had reached the dining room by that time, stopping just outside the door, facing each other. Isobel's eyes regarded her with such warmth that Mary felt the prick of moisture in her own. Quickly, she stepped past her mother-in-law, making directly for the sideboard, over which Molesley presided.

"It doesn't seem likely that I should see him again," she said lightly over her shoulder as Isobel took a plate. "I believe he called on me mostly out of curiosity--ever the newspaperman."

"And might I inquire why you asked him to dinner?"

Mary hesitated, her hand hovering over the handle of a serving spoon, before she answered with a flippant shrug and a slight shake of her head. "A mad impulse."

Actually, madness was not all that far off, when she thought about it. In a certain sense of the word, anyway.

"Isobel?" she asked after they'd been seated at the table for a moment, Isobel perusing the morning's papers and she letters Molesley left at her place. "Have you ever felt...angry...about losing Matthew? Or anyone? Dr Crawley?"

"Do you mean at God, dear?"

"No." Mary looked down at her hands as she rubbed them over her black skirt. That wasn't the anger Richard had read on her face as plainly as if it had been printed in a newspaper. "That isn't what I meant at all."

She wished it were. If only she were angry at God, she wouldn't be so ashamed of herself.

~*~

If Isobel truly feared that past connections might impede Mary's ability to move forward with her life...
after Matthew, their current location did not support the claim. As they disembarked the cab on Fleet Street, Mary gawped up at the dome of St Paul's Cathedral rising above the rooftops like an iron sun against a colourless sky and felt she was seeing it as she had the last time she'd been here, through the window of Richard's fourth storey office. He'd stood before it, looming tall and broad-shouldered and sharp-eyed on the other side of the desk, which had seemed to her like a massive oaken gateway to the city--to a *life*--and he its keeper. And indeed he was, as she handed over her secrets and he pocketed them like a set of keys.

Though Richard's threats of ruination had long since ceased to bar her way, Mary felt acutely that the ground she trod was nevertheless his territory, without looking down the street and read the letters etched into the towering brownstone façade which declared it to be so: *The Capital Herald*. Even the weather seemed to reflect this fact, as if the drizzle had blurred the very ink on the white broadsheets the newsboys hocked on the corners to paint the clouds and the wet fronts of buildings in a spectrum of grey.

The newspaper was not, of course, their destination, though as she followed her mother-in-law across the street, picking their way around puddles and dodging cars and omnibuses and lorries, she sensed the unshuttered windows gazing after her, as though Richard himself, or the reporters who were his eyes and ears to know everything that went on in the city--he had known she was in town, after all--were watching her every move. At least being dressed in mourning served to camouflage her somewhat amongst the black business suits and prim professional garb worn by the working-class men and women who made their way up and down the pavements at the noon hour. She scanned the bits of the masculine faces showed between the low brims of fedoras and turned-up collars of their greatcoats but did not spy the familiar hard brow ridge and strong cheekbones among those who ducked into the corner tea shops and cafés.

Luncheon brought Mary and Isobel to Fleet Street, too, though as they approached the entrance to Lyons, tucked beneath a barber shop on the floor above, Mary doubted the establishment could possibly be worth the drive from Hanover Square through the inclement weather.

Isobel, on the other hand, paused heedless of the drizzle to examine the cakes displayed in the front window, and remarked with her characteristic good cheer, "Those look tempting. We should get one on our way out to take one home for our tea."

"I shouldn't think cook will appreciate being made redundant by a chain bakery."

As Mary lowered her umbrella to step inside, she noticed Isobel's smile had faltered, and felt her own face flush that she'd let anxiety get the better of her. She drew a deep breath and resolved to have a better attitude for her mother-in-law's sake.

"The décor is certainly more impressive than the exterior led me to believe."

Or would have been, she amended silently, if the place were not packed like a sardine tin so she could properly admire the clean lines in dark marble and wood. Indeed, as she and Isobel weaved through the maze of tables and uniformed waitresses, it seemed that the only two cane back chairs not filled were at the table where Edith sat waiting for them. Though *waiting* seemed to have rather a loose definition, as Edith was already sipping a cup of tea and rather than keeping an eye out for them, hunched over the table, fountain pen in hand, and scratched feverishly in a notebook.

"Got your nose at the grindstone?" Isobel asked, sidling up to the empty chair next to her. "I'm sorry, was this a bad day to leave the office?"
"Not at all." Edith down her pen. "This is personal. Nothing for the Sketch."

"Personal, as in Dear Diary?" Mary said as she squeezed into the narrow space allowed by the rotund diner who occupied the chair behind hers.

Flushing, Edith hastily shut her notebook and slipped it inside her handbag; Mary realised how her resolve to have a more uplifting attitude had crumpled as prematurely as a New Year resolution.

"So this is your life now?" she tried again to summon interest. "Slaving away all day in an office and then nipping out for a bite of lunch and a chance to catch up on hobbies? Sounds rather hectic to me, though I daresay Sybil would find it thrilling."

If Edith had taken the first part of the remark as an affront, the last softened the lines that had etched themselves at the corners of her eyes.

"She'd find the Swiss rolls to die for, at any rate," she replied.

After a waitress in a neat black dress and white apron and cap took their luncheon orders--soup all around, though Mary began to second-guess the decision almost at once as the cowl neck of her coat began to itch with the heat of all the tightly packed bodies in the shop.

"Do you come to Lyons often?" Isobel inquired.

"Several times a week--like quite a few other patrons."

"The Capital Herald offices are just down the street," Mary said, glancing around at a few of the nearby diners--as if she would possibly recognise any of the faces Edith knew. "Have you ever bumped into Richard?"

The open stares from the other made her realise at once that she hadn't meant to utter the question aloud. It had skipped through her mind, along with another more unsettling one: a recollection of climbing wearily into the car he ordered to take her back to the station after their interview and thinking, The least he could have done is take me to luncheon. But he had not. Twelve hours to London and back by train to see him for less than half of one, during which she entrusted him with a secret that secured him her reputation and her hand. If Richard had really loved her as he claimed to, then why hadn't he courted her? How else was she to have known he viewed their engagement as anything more than a business transaction--one brokered by underhanded means, at that?

"I should imagine Sir Richard employs someone to bring luncheon to him," Edith said, "and more likely from the Ritz than Lyons. Or have you forgotten that awful Christmas when he wouldn't stop moaning about the servants having half a day off and how you'd do things differently at Haxby?"

Mary had to concede this was most likely the case, though of course she didn't do so verbally. "I'd be careful not to get on his bad side. For some reason he likes you, and he's made a point of keeping your living arrangements out of the gossip pages."

"Golly, how chivalrous. Especially coming from a man who takes no trouble at all to hide the frequency with which he goes home with music hall performers."

"Is it common knowledge that any of them have secret husbands hidden away in lunatic asylums?"

The return of the waitress with three steaming bowls prevented Edith from saying anything in retort,
though Mary had got the better of her enough times in their lives to recognise the open-lipped expression that meant her younger sister had nothing to say even if she'd had the chance. They both took up their spoons and began to eat, Edith sulkily, Mary's lips pursed in triumph, though more out of habit than really taking pleasure from taking Edith down a peg. Her barb had been more vicious than was warranted, especially since she was not in the slightest interested in who Richard went home with; that Edith thought she was, and that she could wound her with this information, was highly provoking.

Her victory wasn't even sweetened by Isobel's evidently being on her side. "Mary does have a point, my dear. I think we all sympathize with Mr Gregson. He seems a kind, intelligent, and forward-thinking man, and it does seem horribly unfair for him to be trapped in a marriage that isn't a marriage at all. But that is why the vows of holy matrimony should not be entered into lightly. In sickness and in health doesn't exclude mental health."

Of everyone in the family, Edith had always been the most pious--Mary thought now how she'd scoffed at Matthew for choosing an afternoon going over the local churches with her sister over a hunt--and she was curious how Edith made her peace with God whilst carrying with a man to whom she was not married, who was in fact married to somebody else. Isobel thought she might make a spiritual appeal to Edith, though Mary warned her mother-in-law when she revealed that this was renewed sense of purpose their little dinner party inspired, that Edith historically did not react well to people interfering in her life--one of the few qualities they shared in common.

"I'm well aware of that," Isobel had replied. "But I can't help but feel that more than anything Edith wants to be noticed, to be looked after. We have to try, haven't we?"

"No one is more aware than Michael that our relationship violates sacred vows," Edith said, staring down at her soup, in which she traced patterns with the edge of her spoon, "and we regret it deeply." She looked up, though, tilting her chin upward as a challenging note crept into her tone. "But we also quite agree that any god who would judge us for that is cruel, not loving."

Isobel spluttered at that, and Mary sighed heavily and took up for her. She'd said we, and however willingly Mary had been included in that, she was here now.

"Perhaps God won't judge you for it," she said, "but society will. Your own family does."

Edith's eyes narrowed. "Let she who is without sin cast the first stone?"

"Come now, Edith," Isobel cut in, losing patience, "if Mary and I judged you, we wouldn't be having luncheon with you now, would we?"

Though Edith's hostility lessened, she continued to regard Mary with some suspicion across the table.

"Let's talk about things a little more appropriate for luncheon, shall we?" Irritatingly, a glance at Isobel revealed that rather than look grateful for Mary's salvaging the conversation, she seemed reluctant to let it drop. Mary reached into her handbag and drew out the folded envelopes she was glad she thought to bring along. "I had letters from home this morning. From Tom and Anna. Tom says Sybbie's becoming quite the chatterbox. And Anna's expecting."

"How wonderful for her," said Edith flatly, and Mary rolled her eyes because it was so very typical of Edith never to take pleasure in anybody else's happiness.

Then, she nearly choked on her soup as images rushed back to her from the dinner party earlier in the
week: of Edith cuddling Georgie, of her offer to take him upstairs, of a hunger in her eyes to savour as much time as possible with her little nephew. And from even further back, of her lying crumpled on her bed, hair askew from where she'd ripped off her bridal veil after Anthony Strallan jilted her at the altar, envy spewing unstoppered from her broken heart: Sybil's pregnant...Mary's probably pregnant.

Edith wanted a baby.

Mary hesitated to continue the discussion as planned, whether because she did not wish to wound her sister more deeply, or because she did not wish to heighten the longing because of Edith's situation, she could not say. But when Edith herself recovered from her initial unenthusiastic reaction, perhaps suspecting where Mary's thoughts had turned, she inquired whether Anna's condition would force her to resign.

The remainder of the meal passed in speculation about how Mama would cope with the loss of another ladies' maid so soon after O'Brien's departure for India with the Flintshires. It was decided that Mama had contracted such a baby fever herself in her state of new grandmotherhood, and especially in Georgie's absence would likely do all she could to accommodate Anna's condition and her child when it arrived. Edith conversed so amicably on the subject, yet with the proper detachment with regard to a servant's personal life and bemusement with regard to their mother's quirks, that Mary wondered if she had perhaps read too much into the earlier reaction.

Though it seemed she was not the only one to have had such thoughts, Isobel asking, "Have you considered how children might enter into your situation, Edith?"

Across the table, Mary watched the colour drain from Edith's face, leaving her lips pale as they pressed together. Mary's own parted as though to utter something in intervention, but they would form no words nor her voice produce any sound.

Isobel continued, "You may disregard the judgments on yourself for living with a married man, but you cannot ignore how detrimental this would be to any offspring born of such a union. I trust you're taking precautions? Only when I think of that poor maid Ethel endured--"

The scrape of Edith's chair legs against the floor tiles as she stood abruptly interrupted Isobel and drew the attention of several nearby diners.

"I see what this is," she said, her voice shaking; her hand did too as she fumbled in her handbag for money, which she flung down on the table, coins scattering across the surface. "I might have known you saw me as one of your prostitutes to reform."

Both women made vehement protests, beseeching Edith not to go, but she was already striding away from the table with a click of heels toward the door. When it closed behind her with a jingle, Mary arched her eyebrows at her mother-in-law.

Isobel's shoulders slumped, and she looked small and weary and old beneath the brim of her black hat. "I suppose you told me so."

Mary did not disagree.
Chapter Summary

When Mary ventures out into the new world of London nightlife to meet an old friend, it’s not only the venue she finds unfamiliar.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Living in a flat, Edith would not have a large staff in her employ, or even a half-dozen such as she and Isobel had at Grantham House. Still, when Mary rapped on the door of 23 Great James Street, she expected that at least some male servant in livery, be it a butler or a footman, would answer. She was not prepared for the man who paid for the flat, wearing a smoking jacket over a knitted waistcoat, carpet slippers showing beneath the cuffs of loose trousers, an open collar, and a look of round-eyed surprise.

"Mr Gregson," she said.

"Lady Mary. This is most unexpected."

"So I gathered."

Clutching her handbag tighter, she leaned to peer around him. The entry could scarcely qualify as a foyer; the front door simply opened directly into the…drawing room? Parlour? What did one call the main room of a flat?

"Is Edith at home?"

Gregson hesitated, his small round eyes darting sideways above his hollow smile in an owlish manner that reminded Mary a good deal of Anthony Strallan. Edith did know how to pick them.

Abruptly, he stepped aside and swept the door open wider, gesturing for her to enter the flat. "Do come in. Your sister's in the kitchen. Making us a bite."

As she entered the flat, Mary barely bit her tongue in time to stop herself saying, Living with a married man and cooking for him. How modern of her. Does she do his washing, too?

"I'll just let her know you're here," he said, and she nodded as he ducked through a swinging door at one end of the long narrow…lounge? As she contemplated a low sofa, he poked his head back through. "Have you had luncheon, Lady Mary? It's no trouble to whip you up an omelette, as well."

"I've eaten, thank you," she lied through a pleasant smile; she caught a cab directly after services at St George's.

Though Gregson invited her to take a seat, she refrained, instead taking the opportunity to inspect Edith’s new living arrangements. Despite the cynical thoughts her taking on an old-fashioned role, he did keep her in the height of modernity.
Downton had cupboards bigger than this flat, Mary suspected, and how she wanted to turn her nose up at the colour scheme of ivory and taupe as being as bland as Edith. But the light palate of the wallpaper, upholstery, and draperies lent the illusion of space to the small dimensions, while honeyed maple wood tones gave her an urge wrap her hands around a cup of hot mulled cider or coffee heavy with cream and froth, and feel the fire at her back from the writing desk nestled between two windows. One could enjoy one's own company in this flat…or, just as comfortably, the company of others. The trio of armchairs and a sofa would seat half a dozen people, the unadorned geometric silhouettes keeping the room from feeling as cluttered as it by all rights should with so much furniture packed into it. There was ample entertainment, too, provided by the phonograph atop a console on the far wall, or the piano behind the sofa, whilst guests partook from the offerings of the small drinks cabinet. Did Edith entertain people--apart from her lover--often? Mary had never thought of her as the hostess type--unless it was to preside over a dull dinner party at Locksley House as Anthony Strallan's wife.

Mary found herself disabused of these prejudices about her sister's priggishness, too, as Edith swept through the swinging door. She wore a green satin tunic and matching blousy trousers, a long scarf tied around her bobbed hair. If Mary was honest, the outfit suited Edith's boyish figure and unbeautiful face—as all the new fashions did; clutching her black handbag in her black gloved hands against the skirt of the austere black mourning suit she'd worn to church, she could not bring herself to admit it.

"My, I feel so terribly overdressed. If only I'd known you were having a pyjama party, I'd have worn my kimono."

"If you'd known the dress code, it would have meant you'd been invited." Edith folded her arms across her chest, and Mary noticed the red varnish on her nails; that must have looked very smart as her fingers clacked over the keys of a typewriter. "What do you want?"

"To talk."

"Didn't you and Cousin Isobel say quite enough the other day?"

"Please don't put Isobel's words in my mouth."

It had come to Mary like a lightning bolt in the middle of one of her sleepless nights, that this altercation between Edith and Matthew's mother was almost exactly like the clashes between Matthew and her father over the management of Downton. How had she not realised before now how similar they were? Well-intentioned and in the right even, but so very wrong in the way they went about showing others the error of their ways. She'd been so reluctant to get between Matthew and Papa, to have to take sides when she'd lived so many years in the shadow of their disappointment. Gladly she'd do it now, whatever the cost to herself, if it would bring Matthew back and render it unnecessary to play the mediator for Edith and Isobel.

Do it she must. She owed it to Matthew, for all the times she didn't stick up for him. She owed it to herself, too, to see if she could be that version of herself only Matthew saw. So far, she wasn't doing a bang-up job.

"Unless you came to tell me you approve of my relationship with Michael after all," Edith said, "I'm not sure I can do anything else."

"Your love life is a good deal little too like Jane Eyre for my taste." Edith opened her mouth in
protest, but before she could out a syllable of protest Mary went on--in hushed tones, aware of only the kitchen door as their only barrier between them and the subject of their conversation. "Should Mr Gregson's wife throw herself off a burning parapet, I'll gladly embrace him as my brother."

"What a horrid thing to joke about." The hissed words were underscored by the swish of Edith's loose-fitting trousers as she went to her desk, opened a drawer, and took out a cigarette and holder; but in profile Mary saw a faint upward quirk at the corner of her lips as she touched them to the cigarette.

The kitchen door opened with a bump as Gregson backed through it, balancing not two but three plates precariously. Edith took one, kissed him on the cheek and murmured, "Thanks awfully, darling," and he grinned sheepishly at Mary, extending one to her.

"I know you said you'd already had lunch, but it seemed rude to eat in front of you."

"You really shouldn't have, Mr Gregson," Mary said. "I must be going soon."

"How thoughtful, Michael," said Edith through an exhale of smoke as she sat down on the sofa with her omelette, drawing her bare feet up beneath her. "But Mary does have a baby to get home to."

"Of course." Gregson plopped down beside Edith, laying the extra plate on the coffee table. "How is the little chap?"

"Fine."

Mary did not allow her gaze waver from her sister, determined not to let her see that she felt the insinuation about what sort of mother she was. She reminded herself why she'd come--though she was finding it increasingly difficult to sympathize now under attack than when she had allowed her conscience to be persuaded during church to extend the olive branch. If Edith envied the child her lifestyle would not permit, she didn't very well have to live it, did she? Now that Mary had come all this way, though, she wasn't about to go home with her tail tucked between her legs because of the likes of Edith.

"I do have to get home to Georgie," Mary said, lifting her chin. "Especially since I'm thinking of going out tonight. And I'd like it if you came with me."

Edith had moved to set her cigarette in the ashtray, but looked back over her shoulder at Mary. "Go out with you? Where?"

"Evelyn Napier phoned to say he's at some place called Murray's most nights, and he'd like to see us. Both of us."

"Murray's the night club?" asked Gregson.

"Surely not," said Edith. "That doesn't sound like Evelyn's sort of place at all."

Mary didn't think so, either--the racetrack was more his turf, if he wasn't actually riding, or the library--but she lifted an eyebrow and asked, "Did you ever think a flat in Bloomsbury sounded like yours?"

Before Edith could retort, Gregson intervened. "Does it have to be tonight? Only there's a new show opening Monday starring Miss Josephine Earle, and we're going to be there anyway."
"It's a big press event," said Edith, smugly. "Everyone who's anyone will be there."

Mary shrugged. "Evelyn said any time that's convenient for us."

She turned to go, and Gregson got up to see her out. In the doorway, she turned back and eyed her sister.

"What does one wear to opening night at a jazz club, anyway? Ought I to invest in a pair of pyjamas?"

~*~

If Mary had felt overdressed in Edith's flat, a nightclub filled with flappers in bright dresses that barely covered their knees made her feel like a dowager in her sedate evening gown, opera gloves, and understated jewellery. She'd never been a wallflower before tonight, not even at the Duneagle ghillies ball last summer when she was too pregnant to dance, while Edith blossomed beneath the chandeliers in chartreuse satin embroidered with pink, red, and orange peonies. Mary was gladder than ever that she'd bobbed her hair, but mostly she regretted coming at all.

As she descended the staircase into the basement-level club, she found herself instinctively curling her fingers, not in a fist, but to take Matthew's hand. She remembered his story of tracking down Cousin Rose to that seedy jazz club in Soho... What was it called? All she could think of was laughing at his description of it as the outer circle of Dante's inferno. Edith had been with him then, to bring the prodigal cousin home.

"You've certainly changed your tune," Mary hissed over Edith's shoulder.

"What did you say?" Edith said distractedly as she waved to an acquaintance who was mingling near the dance floor.

Murray's was not the Blue Dragon--the name came to Mary at last--a mere back-alley dance hall off Greek Street. On the outside, Murray's rose three storeys above Beak Street with the same unimpressive, yet respectable façade as any of the hundreds of banks and places of business in town. Upon entering, however, she had a sensation of falling down a rabbit hole. Half the main floor was occupied by a restaurant, out of which descended a staircase that led down into the ballroom whose ceiling extended the full height of the building. Pillars divided the cavernous space into the ballroom on the right side, at the head of which was the stage where the band played; to the left, dozens of round tables polka-dotted the carpeted floors.

It was at one of these tables, near the far wall, that Mary spied Evelyn. The urge to hold on to Matthew, to hide behind his broad shoulders, left her and she quickened her pace, winding her way through the maze of tables and people mingling with cocktails to see the familiar face up close.

As she drew nearer and he stood in greeting, leaning across the table to snuff out a cigarette in the ashtray, she saw that he was not just as when she met him last at Ascot before the War, or even in the photograph of him in his regimentals which he had enclosed in a letter at her request. The change that struck her most was not the liberal amount silver in his tidy dark hair, or that it had receded a bit further from his long forehead; it wasn't even that his face, handsome despite never having been
formed around what she would describe as a chiselled bone structure, had groan a little rounder, as his formerly trim athlete's torso had evidently done even beneath the slimming black dinner waistcoat and jacket. These were the effects of age--they reminded her of the first time she'd seen Granny's photographs of him as a young sportsman and in the Boer war and been shocked that her distinguished, stout, grey Papa had once been so young and fit--and Evelyn was past thirty now; Lord knew her figure was hardly what it once was, beneath the helpful underpinnings of her clothes.

No, what took Mary aback was the shadows beneath Evelyn's drooping eyes, the grey irises were haunted by the same expression that gazed unblinkingly back at her whenever she regarded her own reflection in the mirror.

Evelyn did not sleep.

Dear old Evelyn, who had always moved through life as coolly and unruffled by it as she could only pretend to be on the surface.

When he smiled at her in greeting, she could not decide if it was comforting or more disconcerting that it remained exactly the same as ever: a slight crooked curve of the lips, modest and a little melancholy.

"So glad you were able to make it," he drawled, leaning in slightly toward her as they shook hands to be heard over the music and the din of conversation. "You picked a good night."

He nodded sideways, and Mary's gaze flickered briefly from his face to follow the line of the gesture to the stage. "So Edith tells me."

"Here to cover Miss Earle's new show?" Evelyn leaned around Mary to shake hands with Edith and Gregson, whom she introduced as my editor. "I've been following your career with interest."

Edith beamed. "Mr Napier, you've always been one of the nicest fellows I've known, but I can't believe for a moment you subscribe to The Sketch."

"Of course not, but I do have a number of female friends who do. I've been known to take a gander if it's lying out on a coffee table during a particularly dull tea party."

"My--a tea party duller than The Sketch?" Mary said, pleased to see Evelyn smirk as though this were perfectly innocuous teasing; Edith, on the other hand, looked offended, and Mr Gregson seemed conflicted about what he ought to make of her remark. He reminded her so much of fussy old Anthony Strallan sometimes, and she sighed. "Take it as a compliment--the only newspaper I've known Mr Napier to read was Sporting Life for the racing articles."

"Indeed."

Evelyn's voice was as tight as the smile that twitched at the corner of his mouth and did not reach his eyes. Mary's heart leapt into her throat as she wondered what in heaven's name she'd said to make him look like that, and how she could undo it. Before she could, Edith salvaged the conversation.

"I remember you were always very up-to-date on fiction. You know I'm living in Bloomsbury now, and I bump into Virginia Woolf now and again."

As they chatted about books and Edith's literary acquaintance, Mary contemplated the strangeness of her sister apparently running with an intellectual and famous crowd. Not merely looking on from the
fringe, as she always had done in London high society, but part of it, due to the shared interests she had found through her work. Even at the centre of everything, as Mary had always been, she had never felt that sort of connection with others in her circle—and she was reminded keenly of it when Gregson interrupted the literary discussion to invite Edith for a dance before the show began and they must change from party-goers to reporters, leaving her alone with an Evelyn who was not exactly the friend she remembered.

*I found my love in Avalon, beside the bay,* crooned the singer into the microphone, a top hat tilted jauntily over his forehead. *I left my love in Avalon, and I sailed away.*

All around them couples vacated the tables to fill the dance floor, while Evelyn seated Mary and signalled for a waiter to take her drink order. "They do a nice Sidecar here," he told her, a fresh cigarette between his teeth as he lit up, so she requested one.

Every morn' my memories stray  
Across the sea where flying fishes play.

"You know I was a little alarmed when you said you spent your evenings at a jazz hall." Mary realised it was up to her to start the conversation as Evelyn drew from his cigarette, eyes distant. "I was imagining one of those dark smoky places with a back alley entrance and a bead curtain."

He chuckled, smoke wreathing him with his exhale. "This is a somewhat more exclusive establishment."

"Yet still not exactly the kind of place I would have expected to be your haunt." She cringed; hadn't she mocked Edith for saying the same thing?

"I admit it's not exactly where I imagined myself whiling away my thirties. But I'm a different man than I was before the War."

"So many people are," she remarked. *Except for me.* A War had changed the world, and the people in it; she thought she had been one of them, but then she and Matthew picked up the fragments of their lives before and put them back together with relative ease while everyone else struggled with the puzzle. And now she was alone.

And as the night is falling  
I find that I'm recalling  
That blissful all-enthraling day  
Beside the bay.  
And I sailed away.

The waiter returned with her Sidecar, and she sipped tentatively from it, studying Evelyn as he nursed a whisky, cigarette still clutched in that hand. He'd always been as self-aware as he was now, and frank about it. She recalled Mama telling her all those years ago how he'd left Downton without proposing—or intending to return to do so in the future—because he knew Mary did not find him as interesting as he wanted to be to the woman he married.
"Change isn't necessarily for the worse," he said, looking out steadily at the dance floor. "Lady Edith seems very happy writing for The Sketch."

"It makes her feel important," Mary remarked with a shrug, and took another drink of the gin and lemon concoction.

"I've heard rumours that her editor is rather more than that."

"What are people saying?" Mary hadn't been sure whether Richard's knowledge was common gossip or him making people's private lives his business. She had hoped it was scandalous enough for people that Edith had left home to live alone and work, in contrast with the widowed sister who did neither, without speculating about her sex life.

"Mr Gregson's a married man with an ill wife."

"That's about the size of it."

"Damned bad luck in love."

"An affliction that apparently runs in the family."

Evelyn smiled sadly. "Shall we drink to that? I haven't been so lucky myself."

He ordered another round of drinks, and when they clinked their glasses together they let the final words of the song be their toast:

> I dream of her in Avalon  
> From dusk till dawn.  
> So I think I'll travel on  
> To Avalon.

When the music stopped, applause rippled through the nightclub as the band left the stage for the change of acts and the couples left the dance floor to resume their seats for the show. A flash of bright green in her periphery drew Mary's eye to Edith and Gregson, the latter abruptly leaving her side to approach someone seated at one of the tables nearest the stage, hidden behind a newspaper.

> A big press event, Edith had said. Everybody who's anybody will be there.

Mary imagined she could hear the rattle of the newspaper as it lowered to reveal Gregson's colleague, who was somebody in the press, indeed. She gulped down her drink, cursing the gin burning its way down her throat and herself for not realising before now that Richard Carlisle would undoubtedly be in attendance—and after he'd talked about frequenting jazz clubs, too. Gregson pointed to her, and before her eyes could meet Richard's she swivelled in her chair, pretending not to be aware of him, to be intent on Evelyn.

"What have you been up to that's kept you away from Downton?" She'd invited him several times since the war, after Papa resumed the hunt, but Evelyn always had some excuse or other, which struck her as odd since he'd requested to convalesce there. "We haven't had a single person to stay who's ridden well enough to suit me."
"In that case I was right to stay away, as I could only disappoint." Evelyn drew from the cigarette, which he'd smoked down to a stub. "I seldom ride these days. And by seldom I mean never."

Mary did not know what to say to this. She wanted to ask why, but it might be due to the injury that led to his request to convalesce at Downton, and she had no wish to wound his pride as well, knowing how Matthew had been. So she murmured, lamely, "Oh."

"To answer your question, I've mostly been in town. "It seems the trenches accustomed me to…a rather faster pace of life."

"Matthew preferred to keep busy, too."

For the first time, Mary realised she'd never considered Matthew's constant activity in light of the War. Not that he'd been an idle man before joining up, practicing law in Ripon during the week and attending to estate business with Papa on the weekends. Though to be sure, it wasn't the feverish pace at which he had after the War. In the old days when he pedalled contentedly between Crawley House and the Abbey on that ridiculous bicycle, she'd never imagined him speeding down country lanes in an AC Six.

Unwillingly, she pictured the car being towed by a truck into the front drive, the front end of the car whose green paint he'd been so fastidious about not scratching, smashed beyond repair. She closed her eyes as if to shut out the unwanted image, and to ward off nausea induced by the sensation of the room reeling around her.

"I wouldn't say I've been particularly busy," Evelyn's steady voice coaxed her to open her eyes again. "Everyone finds different things help them cope."

He reached into his dinner jacket and took another cigarette from his case, and as he lit up, Mary asked, "Do those help you?"

"Marvellously." He smirked around a cloud. "So long as I smoke them one after another."

He seemed more relaxed than he had a moment before, and Mary, rather too tightly wound herself despite her two drinks—or perhaps because of them—asked on impulse, "May I try?"

She could scarcely believe herself, and half-expected Evelyn to remark on it. In either a testament to how changed he was, or how changed everyone was, he wordlessly withdrew another cigarette for her and lit it. Taking it awkwardly between her third and forefingers—Did it go palm up or palm down?—she realised she'd not been around many people at all who smoked cigarettes; Matthew and Papa properly restricted their smoking to cigars with their after dinner port away from the ladies. All over Murray's men and women alike smoked, the gentler sex dangling cigaretties from long jade or ivory holders. She took a small pull—a very small one, per Evelyn's instruction—and held the smoke in her mouth for a moment before exhaling so it would cool and not burn her throat on the way out. For the most part this was true, and she was just thankful not to draw further attention to herself with a coughing fit, though her eyes did smart a little.

"Feel better?" Evelyn asked, looking slightly amused.

"No."

He faced the stage as the lights dimmed in all around them, spotlight on the band as they struck up.
"As I said, we all cope in different ways."

One of his, apparently, was to brood over his whisky as ten chorus girls in flesh-coloured bathing costumes festooned with bright carnations sashayed their hips in low-slung grass skirts while a man and woman sang a duet. They were modestly attired by comparison—even if it was more appropriate garb for a garden party than a nightclub, all in white, the lady's brunette bob crowned with a wide-brimmed straw hat, the man in shirt-sleeves rolled up to the elbows as he strummed away at a ukulele.

Evelyn was not the only man in the room engrossed in the show through a veil of cigarette smoke. As Mary's eyes raked across the rows of tables, she wondered how many were veterans who craved the pace of life learned in the trenches, spending nights listening to fast music or dancing with fast women, and how many were simply…male. The only man whom she knew for certain had not been in the trenches was barricaded behind his newspaper again, as if this was his idea of a war zone.

Of course none of that accounted for the almost equal number of women in the cabaret. Mary didn't understand it, and if she'd had a newspaper, she might have been tempted to hide behind it, too. She excused herself from Evelyn and retreated upstairs to the ladies' room for a few minutes' respite, though there was little enough of that between the queue and the clucking of so many gossiping hens, which only reminded her how removed she was from society. She wanted to go home, and returned to the ballroom with the intent of telling Edith she was going to do exactly that, and say goodbye to Evelyn, when the combined effects of alcohol and her anxiety made her stumble at the bottom of the staircase.

A firm—and familiar—grasp on her elbow steadied her.

"Sir Richard," she said.

"Lady Mary. Fancy meeting you at a nightclub."

"I was just going, actually. After I say goodbye to my--"

"Boyfriend?"

She glanced down at his fingers, still wrapped around her arm—not ungently—then back up at him, raising her eyebrows. "Jealous?"

He released her, dimpling as he gestured toward the front of the hall. "I came with Josephine."

The brunette singer had traded her straw hat for pink plume that matched the boa she now wore as she danced in front of the chorus girls whose quickly changed costumes consisted of poufy undergarments that weren't actually worn under anything. The male soloist crooned:

My little Margie
I'm always thinking of you
Margie, I'll tell the world I love you
Don't forget your promise to me
I have bought a home and ring and ev'ry thing.
"You certainly didn't seem to be transported by Miss Earle's voice as you hunched over your evening edition."

Irritation rippled beneath Richard's sharp cheekbone, and Mary smiled. She'd bickered with him enough during their engagement that she never dreamed she'd want to again; at the moment, however, it was the most familiar conversation she'd had all night.

"I didn't imagine I'd have a chance later," he replied, blandly, so that Mary didn't know whether he meant he would be too busy with work or with the woman. Which was exactly what he intended.

"I thought you didn't enjoy watching people appear ridiculous. Those powder box costumes certainly are."

Slipping his hands into his trouser pockets, Richard turned around and looked at the dancers as though only noticing them for the first time. "Well," he said with a shrug, "as long as no one's making me wear one, I won't complain about anyone else's foolishness."

"Pity. I'd hoped you were the one man in the club who might be unaffected by the allure."

"It hasn't affected my ability to talk business," he said, his gaze snapping back to her sharply, as if meeting a challenge. "That's what I came to talk to you about. Or rather, I hoped perhaps you might meet with me to discuss it another time."

"What sort of business?"

"Estate business. Haxby…" One hand went up to smooth the curling hair at the back of his neck. "Haxby eludes me more than I've cared to admit."

"Richard Carlisle admitting something eludes him? Heavens, that's a tempting offer."

"I'll have Miss Fields phone you to schedule an appointment, then?"

"No."

"No?"

"That is to say…"

Contrary to her glib words, she wasn't sure she could handle a Richard who admitted to being out of his depth any better than she could an Evelyn who no longer rode horses.

Although now she thought about it, Richard had not always been unable to own his shortcomings. Proud of his rise in society, yes, but he'd admitted to her that first visit to Downton that he'd admitted he needed help making his way in her world--quite charmingly, too. She wouldn't have entertained the possibility of marrying him if he hadn't been. But…

"I need some time to think about it. I'm sure you understand."

Richard's eyes narrowed on her for a moment, then he drew back, tugging at the starched white cuffs of his shirtsleeves beneath his dinner jacket. "Indeed. I expect nothing else from you. Only I'd very much appreciate it this time if you don't keep me waiting a year and a half for an answer."
Murray's was a real London nightclub, which featured the actual musical acts described in this chapter, though I bumped them up a few months to suit the timeline of the story. I did not alter anything having to do with dancer/singer Josephine Earle, who I just had to give a cameo role in the fic after I discovered she was, quite coincidentally, recently divorced from a man whose last name was…Glen. And for your listening pleasure, the two jazz songs performed at Murray's: Avalon, performed by Al Jolston, and Eddie Cantor's Margie.
Quiet On the Front

Chapter Summary

Evelyn's familiar candour delivers unexpected new perspectives on the War, but the view from Richard's newspaper office appears to have changed little, if at all.

Chapter Notes

The song featured in this chapter is Pack Up Your Troubles In Your Old Kit Bag, a popular WWI song, recorded by Helen Clark in 1917.

Despite how discomfiting it had been to see Evelyn so altered, Mary accepted a supper from Edith, thinking that perhaps the atmosphere of Murray's Night Club had lent to the strangeness. Perhaps the more intimate setting of her flat would show a glimpse of the old Evelyn, who had been her dependable, if occasionally dull, friend. Just to be sure he did not feel too out of his--new--element, she suggested Edith put a jazz record on the phonograph, and to her relief after the meal he lounged in the cream-coloured armchair angled toward the fireplace with one leg crossed and a cigarette between his fingers in the relaxed posture she would expect to see in the smoking room back home.

"Nice place, this," he drawled, gesturing with his cigarette hand; the other rested on the armrest, fingers curled loosely about a glass of bourbon.

Edith thanked him. "I was dubious of a flat, after Downton, but I find cosy living suits me nicely."

Cosy living did not--thank heaven--include wearing pyjamas, though she also lit a cigarette.

"It does me, too," said Evelyn.

"But I'd hardly call your London house cosy," Mary said lightly, thinking of the Viscount Branksome's stately Georgian home in Easton Place, which generally stood vacant except during racing season.

"I've been staying at my club." Evelyn scarcely glanced her direction as he drew from his cigarette.

A lump formed in Mary's throat as it occurred to her this might have been another change affected by the trenches. Out of nowhere she remembered Matthew's request at the start of their marriage to live more simply. She swallowed, forcing down the bilious thought along with the lump. This had nothing to do with Matthew's wish to return to his roots in middle-class Manchester. He was not so different in some ways to Evelyn, who was known for his modesty long before duty required him to wallow in the mud in France.

"I should imagine Lord Grantham doesn't approve," Evelyn said. "Of your career, I mean," he added smoothly, realising how Edith might have--indeed, had--taken him to mean; Mary saw the tell-tale twinge of her sister's weak chin as she attempted to hide her reaction by bringing her own cigarette.
quickly to her lips. "Unless his views on women's suffrage have changed radically?"

"Well…" Edith looked relieved, but nevertheless pink tinged her cheeks as she leant forward on the sofa to tamp out her cigarette in a polished pewter ashtray. "He's less opposed to the newspaper than to the newspaperman."

"My father doesn't much approve of me these days, either. He doesn't understand why I don't marry. Have children." His normally smooth tones took on a sharp edge, and Mary noticed his fingers tighten around his glass. "Why I don't ride or go to the races."

"Surely it doesn't require a great deal of imagination to understand why a former cavalryman might give up equine pursuits."

Mary squirmed slightly in her chair; this had not occurred to her. "Your injury," she said. "Of course. Did you suffer a fall?"

Though Evelyn had always been characterised by his candour, Mary was nonetheless surprised by the detail in which he spoke of his experiences in the Battle of Arras in the spring of 1917, culminating with his being pinned beneath his horse after it became entangled in barbed wire. She had taken Matthew's reluctance to speak of the War as the natural taciturn nature of a gentleman who found himself necessitated with carrying on in the face of terrible circumstances that had no definite end; once the end had been reached, they were better not looked back upon. Surely this quality was not uniquely Matthew's?

"As you know, I didn't invalid out," Evelyn continued, and Mary acknowledged him with a nod; shortly after he'd written about the possibility of convalescing at Downton, she'd received another letter from him saying his injuries were healing more quickly than anticipated and he would be sent back to the front. "I went to Amiens. I didn't--I don't--sit a saddle quite as handsomely as I used to, but I am not physically unable to ride. In my mind, however…sometimes it's as if I never left the battlefield. I'm haunted by the sights and the sounds…even the smells…"

As his voice trailed off, Evelyn glanced away, toward the fire but not really looking at it, the mirror image of the flames twisting in his bourbon glass.

"Pertaining to the horses?" Edith ventured, and Mary thought how the last time Evelyn was with them her sister had butted timidly into their conversations; now she was confident, encouraging him to come back to them, the bedside manner she honed to perfection in the makeshift hospital ward in the Downton library. "So many were packed off to the front--"

"Including some of ours," Mary cut in.

"--and so few were returned," Edith said louder, her forehead puckering between her eyebrows--though not at Mary. "It must have been inhumane."

"What those great creatures suffered was…" Evelyn screwed his eyes shut, as if against nightmare images, but when he opened them he wore a haunted look as though he could not rid himself of them. "I don't mean to diminish what the men endured--I understand Captain Crawley expected never to walk again. But the horses were the true innocents. The cigarette hung limp between fingers that pinched it tightly between them, the smouldering butt quivering. "They had even less cause to be there than we did, and less choice."

Edith nodded, but Mary blurted out in undisguised astonishment: "You speak as though you don't
believe in the War."

He turned from the fire to meet her gaze levelly. "It's more that I don't believe in wasted life."

*Necessary sacrifice,* Matthew and Papa had always phrased it. The only person Mary had ever heard speak of the War in such bald, cynical terms was Richard. She'd told him just as bluntly that the opinions of a man who wouldn’t have volunteered even if he was protected by his age and perceived political importance counted for little, and they'd rowed fiercely. That anyone of her lot could share that opinion was inconceivable to her.

*Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag and smile, smile, smile,* Helen Clark and her chorus of male backup singers warbled over the phonograph. The wartime tune carried jauntily by muted horns seemed an almost ludicrous juxtaposition with the images Evelyn painted of horses gunned down by machinated weaponry and riddled with shrapnel and torn by barbed wire—but wasn't that the point? They were English, and their upper lips were stiff.

> While you've a Lucifer to light your fag,
> Smile boys, that's the style…

"This song is singularly responsible for my becoming a chain smoker," Evelyn muttered around the fresh cigarette he held between his teeth as he lit it. He offered another to Edith, who accepted it, and to Mary, who did not. As he shook out the match to put out the flame he said, "My father thinks it's me who's the wasted life. So many chaps died. I should marry. Start a family…" His lips parted around an *o* of smoke, and the tone that followed was as hollow. "But what sort of husband does a broken man make? What sort of father?"

He sought Mary's gaze, as if to implore how Matthew had held up in these roles…Her eyes burned back at him. Her jaw tightened, and her thumbs chafed the sides of her index fingers, the fabric of her skirt scratching between them. She wanted to tell Evelyn that he was made of stronger stuff than he thought, that he could--and *would*--be the husband she always knew he would be to a very lucky young lady, but the words stuck in her chest with her breath and lungs as she found herself transported to Matthew's bedside. Where he had lain broken. Believing it unconscionable to marry. Believing himself unable to produce children.

But all that had gone away with Matthew's healing, hadn't it? He had not hesitated to marry her. His anxieties about children had not been over whether he should have them, but whether he could, and he had wanted them right away. All Evelyn had seen, Matthew saw too. Surely he was proof that time truly did heal all wounds?

Time, however, had been the one part of marriage Matthew had not been able to give Mary beyond her most daring expectations. Had it in fact caught up to Matthew that day on the road?

"I think you'll find the women in possession of greater fortitude than when you went off to war," Edith said. "We nursed so many men, you know. Michael always says I'm such a comfort to him, when he faces the ghosts of the battlefield."

"Then I'm sure you'll appreciate that some of us have had more than enough of nurses," Evelyn replied. "Enough of compassion and pity. I shouldn't like to feel...*grateful* to my wife."
Not to worry, there's little resembling gratitude in your tone--but Mary bit her tongue from speaking the words aloud.

"It's unfair to assume women want to offer those things," Edith said. "Or that if they do, there's anything wrong with that."

There was a wistfulness in her voice that made it plain she was talking about Anthony Strallan, and about their father's reasons for opposing the marriage. Had Edith really loved the old goat all along? Does she still? What of Gregson?

As Mary watched Edith regard their old friend with the sad puppy eyes which no doubt ingratiated her to so many convalescents, and had gazed in desperation and disbelief at Sir Anthony's back retreating down the church aisle, something akin to the frustration Viscount Branksome must feel toward his son knotted in Mary's chest. Women like Edith would jump at men like Evelyn--men who were respectable, and not already married, and not damaging to their and their families' reputations. Why did he refuse to leave the trenches?

"We're all living in a different world to the one we knew before," Edith went on, seemingly almost in answer to Mary's thoughts. "We're all searching for where we fit into it."

While you've a Lucifer to light your fag,
   Smile, boys, that's the style.
What's the use of worrying?
   It never was worthwhile, so
Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag,
   And smile, smile, smile.

The refrain repeated one final time, and Evelyn smiled.

"It seems a world made for women now. You a successful journalist. Mary a mother."

As his kind gaze touched her she felt Edith's on her too. Was it the same judging look as Sunday afternoon? Mary has a baby to get home to. Evelyn believed War made him unfit to parent; was the shock of sudden widowhood a comparable experience to what he endured at the front? Mary doubted it. For Matthew, she must pack up your troubles.

She stood, and she forced her lips to return his smile. "I suppose that's my cue to go and kiss Georgie goodnight."

Of course by the time Mary crept down the upstairs hallway of Grantham House, where the bedrooms lay, the usual night-time sounds of Nanny Philips shushing the fussy baby or crooning lullabies over his coos had been silenced.

"I kept Georgie up for you as long as Nanny would allow," said Isobel, emerging in dressing gown and plaited hair from her own bedroom at the creak of Mary's step in the hall and finding her poised with her hand on the nursery doorknob. "You won't wake him if you want to look in on him. I often do."

Though her mother-in-law meant well, something in Isobel's tone--the subtle implication that Mary
should go in, that she was somehow remiss if she did not--made her reluctant to heed the encouragement. Other women, Isobel, Mama, talked of how peaceful babies were in their sleep, but every time Mary had watched George, she noticed every pucker of his small forehead, the drooping of his lips, the soft whimpers, and feared that his sleep was as plagued as hers. Now she could not shake the thought that looking at him might reveal something missed on Matthew's face when he lay vulnerable in slumber.

Or the reminder that the care of her own child was another woman's domain--and a woman whose rung on the social ladder was far beneath her own, at that. Evelyn had been kind to mention motherhood alongside Edith's career, but the truth was that the role provided Mary with little enough to occupy her, let alone to close her days feeling tired from having done good work, as Sybil spoke of. As Richard had, too, when she asked once why he did not leave the newspapers to his underlings, now that he had secured his fortune.

With a shake of her head, she shuffled down the Oriental hall runner toward her room.

"Did you have a nice evening with Edith and Mr Napier?" asked Isobel, following at her heels.

"I suppose. Will you go to the centre again tomorrow?"

"I thought I might. Would you like to go with me?"

Isobel's rekindled purpose had got off to a ragged start with Edith, but she seemed to be faring better with the parish programme to help fallen women. How was it that everyone but Mary--and Evelyn--seemed to have a life's work? Edith had her writing, Isobel her charitable endeavours. The latter Mary had never found inspiring--even during the War when she had helped Mama plan benefits or worked alongside Sybil in hospital, she cared little beyond how she might help Matthew--and the former were hobbies rather than life's work. My life makes me angry.

She shook her head and reached for her doorknob.

"Or perhaps I won't," Isobel said. "We might take Georgie for an outing. Unless you have other plans?"

"Yes, actually," Mary heard herself say without thinking about it. "Richard Carlisle's asked me to advise him about improving Haxby."

"Oh," said Isobel. Her eyebrows drew together in a worried expression, then twitched apart again as she flashed a smile that did not reach her eyes. "Well, twelve thousand acres should be sufficient to interest you."

Mary opened her bedroom door and stepped inside. "It's something to do."

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The last--and only--time Mary came to see Richard at the Capital Herald, she had made an appointment with him, and he had admitted her promptly into his office upon her punctual arrival. She expected nothing less this time, yet here she waited, in the anteroom to his office, seated in a straight-backed armchair upholstered in green like the ones that stood before his desk, listening to the
clack of typewriter keys beneath the secretary's fingers and Richard's shouts muffled beyond the door. Fiancées, she mused, afforded more consideration than other visitors. Or perhaps it was that former fiancées afforded less.

She inclined her head just slightly toward the door, mindful of not appearing too obvious in her eavesdropping, should Miss Fields look up from her work. Not that she was gleaning much from her little breach of etiquette, anyway; the only voice she could pick out was Richard's, which told her he must be shouting at someone over the telephone, but she could discern none of the words.

A full ten minutes elapsed during which Miss Fields typed on, seemingly oblivious to the shouting from her employer's office behind her, as if it were simply white noise, while Mary arranged and rearranged her gloved hands in her lap and asked herself just what she stood to gain from this meeting. She was not, as she had flippantly told her mother-in-law, so desperate for something to do that she was willing to subject herself to the ill-temper currently on display from behind the closed door. Nor did she have any particular need, as Isobel had suggested, for closure from that chapter of her life—though she had hoped, when he first called on them, that he might show her what it was he'd thought they could build together. But they had not been friends before they were affianced, not the way she and Matthew had been prior to his first proposal, and on their meetings since he had not given her much sign that there was anything to salvage from the wreck of their engagement.

That he had sought her help indicated that he seemed to regard her as an equal—or, at the very least, as a worthy opponent. *Strong and sharp*. She could do with a reminder that she was both. A part of her—The nice part, perhaps? The part only Matthew had seemed able to see?—still felt as she had the morning Richard left Downton: sorry that he was stuck with an estate he had bought for her. Haxby Park was less easy to dispose of than the pearl engagement ring she had returned to him.

Her gaze settled on the fourth finger of her left hand as she thought this. Quickly she shifted them again, covering it with her right, but she too late to stop her imagining that awkward telephone call a few days after his departure, after she realised she'd forgotten to give him the ring. *Drop it in the post*, Richard had told her. *You accepted my proposal by letter, after all. It'll be a tidy book-end.*

The office door banged open, and Mary looked up with a start as Richard strode through, scowling; his look of displeasure deepened as his gaze touched Mary, briefly, but then flickered to Miss Fields, who had stopped typing at his emergence.

"Carry on with the arrangements," he instructed her, and the secretary gave a curt nod.

"Very good, Sir."

"Lady Mary." Richard shifted his attention and his mood so abruptly that she felt slightly unsteady on her feet as she stood, and was almost grateful for the firmness of his handshake, except that it made her think of the bargain struck here previously. *You're entitled to be in my debt.* "Forgive my lack of punctuality."

"And it was mine you were worried about."

"Just prior to your arrival I received a telephone call which I had to take." Releasing her hand, he gestured for her to go through the open office door. "I intended to deal with it briefly, but the caller proved more stubborn than anticipated."

"I'm sure you squared everything away for the evening edition with your usual aplomb."
"It was a personal matter."

"You deal with all your personal matters by shouting, then? Not just the ones involving me?"

The sound of the door clicking shut made Mary turn back to see Richard leaning against it, the harsh lines of his face now indicating fatigue as much as frustration.

"The caller was my brother. George."

"I'd forgotten your brother was called George."

"Or that I had a brother at all, no doubt."

Richard pushed off the door with his shoulder, watching her as he circled around to his desk with his sharpening blue eyes. Mary felt the dig at her lack of interest in meeting his family, which had been one of the many points of contention between them when they were engaged. At least he had not remarked on her giving her son the same name—though she was sure he must be thinking it.

"My father has been ill, you see."

"I'm sorry to hear it," she said. Ignoring Richard's expression, which seemed to say, Are you, indeed? she asked, "I hope it's nothing serious?"

"He'll be fine," Richard replied, almost too quickly. He stood between his chair and his desk, running his fingers over the edge. "George's stupidity, on the other hand, is incurable. But you didn't come here to discuss the mental deficiencies of younger siblings. Shall we get to it?"

Again he gestured with his hand, now to indicate the chair on the other side of his desk, where she'd sat on her previous visit. Mary seated herself in the one beside it in a minor act of defiance, though she still perched at the edge, clutching her handbag on her knees. The upward twitch of Richard's eyebrows indicated that none of these details went unobserved.

"Something seems different here," she said lightly, hoping to distract from her obvious unease. She glanced around the office until she had a better rein over her emotions, before fixing him with a bland gaze. "I know what it is. Not a hint of cigar smoke."

"Quit." Richard lowered himself into his chair. "Nasty habit."

"I don't know…I always thought it lent a certain aura. You sitting here, plotting in your newspaper lair, wreathed in smoke."

"It's unhealthy."

Richard's tone brooked no further discussion. He had never taken jokes about himself well, though Mary wondered if in this case it was less to do with his lack of humour than a connection with his father's illness. She did not ask. The only question in her mind was how to extricate herself from this uncomfortable scenario as quickly as possible. It had been a mistake to come here at all; it would be an even bigger one to stay with him in this temper.

"You know it's really Tom you ought to be talking to. He gave Matthew a lot more advice about modernising Downton than I did."
Richard sat back in his chair, fingers steepled and his head tilted as he regarded her thoughtfully. "It's strange, you being on a first name basis with the chauffeur. Oh, I know he's your brother-in-law, but I recall quite vividly how you asked me to run him over. I was never sure you were entirely joking."

The dimples winked beneath his cheekbones, but disappeared again as quickly as they had shown themselves as he leaned forward to shuffle a stack of papers on his desk.

"I'm sure you can appreciate my reluctance to be advised on estate management by a man who only a year ago was involved in the destruction of such properties."

"Would you be singing a different tune if it had been Downton his associates burned to the ground?"

His eyes flicked up with a flash, and when he spoke, she heard the tremor of impatience. "Your impression of my vindictiveness is strange in light of my not having published your scandal."

A valid point, but not one Mary could acknowledge without ceding ground to him. "I'm sure you took no consideration as to how such a publication might have tarnished your public image. Or perhaps you like to inflict more personal wounds."

"Such as soliciting help and admitting my ineptitude to the very woman who played me for a fool?"

The span of the desk between them seemed to shrink as Richard stood.

"I know it's not befitting well-bred ladies such as yourself to display any sort of work ethic," he went on, sliding his fingers along the desk as he rounded the corner with the languid ferocity of a lion prowling a cage, "but even so I'm surprised at you. Letting the opportunity to rule Downton slip through your fingers. Leaving the work to men who know little about it."

"As if you knew anything at all about estate management when you bought Haxby."

"For you to manage. That was what you'd led me to believe you wanted. To inherit. To be lord of the manor. I couldn't give you Downton Abbey, but I could give you a position and power. It turns out you were more feminine than you claimed to be."

His scorn made her heart hammer against her ribcage, but she forced herself to inhale long and exhale slow so she could still the quaver in her voice before she spoke. "You were quite wrong. It was Matthew I wanted."

"Oh, rest assured you made that perfectly clear during our engagement."

He had reached her side of the desk now, but stopped just past the corner and sat at the edge, the casual posture belied by the whiteness of his knuckles as they gripped the wood.

"In hindsight I suppose I rather dodged a bullet. Your knowledge of estate management coming from the man who lost his fortune in idiotic investments, I might have found myself in direr financial straits than I am now."

Clutching her handbag, Mary rose from her chair. "Since you have such a low opinion of my intelligence, Sir Richard, I won't waste any more of your time attempting to assist you."

As she turned to go she heard him sigh.
"That isn't my opinion." Richard spoke so low Mary thought he must do through gritted teeth. When she faced him again, he was lowering his hand from pinching the bridge of his nose. "How did he do it, Mary? How did a lawyer from Manchester recover a fortune squandered in the Canadian Railroad?"

"How do you know what Papa invested in?"

"Not by any means so devious as you imagine. Men do discuss such uncouth matters as money over cigars and port. Even earls."

For a wild moment Mary wanted to completely abandon the current thread of conversation and grasp the one that dangled from last night's with Evelyn. Did Matthew ever talk about what it was like in the trenches?

Lifting her chin, she said, "He inherited a fortune of his own. From Reginald Swire."

Richard had not looked half so shocked when she told him she'd taken a lover who died in her bed. "Lavinia's father made Captain Crawley the beneficiary of his will? After the way he treated her during their engagement?"

It was on the tip of Mary's tongue to defend Matthew's honour and tell Richard her husband hadn't wanted to take the money, that he felt remorse for how he treated Lavinia, but she caught herself. In this light, her own behaviour shamed her. How could she have been so selfish as to quarrel with Matthew about his principles? Even if he had unfairly tried to make her share in the blame of Lavinia's broken heart.

"You certainly have the authority to judge a man's treatment of his fiancée," she shot back at Richard. "It must rankle, mustn't it?"

"What? That an old rival inherited a fortune that bought the car he died in?"

Tears stung her eyes, and Mary turned again to go, but as her fingers touched the doorknob Richard spoke again.

"You may not realise this, but in 1912, Swire owed me enough money to bankrupt him."

Without turning around, Mary said, "You waived the debt because Lavinia stole the Marconi files for you. She told me."

"So it was technically my money that saved Downton." After a pause for it to sink in, he. "That must rankle."

"Not nearly as much for me as it must for you."
When Richard and Evelyn have similar ideas, whose execution will elicit a more favourable response from Mary?

Ostensibly Evelyn had called on Mary to meet her son at last, though as they sat in the drawing room after luncheon she noted how uncomfortable he seemed. Granted, he was no more awkward than many young men of her acquaintance were around children or, if she was honest, than she was herself with every child but her own and Sybil's. Nor was Georgie making himself very amiable, more fractious than usual as he cut a pair of new teeth. But Mary had not forgotten what he'd said about feeling unfit for fatherhood; the now familiar way he reached into his jacket pocket for his cigarette case with trembling fingers made her think his aloofness was due at least in part to the mental anguish he continued to suffer these few years out of the trenches.

Nevertheless, as Evelyn made small talk with Isobel about jazz musicians he enjoyed and a book he had read on Edith's recommendation, Mary couldn't help but compare him to Richard Carlisle. He had more reason than anyone to feel ill at ease in the company of George Crawley, yet when Richard visited, he'd not only admired the baby but taken his tiny hand in his own as if he were making the acquaintance of a business colleague.

Georgie whimpered and began to squirm on her lap, and Mary realised she was squeezing him too tightly as she reacted viscerally to the notion that Richard could be compared favourably to anyone, least of all Evelyn, after the hateful things he had said to her the other day. She relaxed her hold on the baby, bouncing him on her knee in the way he had liked yesterday, and deliberately did not think of Richard and how angry he made her.

No, if Evelyn must be compared to anyone, it ought to be Matthew. He'd walked in the valley of death, too, If her friend was to be believed. He had wanted a child as much as he had wanted Mary. When they had George, Matthew had not hesitated pluck him from her arms and cradle him as naturally as if he'd been holding babies all his life, and in the father's adoring gaze was no hint of shadow.

He'd survived four years of war to die not an hour after his son's birth in a ditch not a mile from home.

Anger roiled in the pit of Mary's stomach more furiously than it had a moment ago toward Richard. Why had Matthew left her then? Why had she let him go? Why did he have to drive the bloody car? And how could he have been so damn careless?

Likely dazed by his own happiness, poor chap, she'd heard someone say-Papa? Tom? Dr Clarkson? She couldn't remember who, having been too dazed herself-but now Evelyn made her wonder. Had it been possible for a man who experienced all they had been as happy as Matthew had led her-and she had so willingly allowed herself-to believe?

George squawked again, and when Isobel came to rescue him she suggested they all go out for a walk in the park, as it was such a fine day. Evelyn agreed readily, but Mary could not enjoy the first cloudless day they'd enjoyed in the weeks of lingering winter. The sunlight glared in her already
watery eyes, and the sight of Isobel pushing George's pram up ahead made her chafe her thumbs against the sides of her index fingers in impotent frustration; the baby, at least as far as she could hear, was soothed by the rolling of the pram as he had failed to be in her arms.

"People will think she's the nanny," Mary remarked as she and Evelyn lagged behind her mother-in-law's brisk pace, unable to keep the note of resentment out of her voice.

"A doting grandmother makes for a lax chaperone," Evelyn said.

"Goodness. And I thought you only came to meet George. Have you plans for something untoward?"

"I suppose speaking in private would have been rather untoward once upon a time." The lines of his forehead arched in amusement. "It's the Twenties now."

"So it is." They had come to a park bench, and Mary sat. "Very well, then. Tell me your secrets, and I'll tell you no lies."

"You make it sound much more interesting than it really is," Evelyn said as he strode around the back of the bench to seat himself at the opposite end. The note of self-effacement in his voice made Mary glance away, cheeks warming at the memory of Mama relaying his words that he wanted his wife to find him interesting. "I only want to apologise."

"Apologise?"

"For being such wretched company the other night at Edith's."

"Don't be silly, Evelyn, it was a lovely evening."

"Do you think me so silly as not to know my conversation distressed you?"

Mary let out her breath, and it shuddered more than she would have liked, but at least she did not actually cry. "It did," she admitted, but she added, turning slightly on the bench to meet his eye. "But not for the reasons you think."

Evelyn said nothing, but watched her intently until she realised he was waiting for her to go on. She was not accustomed to that. Matthew would have let it go, not expected her to explain herself more fully. His acceptance that she had her reasons for silence had always been one of the qualities she appreciated most about him; before now it had never occurred to her that there might have been times when it would have been better to say more than she had. Or that she might have probed him to say more.

"Only that your views about the War surprised me."

Now it was Evelyn who glanced away, the hint of colour on his rounded cheeks. "You must think me damned unpatriotic."

"Of course I-" Mary caught herself in the polite lie as he caught her eye again; his lips quirked in a wry grin.

"It's all right. Father does. Jolly near everyone would."

Mary looked out across the park and saw Isobel making the turn to come back to them. Her black-clad figure and the black pram contrasted strikingly with the green and yellow hues of the sun-dappled grass.
"Perhaps king and country aren't as important as we've always believed," Mary said. "Edith certainly didn't seem scandalised by your views. And seeing as she wasn't at the front herself, she can only have heard them expressed by other men who were. You're not alone, Evelyn."

The look he gave her was dubious, but he said, "Neither are you."

Mary wasn't sure she had any more confidence in this assertion than he did at hers, and it seemed as Isobel approached that the cries pealing from the pram echoed Mary's own loneliness.

"I believe the fresh air and sunshine have ceased to divert Georgie from teething," Isobel said.

Mary stood and reached down into the pram to adjust the stocking which he'd kicked loose and now flapped from the end of his toe like a white flag of surrender. "It's all right, my darling boy. The weather doesn't really suit my mood, either."

He looked up at her so pitifully, one fist jammed into his mouth, that she scooped him up in her arms. This seemed to bring him some comfort, though Mary's own pulse quickened as she felt his little heart hammering against her breast, his feverish brow radiating warmth through her cheek. By the time they had said their goodbyes to Evelyn, who hailed a cab from the park, and walked back to the house she was only too relieved to hand over Georgie to the care of Nanny Philips and to be assisted by Molesley out of her coat; the shoulder was sodden from where the baby had gummed it instead of his fist.

"Molesley?" Isobel said, examining the hall table where a flat square box wrapped in brown paper and string resided. "Was this parcel delivered while we were out? It has no return address."

"Yes ma'am-from Sir Richard Carlisle. It's for Lady Mary."

"Sir Richard Carlisle!" Mary parroted. "You can't mean he delivered it himself?"

"That he did, m'lady." Molesley scarcely spared her a glance for his fascination with the package.

Suddenly and with a pang, Mary wished Carson were here, to be officious and offended about having to allow a parcel from Richard, never mind Richard himself, to darken the door of the Earl of Grantham's home.

"Didn't you ask him to stay?" asked Isobel, never one to forego social graces for the sake of holding a grudge. Of course, if Mary had told her about the previous day's interview, she doubted even Isobel could be so generous in bestowing the benefit of the doubt.

"I told him madam and her ladyship had gone for a stroll with Mr Napier and would no doubt return soon, but he said he couldn't wait," Molesley replied. He turned to Mary. "Shall I carry it to the drawing room for you to open, m'lady?"

She nodded, wincing a little as he hefted the unwieldy parcel into his arms, and followed him down the hall.

"Would you like privacy, my dear?" asked Isobel, at her heels.

"Why? You'll find out what it is sooner or later."

"I do hate to be nosy."

Mary scarcely restrained a snort. Was her mother-in-law so unself-aware? But when she paused in the doorway to glance over her shoulder and saw Isobel looking pale and forlorn in her black
walking suit and hat her conscience chided her. She was not the only person who had lost Matthew, nor the one who had loved him the longest.

Smiling wearily, she said, "I think some moral support is in order when one receives a mysterious parcel from Richard Carlisle."

As it turned out, the recipient of the parcel was not Mary at all. Inside the brown paper they found a Harrod's box; the attached card read Mr George Crawley.

"Well," said Isobel, "we can't open it without Georgie."

Before Mary could utter a word in response-favourable or otherwise, she couldn't say, for the difficulty of getting her head around the notion that Richard had sent a present to her son-Isobel asked Molesley, on his way to fetch tea, to have Nanny bring the baby down if he'd finished his bottle. Soon, George was contentedly gumming a biscuit as he sat amid the brown wrapping and the tissue paper from the box Mary unpacked.

"Why, it's an electric train!" said Isobel.

"Richard seems to have mistaken the interests of a six month old with a six year old," Mary replied, her gaze drifting to George; he was too delighted with crinkling the paper to notice the contents of the box.

Isobel seemed not to have heard Mary as she unpacked the handsome black and gleaming brass steam engine, five colourful cars, a set of tracks, and even a water tower.

"Matthew had a little steam engine as a boy. It kept him occupied for so many happy hours. I admit I rather enjoyed it, too."

Unsurprisingly, she knelt on the floor and began to assemble the tracks, but Mary's amusement was truncated when George inexplicably lost interest in the paper and began to fuss again. As he flailed his fists he lost his precarious balance, toppled over, and wailed louder. Mary set down her cup and saucer, but as she stood and reached to set him to rights, Isobel started the train and it began to chug around its miniature track. Georgie rolled over and pushed himself up on his arms, wide blue eyes following the circular route of the engine without blinking.

"Like father like son," Isobel said with a smile, but Mary did not miss her choked voice, or the mist in her eyes. She blinked it away. "It's a very generous gift, but why can Sir Richard have sent it? Did he enclose a note? Is he courting you?"

"Sending meaningful gifts is hardly Richard's courtship style. I believe it's an apology."

"Whatever for?"

Mary refrained from remarking on Isobel's earlier claim of hating to be nosy, folding her hands together in front of her skirt. "It seems you were correct about some things being unresolved. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that some things left unsaid came out as very choice words."

"Oh dear." Isobel's smile faltered only slightly as she watched George, who was utterly entranced by the toy train. "I do recall he him displaying the occasional ferocious temper. Was he also in the habit of making amends for it in the form of gifts?"

"No. That's new."
"Mary," said Isobel, reaching up to take her teacup from the side table, "I hope you are not putting yourself in the position to be wounded by this man's bitterness. You're in a fragile emotional state."

She meant well, but Mary bristled. The perception of her fragility was exactly why she had left Downton to stay in London. Richard might harbour a grudge about their relationship, but she never doubted for a moment that he thought her strong enough to shoulder the weight of his honesty. **Strong and sharp.**

"Don't worry about me. I had the last word."

It was her own words that lingered with her throughout the remainder of the afternoon. **That's new.** During the time he'd been her unrelenting fiancé, she never would have believed Richard capable of change. Was such a thing possible, after all? In other areas than giving up smoking?

The thought nagged at her until she at last went into the study, picked up the telephone on Papa's desk, and asked the operator to put her through to the *Capital Herald.*

"Mary," Richard's voice crackled over the earpiece when Miss Fields transferred her call to his personal line. "What can I do for you?"

The question was innocuous enough—exactly what one would expect a man to say in such a situation as this, and exactly how she had expected Richard to receive her call. That was what struck Mary, now. Once during the entirety of their three-year courtship and engagement, just a few months after his proposal, she had phoned and been greeted with *To what do I owe the pleasure?* and he had truly sounded pleased, the word uttered in tones rich with surprise and hope. She had not breathed a syllable about his offer of marriage, however, only asked whether he could track down whether John Bates was working it Kirbymoorside as Anna suspected. Every call after, he'd answered in increasingly clipped syllables of barely restrained frustration that she spoke with him only with the expectation that he do something for her.

At the time she had not cared—their arrangement was a business one, she'd justified it at first, and later it had been punishment for the way he'd forced the engagement—but now she flushed with long overdue shame. How could she be so transparent? So unabashed in using another person, regardless of whether he deserved it or not? She was better bred than that—or so she had always believed. No wonder Grandmamma had been less than impressed with her attempts to squeeze more money out for Downton.

Grasping the telephone tighter in her moistened fingertips, Mary squared her shoulders and drew a steadying breath, as she had that long ago day in Richard's office. "You can accept my gratitude. The gift you sent George was very…extravagant."

Richard said nothing, but she could hear the static of his heavy exhale across the telephone lines. He mustn't think this was about the monetary value of the gift, that she didn't understand the meaning behind it.

"And very kind," she added, her voice more unsteady than she would have liked. "Thank you, Richard."

"I gave my nephews the same train set for Christmas and my brother says they're mesmerised—though he means it as an accusation. My sister-in-law has some trouble tearing them away for school and chores."

"At least we've a few years before we'll have to worry about that."
Another heavy puff of breath from Richard. "I suppose it's not a suitable plaything for an infant. Mark-the eldest-is ten."

"Perhaps not," Mary admitted, "but it has the same hypnotic effect on him. It's the most effective teething distraction he's had all day. And he liked the brown paper, too."

"I'm glad."

Mary waited for Richard to continue, but he did not. In the prolonged silence she caught herself wrapping the cord connected the earpiece to the microphone around her hand. She had said everything she intended to, but Richard clearly did not think the conversation had reached its end, or he'd have hung up by now. For that matter, she realised, she must not either, or she'd never have phoned in the first place, and simply written him a thank-you card instead.

What did he want from her? What did she want from him? Resolution?

"You could have stayed," she blurted out, "after you went to the trouble of delivering it yourself."

"I had to get back to the office. And you had company already. I didn't want to intrude on your time with… Mr Napier, is it?"

His voice was taut, and Mary's stomach cinched instinctively with the thought that he must be jealous that she had other male attention. But no—he hadn't spoken Evelyn's name with the same malice with which he always pronounced Matthew Crawley. The tone was one she recognised—it took her back to the day he left Downton for the last time, when she'd caught him attempting to skulk away unobserved by her family. He was contrite—as well he should be-yet embarrassed to have his fault acknowledged.

How different he was to Evelyn, who had come right out with his apology.

*But how very like her.*

Yet some part of Richard must want her to address his attempts to make amends, or he wouldn't have delivered the gift in person.

What did he want from her? she asked herself again, the telephone cord pressing into her palm as she tightened the loop around her hand.

"I suppose in return you expect me to once again offer my advice about Haxby?"

"My only expectation is that you believe how sincerely I regret bringing my personal frustrations into our meeting. I made you my punching bag, and that was wrong. Especially when you're coping with your own…" He paused, as if reconsidering his choice of words. "…difficult circumstances."

That was treading a little close to Isobel's reference to her *fragility*, but Richard was right. Losing her husband was difficult. And he was wrong to take his anger at his own troubles out on her.

"How is Mr Carlisle?" she asked.

A second's hesitation, then: "In the very best of hands, receiving the very best of care."

"I'd expect nothing less from you," Mary replied, the corners of her lips twitching slightly in a smile. Just as quickly they tugged downward again, and she asked impulsively, "Richard, if…you still need me, I'll help you."
She hoped she wasn't being played for a fool, that Richard, expert manipulator, had not engineered this scenario-feigning remorse, appealing to her forgiveness with the gift to George, insisting he had no ulterior motive for the kindness-precisely to solicit her help. To do so would require him to make himself an object of pity in her eyes, and she could not imagine him even feigning that concession of ground. Still, she was taking no chances subjecting herself to his cruelty.

"But you must promise me," she said. "No insults to my family, no digs at my husband, no bitterness about our history."

Richard chuckled, once. "You don't ask for much, do you?"

Mary could picture him leaning back in his chair, chin tilted upward, that sardonic gleam in his blue eyes, and though he could not see her, she arched her eyebrow in response. "Did you ever expect anything less from me?"

"No, indeed," he replied, laughing low. When the sound faded he said in a voice still lower, "And I was always more than willing to give it."
Choosing Teams

Mary and Richard give teamwork a second chance, and a heart-to-heart with her sister's widower encourages her to rebuild her life in whatever way she can. But does Isobel approve?

"These are your land agent's most recent accounts?" Mary looked up from the ledgers spread across the carved walnut desk to Richard, who sat across from her in Papa's London study. "Not the ones from when you bought Haxby from the Russells?"

"Last month's," Richard replied as hunched forward in his chair and leaned across the desk to tap his index finger on the page in question. "The date's right there at the top." His voice deepened, along with the lines of his face in a scowl. "March, 1922."

Though Mary's temper flared, she did her best to retain her air of composure—"Cold and careful Lady Mary Crawley." The entire point of conducting this interview in her own home was to place herself on slightly more even terms with Richard by eliminating the advantage he always seemed to have on his own turf. She refused to be intimidated by him here, sitting at her father's desk.

She sat up straighter, arching her eyebrows at him. "Don't be cross at me. Be cross at Mr Crouch. He's the one who's been charging your tenants such low rents, and not always collecting them in full." Returning her gaze to the account books, she added, "Or at all."

"No wonder the Russells couldn't afford to keep Haxby." With a huff, Richard leaned against the back of his chair and started to rake his fingers through his hair, only to catch himself and smooth it back into place. He exhaled again, loudly, through his nostrils. "And no wonder I can't afford to get rid of it."

"Surely that's a relative term, for a man of your means?"

"I won't sell Haxby at a loss."

Mary shrugged. "Then you'll have to make the farms generate income, as well as rent. One doesn't have to read far into the accounts to see that the farmers are eking out livings for themselves with minimal benefit to you, the landowner."

The problem had appeared so obvious to her that at first she'd thought she must be viewing Haxby through the lens of Downton. It did not seem possible that Richard could be in nearly identical straits as Papa. Equally impossible was that she could misunderstand what was written so plainly in the ledgers.

"It must please you," Richard's brittle tones drew her gaze upward as he stood, "to see how spectacularly I've failed to be a country gentleman."

"I beg your pardon?"
"You were always so eager--you and your family--to point out that I was not, nor never would be, one of your kind of people. I knew it the moment you set eyes on me in that damned tweed suit."

He began to pace the room--prowling, catlike, as he had that other day in his office, but today Mary was no mouse.

Getting to her feet, she said, "We were quite agreed, weren't we, Sir Richard, not to discuss my family? If you can't hold up your end of the bargain, I'm afraid I cannot discuss farming with you."

She had run her fingers along the edge of the ledger as she spoke, and now slipped them beneath the cover to flip it shut. Richard stopped pacing, standing behind his chair, lips parted slightly as if to speak. He didn't, not even to make an apology. But he didn't argue, either. Mary would take what she could get.

Assured of her command of him, she said, more quietly, "Do you think I'd be helping you right now if I wasn't sorry you got stuck with a country house and twelve thousand acres you bought for me and never wanted yourself?"

Richard looked even more contrite, his gaze dropping to his hand on the back of the chair. Smothering a smirk, Mary resumed her place behind the desk.

"Then take a seat, and let me help you," she said in what she hoped was a tone of brusque professionalism, and smoothed the creases from the front of her black skirt. "It's what you always wanted, isn't it? For me to help you learn to do things properly?"

He worked his jaw in that characteristic mannerism of vexation, but his husky tone belied a more raw emotion. "This isn't precisely the scenario I envisioned."

"Welcome to the club."

For a moment their gazes held, each acknowledging the disappointing trajectories the other's lives had taken, the tension between them breaking only when Richard lowered himself into his chair again, once more at eye level with her across the expanse of the desk.

"So," he said, curling his long fingers over the ends of the armrests, his authoritative posture juxtaposed with his next words, "how do you advise I save myself from Haxby?"

"I should think the obvious solution is to raise the rents."

"Doesn't that obvious solution come with an obvious problem? How will tenant farmers who struggle to pay the current rents take having them raised--and by an absent landlord, no less? I deal with enough disgruntled senses of entitlement from my own employees."

"Alternatively, you could buy them out."

"Pay for what I already own?"

"It would be cheaper than losing money off land not being farmed properly. Buy out the tenants, raze the cottages, lease the land to be farmed properly. For profit. Why are you smiling?" Mary interrupted herself, noticing that Richard had relaxed against the back his chair, his chin tilting slightly upward, as did the corners of his mouth.
"Forgive me." He fidgeted in his chair, crossing one leg over the other, and she released the breath she'd been holding as his gaze flickered away--only to catch it again when his blue eyes snapped back to hers. "Only listen to yourself. You've a knack for business."

*I think very highly of you*, Richard had said, looking at her exactly like that, once upon a time when he proposed to her. Then, she had found it quite the let-down, indifferent and inspiring in her no wish to spend the next thirty years of her life as this man's wife, as Matthew's impulsive and impassioned proposal following their kiss in the dining room had. Now, she drew slow deep breaths to rein in the increasing tempo of her heart, but in vain. When heat prickled up from the collar of her black blouse along her jawline toward her cheeks, she glanced away.

"Or I've simply eavesdropped on men who do."

"How do you think the son of a Morningside printer and laundress learned how to become a millionaire? And I'll wager you're cleverer than any of those businessmen."

"You flatter me."

"Not at all. You know my opinion of--" Richard caught himself, even before Mary gave him a sharp look. "Of flattery."

His hand went back to tug at the curling ends of his hair above his collar, and Mary's smile sneaked through her pursed lips.

"This all sounds sensible to me," said Richard, sweeping his hand to indicate the account books as he sat forward in his chair again, "but of course my knowledge of farming is…scant. Where would I even begin?"

"By sacking your land agent. You have no scruples about that practice, I should think?"

Richard grinned. "If I do the firing, will you do the hiring? Unless of course you'd like to embark on a career yourself."

"Why do I have the impression you're not entirely joking?"

"Come now--do you want to be the only Crawley sister without a career?"

"If you know me at all, then you must realise how much I enjoy standing out."

Once that had been a good deal truer than it was now. Standing apart in her grief had driven her from Downton and village life. Even now, she felt conspicuous dressed in drab mourning garb--though less so in the company of Richard in his black pinstriped business suit than she did in other settings.

The clock in the hall chimed, and as Richard bent his head to check the silver watch draped across his waistcoat, murmuring that he must be getting back to the office, Mary thought an hour had not elapsed so quickly since last September. Perhaps there was something to having an occupation, after all.

"Talking of Lady Edith," Richard said as together they packed the ledgers into his briefcase, "I've been following her column."
"You subscribe to the Sketch?"

The brass closures of the briefcase snapped shut, and he regarded her incredulously. "I don't make a habit of subscribing to my competitors' publications. Josephine takes it."

Mary twitched her thumbs against the sides of her forefingers, unsure whether her annoyance was directed at Richard for mentioning his lady friend, or at herself for being annoyed at the mention of the jazz singer.

"I'm surprised you don't hold the women you court to your same standard."

"I courted you. At Downton, the Times is held as reverentially as the Bible. Anyway," Richard added, "I'm not precisely courting Josephine."

Mary didn't trouble herself to stop an eye roll, though she wished she had as she glimpsed the smug flash of a dimple as Richard turned to quit the study.

"You were saying about Edith?" she asked, sweeping past him into the hall as he held the door for her. From the drawing room came muted sounds of Isobel and George imitating train whistles. "Or did you merely wish me to pass along your compliments? I'll warn you, we're not on the easiest of terms."

"Sibling rivalries--the one thing guaranteed in life never to change, no matter what tragedies life hurls our way?"

Mary winced, chastised, though not by Richard's words, which his thoughtful gaze indicated had not been uttered with the intent of wounding--or at least not of chiding her conscience. He could not know that on the morning Sybil died that Edith had asked whether they might live each other as sisters, only for Mary to rebuff her.

"Is your sister happy with her career?" asked Richard, sliding his arms into the sleeves of his greatcoat which Molesley scurried to bring. "Does she have plans for more ambitious work than writing for a ladies' journal, or is she content to work for Gregson?"

"I couldn't say. Do you have something in mind?"

"I might. Let her know, if terms improve, that I'd be happy to speak with her should she have any such aspirations."

She assured him she would try, but added, "It might be better coming directly from you. Edith's predisposed to think I'm passing judgment on her personal life."

At that moment, Isobel emerged from the drawing room, the brief falter of her cheerful greeting indicating she'd overheard Mary's words.

"Mrs Crawley." Richard said, and removed the trilby he'd just donned; in his grandmother's arms, George lunged for it. Chuckling, Richard placed it on the boy's head, and they all, Molesley included, laughed at the image of George, obscured to his slobbery chin in trilby, turning his head back and forth in owlish, silent confusion.

"Won't you stay for luncheon, Sir Richard?" Isobel asked. "You can see how much Georgie enjoys the train you so thoughtfully sent. Perhaps he'll reproduce the trick he learnt last night. Did Mary tell
you he scooted on his tummy to try and catch the engine?"

"She did not."

Mary flushed at being found so remiss, though she'd always thought parents who boasted about their children's accomplishments as if every other baby in the course of human history had not achieved them were tiresome. Luckily Richard was preoccupied with rescuing his trilby as George yanked it off his head with both hands and pulled the felt brim toward his mouth.

"Clever lad," he said, without any indication that he thought the proud grandmother tiresome.

"Although I'm afraid catching trains is hardly a necessary skill, given the perpetual lateness of the English railway. But I shall soon be tardy for an appointment myself, without the excuse of a late train," he added as the clock chimed the quarter-hour. "Thank you, Mrs Crawley, but I hope you'll extend a rain cheque."

Isobel nodded dubiously, and retreated with George to the drawing room, where she rang for Nanny Philips.

Molesley got the front door and Richard stepped through, but he turned back on the doorstep, running his fingers along the edge of the trilby he still had not put on, as though he were reluctant to go despite the looming engagement. And as his warm, callused fingers curled gently around hers to shake her hand, Mary discovered that she, too, was loath to say goodbye.

"So I can look forward to hearing from you when you've found me a suitable land agent?"

"You're looking forward to hearing from me? Some things do change."

~*~

Yes, some things did change--but for a man whose life's purpose and current career were to bring it about, Tom Branson seemed unduly surprised when Mary rang him later that day, soliciting his advice about estate modernisation. He tried to hide it with teasing, but the pitch of curiosity beneath his lilting brogue carried across the two hundred miles of telephone lines between them as clearly as if they were in the same study together.

"Why do you want land agent recommendations? Has Lord Grantham asked you to look into replacing me?"

"As a matter of fact I'm doing exactly that for...a friend."

Instantly she regretted her slight hesitation over how to refer to Richard--were they friends?--as Tom, who never missed a detail nor resisted the lure of his inquisitiveness for long, seized on it.

"Not Mr Napier?"

Tom knew about Evelyn from her letters, both to him and the ones Mama no doubt shared with everyone in the family over tea, but she had omitted Richard even from her account of the dinner party. But she could not very well do so now, if they were to have a potential business connection, no matter how distant.
She cleared her throat and drew back her shoulders, imagining her brother-in-law standing in front of the desk, and dealt the truth to him as plainly and unapologetically as she had confronted him before about Sybil. "Sir Richard Carlisle."

A lengthy pause ensued before Tom said, "Your former fiancé?" He sounded nearly as surprised as he had by the initial inquiry which sparked her call.

"It isn't like that. And please keep your voice down." Mary scarcely spoke above a whisper herself as she cast a furtive glance at the study door, even though she knew perfectly well it was firmly shut. "He isn't exactly a favourite with Mama and Papa. Or Carson."

Tom chuckled. "Don't worry. There's no one about. And I don't know much about your family's opinions of Sir Richard. Though generally I find that if Lord Grantham dislikes a person, I ought to give them a chance."

Mary rolled her eyes at the dig at Papa; perhaps if she was going to be dealing often with her brother-in-law, she ought to hold him to the same promises as Richard. "Sybil didn't think much of him."

"That's because she thought you were marrying Sir Richard for his money and position. Her opinion improved slightly when he escorted you and Edith to Dublin for the wedding."

She'd never said, Mary thought. Never said so many things…Though on the subject of Richard, by the time she'd seen her little sister again, it had been the eve of her own wedding to Matthew. Her resentment of those months of separation roiled anew… The years of separation from Matthew…

"What about your opinion?" she asked, abruptly returning to the matter at hand.

"Mine had been pretty well formed by a few interesting political exchanges as I drove Sir Richard to and from the train station."

Mary was glad not only for the distraction from her grief, but that Tom could not see her boggled expression at this bit of information. Richard had actually emerged from behind his newspapers to converse with the chauffeur? He hadn't even done that when he took the train down from London with Aunt Rosamund the first time. Then again, one could hardly blame a man for that.

"By interesting I can only presume you mean intense, given your diametrically opposing views."

"On economics, yes. But I've nothing against a man earning his wealth. We quite agree on matters of being born into money and power, and of course there's the journalism connection. We both objected to the War--albeit for different reasons. And," he added after a pause, in a tone that perfectly conveyed to Mary that he was grinning on the other end of the line; she could almost see his blue eyes twinkling in that mischievous way she was sure must have appealed to Sybil's rebellious streak, "there was that personal opinion we held in common, that the other would be the son-in-law Lord Grantham would dislike the most."

"The basis of a solid friendship," said Mary with a laugh.

"We'd might have been bosom pals if we'd only been able to overcome our differences about the superiority of whisky over Scotch. By Sir Richard recognising whisky's superiority, of course."

"You never know…He and I seem to be overcoming our differences about a great many matters."
Such as blackmail.

Of course Richard had always believed they were more alike than Mary would own to. Was he right? And if he was, could that possibly be a good thing?

"Please, Tom," she spoke low into the receiver, cupping the earpiece hard against the side of her head, "don't mention a word of any of this to Mama and Papa. They wouldn't understand why I'm doing it. I'm not entirely sure I do."

When had she regressed to the time in her life when she conspired against her parents? She wasn't thirteen anymore…In fact, next month she would be thirty, she realised with some surprise.

"Does Matthew's mother understand?" asked Tom.

Why he couldn’t have called her Mrs Crawley instead of referring to her as Matthew's mother made Mary's stomach coil tight as the knot she had not realized she was twisting in the telephone cord. Was his wording intentional? If so, it may have been for the best, reminding her that her choices did not affect her alone, but she clenched her jaw.

"Isobel accepts that I must have an occupation."

Though she remembered the anxiety with which Isobel had asked whether Richard was courting her, and the appearance of relief when he could not accept this morning's impromptu luncheon invitation.

"You'll get no judgment from me," Tom said. "After all I'm an Irish Republican now managing the ancient seat of an English earl." He must have spat the words, because the earpiece crackled with static, but he went on in a gentler tone. "We've lost the people we love most in the world, apart from Sybbie and George. We've got lives to rebuild, and we've got to start somewhere."

Mary wished she could speak aloud how immense was her gratitude that Tom understood what she felt, what she needed, but all she could manage was a nod, which he of course could not see, as she set the microphone on the corner of the desk and clasped her hand over her mouth to stifle a sob. Though her comfort was that Tom must also know that without her having to say--most ironically, given the new thoughts that had begun to plague her nights.

"Though if Carlisle ever makes you uncomfortable," Tom said, the spirit coming back into his voice, "remember I've got rough friends."

Laughing as she wiped away her tears, Mary took up the mouthpiece once again. "The question, Tom," she said, "is whether you've got any fellow land agents who are rough enough to suit Sir Richard?"
Chapter Summary

Interviewing a prospective land agent for Haxby Park forces Mary and Richard to ask long overdue questions about themselves. But will the answers violate the terms of their agreement?

May, 1922

Within days of their conversation, Tom contacted Mary about a Mr Stephen Battle whom he thought would meet Sir Richard's requirements for a land agent. However, Richard's schedule would not readily accommodate an interview with the man.

"I thought getting Haxby off your hands was a matter of urgency?" Mary sniped at him over the phone, vexed at first by his lack of immediacy, and then at herself for being vexed. Why should it be any concern of hers when Richard dealt with his estate?

Of course he'd responded in kind: "You may recall I have a career of my own, which keeps me more than sufficiently occupied without doing the job of another man." He added, more pleasantly, "I like his name, though. Battle. That's promising."

"Mm. Or perhaps Tom's idea of a joke."

"How so?"

Mary cast about for an explanation that did not involve the truth which she had almost revealed to him, of Tom's remark about having rough friends.

"An Irish revolutionary putting forth a candidate called Battle? Even you can't miss the humour in that." Over his protest, she added, "Or it could be ironic. Mr Battle may turn out to be meek as a lamb."

Indeed, the latter seemed likely to prove the case when Mary first laid eyes on him nearly a fortnight later, as Miss Fields showed him into Richard's office: a man of already inconsequential stature, who leaned heavily on a cane and thumped along on an artificial leg.

But after seeing Mr Battle out after the interview, saying he would be in touch within the next day or two, Richard sauntered back into the office, rubbing his palms together and smirking at Mary, who stood at the corner of his desk. "More like a wolf in sheep's clothing."

"A quality only you would find desirable in a prospective employee," she said, and when his grin stretched, apparently pleased with this assessment, she couldn't stop a smile of her own. "I'm surprised you didn't hire him on the spot."

"I was tempted." Richard stepped nearer to her, slipping his hands into his trouser pockets. "I thought it prudent to talk it over with you first."
"Oh." Mary schooled her face not to show how pleased she was by his compliment. "Well. I thought--"

Richard held up a hand. "Over luncheon, perhaps? I owe you. For the last time we…” His eyes darted away from hers, and he flexed his jaw. "…did business together."

*I thought it was me who was indebted*, Mary thought, but did not say. "The circumstances were… rather different."

"Indeed. Never mind. It was a stupid idea."

"I'd like to, Richard, really I would, but I couldn't be seen out with you."

"Certainly not," he said, meeting her gaze again, relief washing the lines from his sharp features. "That's why I took the liberty of having food brought in."

Mary did not manage to squelch a snort of laughter.

"What?"

"Do you have an employee whose sole job is to do things of that sort? Edith believes so."

Richard rubbed his fingers over the curling hair above his collar, but his self-consciousness, for once, did not get the better of his temper. "You and Edith talked about me?"

His eyes flashed, and so did a dimple as one corner of his mouth curved upward. He was appallingly smug, and Mary shook her head as she turned to pick up the telephone receiver.

"I'll just ring Mrs Crawley and let her know I'll be later than expected, if you don't mind."

He did not, but Isobel acquiesced to the change of plan with some reticence. "Of course, my dear, if you must. Only..."

"Yes?"

"George was taking his morning nap when you came down to breakfast, and Nanny will have put him to bed for the afternoon by the time you've had your luncheon."

Mary flushed at that, but she was conscious of Richard lingering in the doorway to the room adjoining his office and kept her tone glib. "Perhaps someone ought to speak to him about how it's common practice to sleep at night and be awake during the day."

She put down the receiver with rather more force than she meant to, belying her mood; as she swept past Richard, he caught her elbow, gently, and looked down at her, searching her gaze. Mary averted her eyes, dropping them to her sleeve and the way his long fingers curled lightly around it, pale against the black, his thumb stroking lightly over her forearm. Her brain told her she ought to pull away, but her body would not comply. Richard's warmth penetrated the fabric, and his voice rumbled through her when he spoke low.

"If you're required at home we can do lunch another time."
"Thank you, Richard. I'm not." She turned her head, taking in the sight of a tea table draped with a white cloth and a decorated with a bowl of hydrangeas. "It would be a shame to let this lovely meal go to waste."

The tips of his fingers remained at her elbow as he escorted her to the table; when he seated her, his hands brushed the sides of her shoulders.

"Are we celebrating?" Mary asked, her eye passing over the green salad and sea bass and alighting on the bottle of champagne Richard picked up as he stepped around the table to his place.

"That's up to you," he replied, uncorking it. "Do you think I should hire Mr Battle?"

She thanked him for the champagne he handed her, sipping after she swallowed a bite of salad. "My only concern is his leg. Overseeing twelve thousand acres will require a deal of riding or driving."

"He says he can manage."

"He says."

Leaning back in his chair, Richard regarded her over his glass, eyes bright with the same look of admiration Mary had seen when she looked over his accounts in Papa's office. "Can you find the time to check that his references say the same?"

"If you need me to."

"I do. You're so much more charming on the phone than I am."

"Except it's not you and I who must be charming in such a situation, is it?"

Their eyes met across the table, and they shared a quiet laugh. After the sound faded their gazes held, until Mary felt a prickle at her cheeks and saw the Adam's apple bob down into Richard's starched collar. He cleared his throat and averted his attention to his sea bass, and they ate in silence for what seemed like a long time.

At length, Richard said, "If you like what his references have to say, I'll make him an offer. Mr Battle's experience will, I think, be very useful."

He talked on, but Mary only half-listened as most of it was a reiteration of the interview. Stephen Battle was the son of a land agent and, though he had not followed in his father's profession prior to the War, the loss of his leg and the failure of so many estates made a return to his roots prudent. He'd worked as an itinerant agent, traveling throughout the countryside and pulling a number of estates from the brink of financial ruin to sell to tycoons who could afford them; the only one he had not saved he claimed was due to the owner's refusal to make the necessary changes. At one point, it had seemed that Mr Battle was interviewing Richard for the position of employer rather than the other way around.

"Mary?"

"Hm?"

"Isn't the sea bass to your liking?"
Her eyes darted to Richard's plate, the last bite of the bass on his fork. "Yes of course." He'd remembered it was her favourite luncheon food.

"You were pushing it around on your plate."

Mary speared a bit and brought it to her mouth, but sighed without taking a bite and laid her fork back on her plate, pulling her hands into her lap beneath the tablecloth.

"A number of the old country houses seem to be similarly afflicted. I suspected as much when I looked over Haxby's accounts that the situation was much like Downton's, and Mr Branson confirmed it. So it wasn't…"

She looked down at her hands and saw that her right thumb twisted the wedding band on her fourth finger so hard that the diamond of the engagement ring left an imprint on the pad. She curled her fingers into fists and held them still on her skirt.

"Papa truly did not manage it so terribly as I believed."

As Richard drained his champagne glass he looked out the row of windows that lined one wall, framed in green curtains and sharing the same view as his office. St Paul's rose above the rooftops of the Fleet Street newspaper buildings, towers of smoke chuffing from chimneys as the presses printed the evening editions. He slipped his hand inside his jacket, as if reaching into his pocket, only to withdraw it again, still empty.

"It's moments like this I wish I hadn't given up smoking." He looked at Mary, briefly, before becoming interested in the drop of champagne at the bottom of his glass as he tilted it on its stem. "You needn't feel you must redeem Lord Grantham in my eyes. His incompetence with regard to Downton is the least of the issues I take with him. In any case, I ought never to have spoken unfavourably of him to you."

Mary shook her head. "It's not what you said. Matthew was very quick to lay all the blame on Papa's shoulders. I suppose it's understandable. The blunder with Mama's fortune was entirely his fault. But...

She thought of what she and Tom had discussed, in addition to land agents--Tom Branson, Socialist, Republican, making allowances for a member of the Establishment.

"Papa only managed the estate as he was raised to. As his father was raised to. As generations before him were raised to. Now that I know this I'm surprised Mathew came down so hard on Papa. He dealt with him more like--"

More like you would, she nearly blurted out, but caught herself in time. Her stomach twisted into a knot when she remembered how he'd said, You're on my team now. As if the future Earl were at odds with his predecessor. Forcing the future Countess to pick a side. And hadn't that been the centre of their dispute before the wedding? You're not on our side! she'd flung at him. Hadn't marriage to Matthew been meant to bring her and her family together?

"I never would have expected that from him, before the War."

Up until this point, Richard had been listening with an expression of bland interest, his head tilted slightly, but now he held it upright as his eyebrows lifted on his forehead. "What has the War to do with it?"
She was twisting her ring again. Did she really want to discuss this topic with Richard, of all people?

Then again, of all the people she knew, even those she loved best, Richard was the only one she could count on to be completely honest with her.

She took a fortifying drink of champagne and cringed; its sweetness was a good compliment for the meal but not the conversation.

"I presume war is one of those subjects for which feminine sensibilities are too fragile, and reserved for the men over port and cigars?"

"Generally--but do you imagine Lord Grantham and Captain Crawley were keen to discuss it with a known opponent?"

A valid point; Mary's cheeks warmed as she remembered how Granny and Papa blustered about the opinions he'd ventured to voice during that first weekend: *He's not even patriotic!*

"My friend Mr Napier has expressed views not dissimilar to yours," she said, feeling as if she ought to atone for the embarrassment she'd allowed herself to feel that he was not in uniform--though when they met at Cliveden she'd told him what a relief it was to see white ties and tails instead of redcoats for once. "He served in the cavalry."

"But they are dissimilar to your husband's?"

That was Richard, with his newspaperman's talent for cutting through the superfluity to get to the heart of a matter.

"I wouldn't know," Mary answered. "He never talked about it."

Her heart seemed to hang suspended in the breathless cavern of her chest as Richard studied her, and she tried to keep her face as inscrutable as his was. If he read anything on her features he gave no indication of it. After a moment be pushed back from the table, laid his serviette in the seat of his chair, and strode to the door which led to the anteroom of his offices. She heard him request that their plates be taken away and dessert brought, and as he resumed his place a young woman dressed in smart navy blue--not a maid, but probably one of the junior secretaries--efficiently did his bidding, replacing Mary's untouched sea bass with a slice of lemon tart for which she still had no appetite.

When the girl had gone Richard refilled their champagne glasses, taking a drink before he sliced into his tart with the edge of his fork.

"There's never been a war like the one just fought," he said, "so I couldn't presume to speak to what is considered *normal* behaviour for our boys who braved the trenches."

Mary had taken a bite of lemon tart to be polite, but the sweetness of it was diminished slightly by the hint of bitterness with which Richard pronounced the last.

"From what I gather," he went on, pausing to chew, "there is no normal. Some of them volunteered to fight, others were made to. Regardless of how they left, none of them came back the same. And I don't refer only to loss of limb or disfigurement. You remember that footman employed at Downton on my first visit?"
"Lang. He was a valet. He spilled soup all over Edith's dress."

"No doubt because he was shell shocked."

"Papa dismissed him because he wasn't up to the job."

"I won't fault him there, as I've had to let a few such cases go myself. Shell shock victims can be a danger to themselves, as well as to others. I'd rather not see my warehouse become the site of more War casualties because insomnia led to improper operation of the machinery, or the noise of the printing presses sent them into hysterics or worse."

"Mr Napier can't be around horses," Mary said. "Racing and riding were his life before."

"As I said, there is no normal."

Mary felt a little light-headed; she told herself it was the champagne on her relatively empty stomach, and not fragile feminine sensibilities. Though how anybody, female or otherwise, could talk about such things and not be affected, she could not imagine.

Perhaps that was why Matthew didn't.

"You must thank God you were in a position to spare your brother being called up," she said. "If you believed in God."

"Indeed. But we seem to have strayed from the topic," Richard said, crossing one leg over the other. "You think Captain Crawley suffered more than temporary paralysis, is that it?"

"I'm hardly qualified to say."

"Why? Because he didn't handle Lord Grantham's feelings with kid gloves?" His cheek muscle twitched, as if in the start of a smile. "I daresay the War jolly well did change him. He was an officer, for Pete's sake. Probably got accustomed to giving orders and having them obeyed without question. I rather relate to that myself."

He chuckled, but Mary silenced him with a look.

"I think I know my husband better than you," she said. "And yes, I am afraid he may have suffered more than he let on."

"I never knew you and him to have difficulty communicating."

It was late…and you two were locked together in the corner of the room, Richard's voice hissed from the recesses of her memory, and Mary retorted, as she had not that dreadful night more than two years before, "Unlike you and me? You were always marvellous at saying what you felt."

"I shouldn't have said that." Richard glanced away. "No digs at your husband, that was the agreement."

"No. You shouldn't. You ought to have told me you loved me before the end. You who can be called many things, but not a liar."

The words flew from her lips without having first formed in her mind, and as Mary heard them she
pressed her fingertips to her mouth as if by doing so she could draw them back. It was too late. They had found Richard's ears, too. His face went very pale.

"There was another agreement, wasn't there?" he said. "Not to talk about our past?"

Mary swivelled in her chair, heedless of the serviette fluttering to the floor from her lap like an autumn leaf as she stood and turned her back to Richard and the luncheon table.

"I didn't mean to," she said, drawing her hand from her mouth just enough so that her speech would not be muffled, the tips of her fingers still touching her bottom lip. "This isn't about us. Or you."

"Isn't it?" The legs of Richard's chair scraped on the floor, and the soles of his shoes were ponderous with his slow stride toward her. "In any case you're right. I ought to have told you how I really felt much sooner than I did. And we should have talked about why I didn't before now."

If he could just admit the truth, all four of us might have a chance. Lavinia, too, had found Matthew's communication lacking, though Mary was not about to return down that dark path he had led her to feeling culpable for that young woman's sorrow and death. Thankfully, Richard was there to draw her back to present concerns—as he had been the horrible day they'd laid the poor girl to rest.

"But surely you already know the answer, Mary?"

She could feel the thud of her heart. "Because you knew I didn't love you."

"Right on the mark," said Richard, his voice low and hoarse. "If our feelings were unequal then we couldn't be equals. You'd have had an advantage."

So he'd kept the truth from her. Pretending that love was not a necessary ingredient for a good marriage, or hoping that she might grow to love him. Either way, he had sold at a loss.

"Would it have made any difference? If I had told you?"

"I couldn't have come to love you. Not so long as Matthew Crawley walked the earth."

"Thank you," he said quietly. "I appreciate your honesty."

Mary turned to him. "I didn't answer your question entirely."

Might it have made a difference? No church bells would have chimed in honour of Sir Richard and Lady Mary Carlisle, of that she was certain. But she'd meant it when she apologised to him for using him, and she wanted to believe that she wasn't so mercenary as to use a man who could actually be hurt by her. That she had learned something from the mistakes she'd made with Matthew all those years ago.

"If you'd told me you loved me," she said, "you wouldn't be trying to sell Haxby Park."
Mothers and Daughters

Chapter Summary

Grief drove Mary from Downton, but life with Matthew’s mother and son turns her thoughts back home. Will her own mother and sister be able to help, or only hurt her further?

The toy locomotive chugged round and round its track on the Persian rug, hypnotising Mary as she watched. At some point she realised that the floor wasn't covered by carpet at all, but by manicured sun-dappled grass, wide stripes of alternating light and dark green cast by the morning light that beamed through the windowpanes; in place of the coffee table the train track looped a sprawling neo-renaissance château.

"You would give my son a miniature of Haxby," she remarked to Richard, whom she had not until now observed standing at her side.

"Miniature?" he said. "I think, my dear, you'll find it's we who appear miniature compared to the house and the twelve thousand acres on which it stands."

She looked around, then, and saw that the walls of the Grantham House drawing room had vanished, and she stood on the gravel drive that cut up the centre of Haxby Park. In the distance she heard the thunder of the train. How? Haxby wasn't situated near the railway. She started to ask Richard whether this was one of his improvements to the estate, and whether he'd found a way to make the trains run on time while he was at it, when Stephen Battle caught her eye, stumping across the grass on his artificial leg.

Mary waved to him, but he took no heed of her. The train rounded the corner of the house, screeching to a halt as if it had pulled into the station. As she watched the land agent hook the handle of his cane over a window to give himself a boost into the engine, she felt the weight of Richard's hand come to rest in the curve of her waist, his long fingers curling possessively over her hipbone.

"So." His chin nudged against her temple, and his breath tickled as he leaned in to murmur in her ear. "Shall we rescue him?"

Mary looked at him over her shoulder. "Rescue him?"

Richard's reply was swallowed up by another shriek of the train whistle, but as they both turned to watch it depart in a blast of shrouding steam, Mary repeated at a whisper, "Rescue him."

Her heart clattered behind her ribcage in time with the train's acceleration down the track, lodging in her throat to choke her scream as she saw Matthew racing the AC Six up the drive toward the house.

"We must rescue him!" She lurched toward him, but Richard's hand at her waist gripped her painfully, restraining her.

"You have to let him go," he said as she struggled, helpless as he snaked his other arm around her, too. She felt him at her back, stolid as a wall. "Let him go, Mary."
"No, I can't!"

"You can. You're strong and sharp…"

So was his hold on her, clamped around her stomach like a vice. Mary looked down with the intent of grasping his big hands and prying them off her, only to realise the only pair there were her own, pressed to the swell of her child with in her; the pangs that tore through her were not caused by Richard at all, but by labour contractions.

"You're strong," said a voice—not Richard's any longer, but Isobel's, at her bedside in the village hospital. She gave Mary a hand to hold as she bore down with the pains. "You can do it, my dear. You must. For your child. For Matthew."

The Six careered toward the train, though Mary could not see the crash for the lightning bolt of pain that ripped up and down her body from its source at her belly. She heard it, though, and when she came blinking out of the white flash she found herself sitting upright in a four-poster bed, shivering in her sweat-soaked nightdress as rain splattered against her windows, the panes rattled by distant thunder.

For a moment she sat, until she had caught her breath and her heart had returned to a less alarmed tempo. When another flicker of lightning illuminated the side of the bed where the sheets lay smooth, un-rumpled by another sleeper, she disentangled herself from the covers and swung her legs over the edge of the mattress. Her room was so dark that she expected to twitch back the drapes and see the streetlamps reflected in the puddles on the pavement and the silhouettes of the row houses still, peppered here or there with a lit window where some neighbour also remained wakeful in the middle of the night, or a party continued late. Instead, the grey light of a sun risen high behind the wall of storm clouds revealed pedestrians clad in wellington boots and armed with umbrellas dodging splashes from the automobiles that rolled down Hanover Square.

Returning to her bed, she flicked on the lamp on the nightstand and saw that the clock read half ten. Wearily she sank down upon the edge of the mattress, back to the expanse of the bed, and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. She always had been a late riser—as a bride, she'd revelled in the privilege afforded to a married woman to lie-in and take her breakfast in bed—in the days when she could sleep. Well—she slept last night. For all the good it did her.

Suddenly her damp hair and nightdress became unbearable to her, not only for the physical discomfort but for the reminder they presented of her dream—such a silly thing, in retrospect, to have been so affected by—that she leapt from her bed again, bolted for the bathroom across the hall, stripped off the gown, and ran a bath before the maid she'd rung for even arrived to assist her. Her relief at freshening up was only temporary, however, when she was greeted downstairs by the noise of the toy train running around its track in the drawing room. Overcoming the temptation to go directly to the breakfast room rather than greet her child and mother-in-law, Mary slipped inside. Isobel sat at the writing desk, answering the morning's correspondence, and so did not see or Mary go in until George emitted a loud protest when she bent to switch off the train.

"We really ought to consider moving the Grantham House Railway to the nursery," Mary said, plucking her son off the floor; he stopped howling about the train and clutched at her pearl pendant instead.

"Oh I don't know," said Isobel with a smile as she got up, "I thought it might prove amusing should we have another dinner party. A nice change from bridge."

"Some people say things like that, and I'm sure they're joking."
Though Isobel continued to smile, Mary noted the subtle shift of her features, the concerned scrutiny that etched itself a little deeper in the crinkles at the corners of her eyes.

"I'm glad you had a lie-in," said Isobel.

Mary did not know how to reply to this; she was spared having to by George grinning and declaring, "Da-da-da-da-da!"

Her face must have registered something of astonishment, because Isobel's expression faltered. "I'll ring Molesley to see to your breakfast," she said, returning to her desk to press the bell. "Oh-and a letter came from Cora in the morning post."

As Mary shifted George in her arms to take the letter from her mother-in-law and slip it into her pocket to read later in private, he said let out another stream of, "Da-da-da-da-da!"

"Heavens," said Mary. "Do you suppose I ought to put that down in his baby book as his first word?"

"It's not a word so much as a vocalisation, I daresay. He has no context for it."

Mary heard the quaver in Isobel's voice, and the hitch in her own as she replied, "Indeed."

She set George on his chenille blanket by the toy railway and switched it on again, hoping that would be the end of it. But Isobel never could leave well enough alone—a quality which, Mary must own, was partially responsible for their marriage having taken place at all.

"I believe it's quite normal for babies to say da-da before ma-ma."

"It hardly seems fair, does it? That this should be the case even when have only a mama?"

She had never thought Molesley, with his greasy side-swept hair and sycophantic demeanour, could be a welcome sight, but when he bobbed through the drawing room door Mary could have kissed him in relief.

"Will your ladyship take your breakfast here with Mrs Crawley and Master George?"

"Tea in the study, if you please. Will you be needing the phone this morning, Isobel? I have to check references for the land agent Sir Richard and I interviewed yesterday."

In the pause before Isobel replied, Mary realised how domestic that sounded. More so, in fact, than anything she'd said with regard to Richard and herself during their engagement. Did Isobel think the same thing? The image from her dream, of standing with him in front of Haxby, appeared at the front of her mind; she could almost feel his hand slot into the curve of her waist. She blinked, and found herself looking into Isobel's polite smile instead.

"I haven't had a chance to ask how your meeting went." She'd been out of the house when Mary returned, doing her parish work.

"Obviously it was most productive."

"And luncheon?"

"Sir Richard had sea bass brought in from Fortnum's. Not quite the Ritz, but still amusing in light of Edith's little joke."

She went to the study, then, leaning against the door for a moment after she shut it, appreciating the
refuge of rich walnut panelled walls and the steady fall of rain. Tea awaited her on the desk, along with the file Richard sent home with her, containing Mr Battle’s reference list and their notes from the interview, but a crinkle in her skirt as she sat reminded her of Mama’s letter.

My darling Mary, it began.

Whenever I read your letters, I always feel I’m actually in London, enjoying the excitement of town right along with you. Of course they also make me very anxious to come up. I haven’t wanted to do the season so since Sybil came out. Rose is twenty now, and Susan writes to get her a husband if we can. Your father says there’s no urgency, that things are different now than they were when you girls were debs, that I can’t relive the past, and I suppose he’s right. And I quite agree with him that if you still need to be apart for a little while longer, we don’t want to impose on you and Isobel and the time you need to heal.

But I do miss you so terribly, my dear, and little Georgie. He must be so changed. Isobel writes that he scoots proficiently, and will be crawling before we know it.

The letter went on, but Mary lay the stationery on the desk. She passed a hand over her eyes, smarting from squinting at Mama’s spidery script in the yellow light of the electric desk lamp, and with the pad of thumb and middle finger massaged her temples, which pulsed with the drumming of the rain in the gutter. Isobel writes…

Mary read on. Mama expressed the approval present in all her most letters that Mary had reached out to Edith, inquiring whether she seemed happy with her work and with Mr Gregson, requesting that whenever Mary saw her again to pass along her love-and Papa’s, though of course Mary had not breathed a word to him of Mary's forbidden association with her sister.

It was what Mama did not say that spoke plainest amidst the effusion of maternal longings: she wanted to go back, to a time when their concerns were more trivial, when she had more control over her daughters’ lives. Papa, on the other hand, despite his fear and loathing of the future, couldn’t bear facing a past that was not quite what it had been. London life had never suited him in the best of times, and Mary suspected he now found nothing there but painful reminders of all that had been lost. When she told him she wanted to get away from Downton he’d been surprisingly understanding, but he’d also discouraged her from London. She would see more of the ravages of the War there, he’d said-as if the young men who’d come back and seemed to collect in the city, blind, crippled, disfigured, or with scars not visible on the outside, were somehow more to be pitied than those who remained only as names etched on stone in churchyards.

Was that what he would think of poor old Evelyn, chain smoking away the evenings at Murray’s? Was that what Evelyn's own father thought of him? Or did Papa understand more than Mary gave him credit for?

He’d fought a war, too. It wasn’t often that she thought of the Second Boer War, or of the two years he was absent from her childhood but for brief furloughs home, and she’d asked about it even less. Before she could think what she was doing, or talk herself out of it, she picked up the telephone and asked the operator to put her through to Downton Abbey.

Carson answered—of course he did—but his sonorous baritone, richer than usual with gladness at hearing her voice, nevertheless took Mary by surprise; her throat tightened with a sob so that she was relieved when he put down the receiver and went to fetch her mother, and in the interim homesickness clutched her stomach so tightly that she almost made up her mind to go home at once. Thankfully, the unbridled emotion in Mama's greeting as it crackled through the earpiece helped Mary to rein in her own.
"I just read your letter," she said. "I was going to write back, but as I was sitting by the telephone anyway so it seemed easier to call."

"I'm glad you did," Mama replied. "It's wonderful to hear your voice—now please just let me hear your voice say you want us to come." She didn't give Mary a chance to say so or not, her words tumbling out as if they'd built up in the weeks of her daughter's absence. "Oh, Mary, I haven't been able to stop myself making plans for the summer. We should do something really special for your thirtieth birthday. And Sybbie will turn two in June, can you believe it?"

Two years since Sybil died. The unspoken words hung between them in the pause.

Sybbie's first birthday last summer had been a subdued affair at Downton, the grief that had only just begun to dull following the young mother's death returning in force and strangulating the joy everyone had done their utmost to summon for the sake of the child. Mary's hand had found its way to her own increasing middle more frequently than before, fear mingled with grief that this might be her baby's first birthday. Never once had it occurred to her that the parent who would have their child's birthdate carved in a headstone might not be the one who brought it into the world.

"A change of scenery might do Tom some good, too," Mama went on, a little choked, but she pushed the hoarseness from her voice by the force of will Mary had observed so many times in the past two years. "We could have such fun throwing a little party for Sybbie in town. Maybe a real girls' day out with Auntie Mary."

"Do you think she'd like a toy train set?" Mary muttered.

"What? Oh, I suppose I could ask Tom…"

"Never mind. Mama, I'm terribly sorry to throw a damper on your plans, but they're not actually why I phoned. As I said, I only just read your letter, and I'd have to discuss it with Isobel."

"Oh. Of course. And I don't mean to pressure you, dear." Mama audibly deflated, but Mary pictured her concentrated effort to maintain her ebullience in the face of disappointment and wondered if the lifetime of judging her mother's expressive face as an open book of American emotions hadn't been a little unfair; perhaps Mama, more than any of them with their cold, careful English composure, demonstrated the true art of keeping a stiff upper lip. "What do you want to talk about?"

Mary wavered; was it right to ask her mother a favour after getting her hopes up and then dashing them? She picked up her teacup, cringing as she tasted that it had gone tepid.

"I wanted to ask you something about Papa."

"What about him?" The genuine curiosity in Mama's voice dissipated some of Mary's guilt.

"The Boer War. Did he ever talk about it to you?" The crackle on the telephone line might have been static, or Mama spluttering. In either case, or both, Mary added, "I'm sure that was the last thing you expected me to ask."

"Well…yes. You've never shown an interest before."

"I was barely ten," Mary retorted, though she heard echoes of Edith and herself arguing that many years later: Don't you ever read the papers?...I'm too busy living a life.

How much had she missed, living this life of hers—such as it was? Perhaps she might have more to show for it, if she'd paid a little more attention.
"I'm afraid I don't have much that will satisfy your curiosity," Mama said. "You know your father. He's not one to lay a man's burden on a lady's delicate shoulders."

Mary hummed her agreement-though she recalled Matthew not wanting to talk about what he'd seen on the front; perhaps that was what Papa really meant by his chivalry. In any case, it was why she hadn't asked to speak to him. Still, she wasn't ready to let the subject go, now she'd broached it. She tightened her grip around the stick telephone and leaned forward in her chair to speak into the mouthpiece.

"When he returned from South Africa, did you notice...did he seem different to you, at all?"

"He was very affectionate, but that's understandable following a lengthy separation." Mama laughed a little, and Mary rolled her eyes, but then Mama added in a more serious tone, almost more to herself than to her daughter. "Come to think of it, he never slept in his dressing room after that. Except during my monthly indispositions."

"Thank you, Mama, you've been so terribly helpful." Even deadpanned, the words themselves were harsher than her mother deserved; Mary leaned her elbow on the desk and her forehead against her hand, rubbing the ache, feeling a bit like a private eye whose lead had turned out to be nothing at all.

"I'm sorry, Mary, it was just so very long ago...I hardly think about this times. He didn't sleep well, at first," she offered, voice lilting upward at the end, almost as if to ask, Is that what you'd like me to say?

Mary raised her head. "Couldn't sleep, or...?"

"Some nightmares. He never would say what about. I suppose one does see rather nightmarish images at war. Everything returned to normal very quickly, though. He had Downton and his three beautiful daughters."

"And his devoted wife."

Sighing, Mary rose from her chair, telephone in hand, to peer out the window behind the desk. The rain had stopped, and now a hundred rainbows refracted in the drops that clung shivering to the glass as the sun peeked out from behind the clouds. It sounded so very much like the way things were for her and Matthew: the storm had passed, lingering only as the occasional half-remembered unpleasant dream. And yet...Thunder rumbled faintly in the distance.

How did one account for men like Evelyn, for whom the nightmare did not seem to end? Mama was not always the most astute observer and-like herself, she realised-tended to insulate herself from the affairs of the larger world for those within the realm of her immediate concern. The Countess of Grantham lives in Downton Abbey.

"I suppose he never expressed any...regrets?" Mary said into the microphone. "About what the fighting was for?"

"No. He was all King and Country."

"Queen, for most of that time," Mary quipped, then added, with all sincerity, "Thank you, Mama, then added, with all sincerity. "Thank you, Mama. You have been helpful."

"Of course, my darling," Mama replied, and Mary smiled, hearing the indulgent smile in her tone, the gentleness that was almost like a caress of cool soft fingers on her cheek. Just as clearly she saw the expression fall away, the corners of her eyes and mouth etching her concern as she asked, "May I ask you something? What's brought all this on?"
Mary's heart missed a beat. "Why, I-

"Is it the time you've spent with Mr Napier? Dr Clarkson's told us about young men coping with troubles quite unlike ones he's treated before. The Great War was a different War than the one your father fought. Than any man fought. Poor Evelyn. I think it's wonderful you're being a friend to him, especially given how he felt about you in the past, but I hope…I hope you're not attempting to carry his burden in addition to your own. You need to look after yourself. For Georgie's sake."

While Mary could not deny that perhaps her association with Evelyn had stirred up notions that might otherwise never have occurred to her, she could not of course say so to Mama.

"Don't worry. He seems to have found a more empathetic friend in Edith than in me."

"Oh?"

Even across two hundred miles of telephone lines, Mary heard the unmistakable hope in that single syllable.

"A subject for another day," she replied, glancing at the clock on the desk. Other people's burdens, at least, distracted from one's own, and the file open on the desk before her represented the burden Richard was shouldering in the form of one hundred rooms on twelve thousand acres.

After Mama had obtained Mary's promise that they would speak again soon, she hung up the phone, only to pick it up again and spend the next three quarters of an hour making reference calls for Richard, until it was time to get properly dressed for the next item on her day's agenda.

While Molesley helped her into her coat in the front hall, she met Isobel coming down the stairs.

"Oh-are you going out?"

"Did I forget to tell you?" said Mary, turning to check the angle of her hat in the mirror. As she did so, she noticed a shine on her nose and took out her compact from the black handbag looped over her elbow and dabbed powder over it. "I'm meeting Edith for luncheon and a little shopping."

"How lovely. Although…I was just checking on Georgie. He's sleeping still, but he should be up from his morning nap very soon. Why doesn't Edith come here, so she can see him again?"

In the mirror, Mary caught Isobel's eye over her shoulder, and read the unspoken message: Why don't you stay home with him?

"Perhaps because she feels unwelcome." Mary's words were punctuated by the snap of her compact. "And judged."

She slipped the compact into her purse and stepped through the door Molesley held opened for her without another glance at her speechless mother-in-law.

For more than a decade, Selfridges department store had been famous for featuring curiosities previously un-experienced by the modern shopper. Certainly Mary had never expected that she might be one of them; following Edith through the ladies' clothing department, watching her formerly dowdy sister move with ease among the mannequins and racks, talking about the latest trends in hemlines and colour palettes and what her friends in Bloomsbury were wearing—she dropped names like Vanessa and Virginia, Dora and Karin as if they were supposed to mean something to Mary, though Lady Ottoline rang a bell, at least—selecting blouses and skirts and dresses almost carelessly, handing them off to sales girls with whom she was on a first name basis, Mary
herself felt conspicuous in her staid black suit which fell decidedly past the stylish mid-calf worn by most of the other female patrons, her black hat simply adorned with grosgrain and a feather.

"I don't expect Lady Duff Gordon, of course," she said, "but doesn't Mr Gregson pay you well enough to afford a dressmaker? Or Harrod's, at least?"

Edith sighed. "I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt, and assume this isn't really about you being such a horrid snob as being frustrated with having to dress in mourning."

Mary gawped at her, uncertain whether to be pleased at her sister's newfound astuteness or displeased with her own transparency. Does this mean I'll have to go into full mourning? she heard her twenty year-old self ask Papa, whose look of shock and sadness would never leave her. At least she did not see that expression mirrored on Edith's face now, as she selected a lavender dress with pointed collar, cuffs, and low-slung sash in deep plum, two lines of matching buttons marching down the bodice to the drop waist, and held it up as if to consider Mary in it.

"You know mourning standards are all rather more relaxed since the War," she said. "I don't think anyone would bat an eye at you going to purples and mauves already. At least not in London, where it's so much easier to blend in. I spotted a darling little cloche last week that would be perfect with this."

Unable to resist running her fingertips down the silk crepe sleeve, Mary thought how light the fabric was for the approaching summer. For a moment she was tempted, then released the material, watching it flutter from its hanger as she clutched her purse in both hands.

You have to let him go, Richard's voice in her dream returned to her.

"I think you're forgetting that I currently live with my late husband's mother," she said. "And anyway, that looks more like office attire than a day dress."

"You've been spending a deal of time in Sir Richard's office, haven't you?" Edith said as she replaced it on the rack.

"Speaking of Sir Richard," Mary said as they left the ladies' department, "he asked if you're happy writing for The Sketch."

"Did he? How interesting. He never struck me as the sort of man who concerned himself with other people's happiness."

"Likely because you're not the sort of person who measures happiness in acreage."

They stepped into the lift and asked the operator to take them to the rooftop garden, as the afternoon had turned out lovely after the morning storms.

"So since Sir Richard failed to buy your love with Haxby," Edith continued their conversation, "he's now dealing in...what currency exactly? Offering me a job to spare you the shame of a sister who lives with her employer?"

Mary started to protest that Richard had no use anymore for her love, bought or freely bestowed, but the words died on her tongue. He had tried to spare her public embarrassment before—if not by keeping her sex scandal a secret to hold over her head, then by hushing up the Bates trial. The lift stopped and they exited onto the roof, where she was glad for the distraction provided by the miniature golf course.

"I appreciate you giving me the benefit of the doubt, Edith, but I'm afraid I must say I find that
perfectly gauche."

Richard probably thought it an ingenious idea, rooftop golf; she was surprised his renovation plans for Haxby never included this feature, along with the tennis courts and swimming pools he'd spoken of.

Edith *hmm*ed her agreement. "But the view is simply perfect," she said, going to stand at the ledge and peer across the rooftops of London.

Mary stood beside her but made the mistake of peering down all four storeys at the street; the height, as well as the heady scent of wisteria blooming on the trellises which shaded the tea tables, made her feel a little woozy. She turned to lean against a huge potted hydrangea.

"You ought to at least hear Richard's proposal," she said. "He's one of the most powerful men in British publication, and if you're truly serious about your career, he's your surest bet. In any case you can be certain he wants to pay you for your *writing* ability."

"What about Michael? If I'm truly serious about him, wouldn't it put a strain on the relationship to leave him without a columnist while I go to work for a rival publication?"

"Are you?" Mary turned to her sister, but Edith only turned her head slightly so that Mary could see her in weak-chinned, hook-nosed profile as she lit a cigarette. "Serious about Mr Gregson?"

Edith shrugged and exhaled a puff of smoke. "He makes me feel important. Intelligent. Necessary."

"That's not love."

"Remind me again why you were going to marry Sir Richard?" She tucked her lighter back into her handbag and took another drag from her cigarette. "I didn't want to die a virgin. Surely *you* can't judge me for that."

*The Turkish ambassador had a right to know how his countryman died. In the arns of a slut.* The whisper did not sting as it had when Edith hissed it at her; ten years' time-heavens, had it really been so long?-had dulled her, or perhaps it was as Richard said and she truly had gone cold now, too cold and numb to be wounded.

"Was it the same with Anthony Strallan?" Mary asked, coming alongside Edith again, mindful not to look down. "Loving how he made you feel?"

Edith shook her head, and her jaw muscle flexed beneath her cheek as she fought against the quaver in her chin. She exhaled cigarette smoke through her nostrils. "No. I loved him."

"Oh Edith."

"Do you know, we might have been married seven years by now, if-" Her voice caught, and Mary's breath hitched as she anticipated what would follow: *if you hadn't ruined everything. -*if we'd married before Anthony joined up? We'd certainly have children. Why-we might have brought them here, to play golf on the roof. Anthony would have thought this quite delightful."

As Edith brought her cigarette to her mouth again, Mary saw that her fingers trembled. She felt her own do, too, and pressed her palms to the ledge to still the tremor, though she felt it must be the dread of the accusation which had not come. Not in eight years.

"Please, Edith. Tell me what you're thinking. So few people are honest with me." *Only Richard.*
"I want children," Edith answered. "And Isobel's right, I can't have them with Michael. And it isn't fair. Once again you have what I want but you don't deserve. You never wanted children. I always did. And which of us is a mother?"

"You're wrong. I wanted Matthew's children."

Edith regarded her dubiously as she smoked. "When did you decide that? When no one thought he'd be able to have any? Just like you only wanted Matthew when you thought you could never have him. Yet you got Matthew and Matthew's child."

She tamped out her cigarette on the ledge, and flicked the butt into the air to fall four storeys down into Oxford Street.

"Everything you never wanted."
The Bumpy Bumpy Road

Chapter Summary

A drive with Richard provides a solution to a problem, but proves anything but a pleasant trip down memory lane.

Chapter Notes

Since my last update I learned that *Something Worth Having* won two Highclere Awards: second place for Best Minor Character (Richard Carlisle) and second place for Best Minor Ship (Mary/Richard). It's truly an honor for my work to be recognized, and it's all due to you who read and voted for my work. And as always, thanks to vladnyrki for her beta work!

The telephone was obviously not the invention of a mother, Mary thought as she stood in the hallway of Grantham House and clutched the microphone in one hand and the earpiece in the other, leaving her helpless to assist George, who clung to the hem of her skirt and looked up from the Persian runner with perfect misery on his round face, eyes and nose streaming.

"Mary?" Richard Carlisle's voice rasped in her ear, barely audible over the baby's wails. "Is everything all right?"

_No_, she wanted to snap at him, _everything is not all right. Don't you hear how unhappy my child is? How unhappy I am_, she was afraid she might add if she voiced her true thoughts or worse, break down and cry herself.

"Fine," she replied instead; catching a glimpse of her reflection in the hall mirror, she was glad that Richard was not here in the flesh to see the tell of her eyebrows quirking upward with her lie. "Only it's Nanny Philips' day off, and Isobel decided she simply must do something for one of her charities. I'm afraid I won't be able to keep our appointment. I'm sorry, darling, but my hands are full."

Of course she hadn't spoken the last part into the mouthpiece, but apparently she had not pulled it far enough back because Richard replied in tones of amusement, "Darling now, is it? I hadn't realised our last interview ended on such good terms."

Their last face-to-face meeting certainly had not, their old wounds re-opened, though to be fair the several phone calls they'd exchanged since had been perfectly professional. Perhaps they had managed to put their awkwardness behind them once and for all, and moved on to function as business associates, or even friendly colleagues.

"Of course you can keep our appointment," he went on. "Just bring George with you. I'll let him bang around on my typewriter. Or, failing that, Miss Fields and the office girls quite dote on children."

"My-you do require a broad skillset for your secretarial staff."
"Miss Fields did get her start as a governess."

"Oh, Georgie," Mary said, lowering the microphone again as the tug at her skirt was followed by his cries being muted when he stuffed the fistful of fabric into his mouth.

"I beg your ladyship's pardon, but is there any way I may be of assistance?" Molesley peered with bulging eyes around the corner. "I could hold Master Crawley…or the telephone…"

Relief flooded through Mary as she gestured to the butler and he scuttled toward her. George stopped crying, looking up at the man with fascination, but when Molesley bent and slipped his hands under the baby's arms to lift him, George yowled again and flopped backward, conking his head on the floor-fortunately softened by the runner. In the end Mary cradled her son awkwardly in one arm while she kept hold of the earpiece, leaning uncomfortably close to Molesley as he held the microphone for her.

"I'm sorry, Richard," she said, thinking with envy of the modern telephone she'd noticed on his desk, with the earphone and mouthpiece all in one, which allowed him the freedom of one hand, or both if he rested it in the crook of his neck, "that just won't be possible. I wouldn't have the pram and I could never manage George and all his…accoutrements. Even if it weren't raining," she added, glancing over Molesley's shoulder through the door's narrow rectangular windows at the grey.

"Yes, of course." The crackle of static indicated Richard's exhale, followed by a creak as he sat forward in his swivel chair. "Well then what if I came to you?"

Her attention wavered as George's muffled babble reached her other ear, and the sensation of warm moisture spread beneath the shoulder of her blouse as he chomped down on it. Teething, no doubt, Isobel would say.

"Will we really be able to discuss estate business with a baby present?"

"He naps in the mornings, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"Then it's settled. In any case," Richard's decisive tone gave way to one she was not as accustomed to hearing, the more playful one that had characterised the early days of their acquaintance, "there probably ought to be someone in the house who's changed a napkin before, don't you agree?"

"Is this the same Sir Richard who objected to serving himself luncheon on Christmas Day?"

"I'll see you at a quarter past."

After handing the telephone earpiece over to Molesley and instructing him to have cook prepare a bottle for George and tea and sandwiches for two-Richard liked roast beef with horseradish, she told him-she carried her son upstairs to his nursery. He fussed when she laid him in his crib, but was mollified when she gave him the bottle the housemaid brought—for a moment. The instant Mary flicked off the light switch and started to close the door, he screeched. She turned back in time to see the gleaming glass slip through the brass spindles of the bed and land on the plush carpet, and the little tear-streaked face peering at her between the rungs.

I thought you'd enjoy time alone with Georgie, Isobel had said on her way out, so innocently that Mary doubted it could be sincere. Having Richard around to call not being exactly what Isobel meant by alone, though Mary shoved aside the smidgeon of guilt when she considered that enjoyment wasn't precisely what came to her mind as she stooped to retrieve the bottle for her little boy who then proceeded to refuse it and all other attempts-rocking, pacing, singing low half-
remembered lullabies to soothe him to sleep. By the time she resigned herself to her shoulder being the only thing that would pacify him and that only a little; he continued to whimper and sniffle even as he gummed her—it was too late for a change of clothes as she intended, so she had to hide the mess he’d made of her sleeve by pulling on a cardigan before she joined Richard in the drawing room.

"Look who refused to nap," she said as she breezed through the French doors and met Richard’s quizzical gaze with a smile as he rose from the sofa to greet her. "It seems my son has a mind of his own."

"A stubborn Crawley? I’m astonished."

He reached out to shake the small hand George had just withdrawn from his mouth, and did not cringe at the drool as Mary did, though he did wipe his fingers on his handkerchief as he resumed his seat. She placed the baby on the floor and started his electric train, which she’d had moved up to the nursery, only for Isobel to bring it back down. Seating herself at the opposite end of the sofa to Richard, she offered him tea which he declined, but he did help himself to a sandwich as she poured herself a cup. She was in dire need, after the frazzled morning, and now with the sound of the train and Richard sitting so near making her half-expect to see a model Haxby and a crash with a toy car.

Gulping down the hot strong brew, she said, "Thank you for accommodating us this morning. To be honest I was surprised you wanted to meet with me again. Isn't that why you hired Mr Battle, to manage Haxby?"

"Regretting you didn't take me up on the offer for the job?" said Richard around a bite of sandwich. "I’d have paid you generously."

"I’m not the Crawley sister who’s interested in earning a living. Which reminds me, I mentioned to Edith you might have something. She doesn’t seem terribly interested."

"She will be if she speaks to me." Leaning forward to take another sandwich from the platter on the coffee table, he glanced at Mary over his shoulder, eyebrows lifted. "I've got a lot of experience selling ideas to people."

"I thought it was newspapers you hawked."

When he finished chewing his sandwich he turned on the sofa to face Mary more directly, long fingers clasped together on his knees. "Battle thinks I ought to break up the estate."

Mary sipped her tea. "Separate the land from the house?"

"Precisely. Haxby's prospective buyers, he believes, will be people exactly like me: wealthy businessmen who wish to have country residences or host country-house parties, with little interest in maintaining a country economy."

"That seems a logical assumption."

"You think I ought to do it, then?" The lines on his forehead deepened as though this was not the answer he’d expected her to give.

Taking another fortifying drink, Mary replaced her cup on its saucer and set them gently on the side table. As she turned she glanced out the window; the Silver Ghost lived admirably up to its name where it was parked alongside the curb as the grey rain fell down on it in sheets.

"I think it was foolish to hire a land agent to advise you how to sell Haxby if you don't intend to follow his advice. What's your hesitation?"
Though she’d looked at him as she asked the question, Richard did not return her gaze as he answered. "Battle's probably right about the sort of person who might buy it from me, but I bought Haxby with rather a different vision in mind."

Mary followed his gaze to where it rested on George, who’d grown bored with watching his train and now gave chase. He crawled until his little arms gave way, then scooted on his belly, heedless of the tracks coming apart beneath him.

*Our children will have noble blood.* The only time Richard had spoken directly to her of children had been that day in his office, when she told him about her chequered past. How she’d resented him for it— for expressing the presumption rather than a hope of children, when Matthew had sacrificed all such hopes on the altar of king and country. She hadn’t thought Richard possibly *cared* for children, any more than she thought he cared for her, though she realised now she ought to have done. If she’d listened more carefully to him as they walked together through the empty halls of Haxby, in the midst of the repartee about buying or inheriting furniture, his lot and hers, she might have unguarded romanticism in his voice when he asked her if they ought to rescue the house, to give it another chapter. *We can build something worth having, you and I—if you'll let us.* A home. A family. *A legacy.*

"You didn't rise in society by making poor decisions based on sentiment," she said.

Richard looked at her then, eyes brightening as they narrowed, like the strike of a match. "I'm sure you'd never allow sentiment to influence your decision to do what needs to be done with regard to Downton."

Before she had time to feel the sting of the retort, George demanded a reaction. "Da-da-da!" he cried, and both adults snapped their heads to see that the baby had scooted himself all the way to the coffee table and pulled himself up. He clung to the edge with one arm while the other scrabbled for the plate of sandwiches.

"George, *no,*" said Mary, firmly; the saccharine *no-no, Georgie* with which his grandmother half-heartedly reprimanded him was always irksome. Though as she got up to remove George from the sandwiches, while Richard pulled the sandwiches from George, and the little chin, which had begun to quiver startlingly like his Aunt Edith's at the rebuke, disappeared beneath the yawning mouth when he burst into tears, she wondered if it might not have been preferable in company to appear too indulgent rather than too strict.

"He certainly doesn't shy from expressing his opinions."

Richard chuckled, but it provided Mary with no relief from her embarrassment. Though he might not be offended by the temper tantrum, in no case did she desire to put her incompetence as a mother on display for *him,* of all people.

"Yes, he's quite clearly expressing what dire need he is in of a nap."

"Perhaps he wouldn't nap because he's hungry?"

"He refused his bottle."

"Ah." Richard selected another sandwich. "Well, wouldn't any man, when there are roast beef and horseradish sandwiches to be had?"

Shaking her head—either at Richard or at George having resumed gnawing her shoulder—Mary paced to the window and looked out. "Sometimes Nanny Philips has trouble getting him to nap. A stroll in
the pram usually does the trick. Obviously that's out of the question today."

"What about a drive?"

A backward glance revealed him to be chewing what seemed to be a rather large bite of sandwich, and dusting the crumbs off his fingertips as he stood.

"My brother George may be short on ambition, but he's a wealth of childrearing experience. He's spent many a night driving new babies around Morningside in his truck to get them to sleep. Do you think it might be worth a try?"

Mary looked outside again, the outline of the Silver Ghost still elusive behind the curtain of rain. George whimpered, rubbing his eyes and bobbing his head against her shoulder, stocking feet kicking at her hips.

"Your driver won't mind?"

"If he did, would it matter? After all isn't driving what I pay him to do?"

It was on the tip of Mary's tongue to tweak him about saving face after her earlier remark about his complaints about the Downton staff at Christmas, but he delved into his trouser pocket and, with a jangle, drew out the brass-plated keys to the automobile.

"Some days, I like to play at being my own chauffeur." The corner of his mouth quirked as he fought a smile. "Usually on rainy days, when I don't trust anyone with the Ghost but myself."

"Are there days you like to play at being a nursery maid? Only I think someone who knows how to change a napkin could also be in order."

The housekeeper knew how, sparing Richard the indignity of this task-though when Mary coaxed out of him as they donned hats and raincoats that he acquired at this particular skill at quite a tender age, due to his mother having contribute to the family income during George's infancy, he squared his shoulders and jutted his jaw in a way that defied her to laugh at him. *I'm not ashamed to be what they call a self-made man. In fact I'm proud of it.*

Rather *too* proud of it, Mary had thought, once upon a time. Now, seated in the passenger side of the Rolls Royce, Richard at the wheel and her son wedged between them in rather undignified fashion for a future earl in a laundry basket, she was grateful for the humble upbringing that sparked this creative solution to her problem. Necessity, as they said, was the mother of invention.

Along with gratitude, though, came a measure of guilt. For two years this man had been her fiancé, had spent at least half of those weekends with her family, yet she'd never once met his. She had deemed much of his behaviour as ill-bred; in this, hers undoubtedly had been.

"Are your brother and his family well?" she asked politely as Richard started the car. "Have you been to see them lately?"

"As a matter of fact, George and his eldest are in to see me. Hence my remark about my female staff doting on children."

"How nice. Mr Carlisle must be much recovered, then, if George was comfortable enough to make such a lengthy journey?"

"My father's condition is well in hand."
If Richard's reply struck her as slightly elusive, she put that down to his concentration as he pulled cautiously into the street-perhaps overly so, given the lack of motor traffic due to the inclement weather; though he quite babied his automobiles. And he did not allow her time to think too much on it, turning the conversation back to her.

"Where were we before your George interrupted us? Ah yes-I was going to ask whether you feel Mr Branson's course of action has secured Downton for the future Earl of Grantham?"

"Weren't we discussing Haxby?"

"Does Branson have any concerns that the measures taken with the rents and mechanizations of the farming will keep the estate afloat in the long term?"

"To be honest I've been rather preoccupied with attempting to make sense of why George must grow up without a father to think about him growing up without an estate."

"What's to make sense of?"

Mary looked to her right; she shouldn't be surprised at anything that came from Richard's mouth, yet somehow always managed to catch her off her guard. His gaze left the road briefly to touch hers.

"I don't mean to sound callous, but your husband died in a tragically ill-timed accident."

"There must be a reason why," Mary said, quietly, immediately wishing she'd left the thought unspoken.

"Bloody hell."

He hit deep puddle too quickly at the turning, and Mary braced herself against the door as tires hydroplaned; water whooshed against the sides of the car, and she shot him a glare. "I'll thank you not to use coarse language in my son's hearing."

Richard's eyes flickered down to the seat between them; Mary's followed, and she saw that her son had fallen asleep in his basket.

In the wan light, George's long fair lashes appeared silvery-gold against the rounded edges of his cheeks. She couldn't help but ghost her fingertips across his rosy skin. He stirred in his blankets, one arm flailing up, and caught her thumb in his dimpled fist. She smiled, believing for a moment she was back in hospital in those moments when it had been so sweet to be alone with her son. Before Papa came bearing the news that turned that very thing so bitter. She slipped out of her son's grasp, folding her black gloved hands together atop her black coat.

"Is that what you meant by the War changing Matthew?" Richard went on. "That somehow what he may or may not have suffered in the trenches caused him to crash his car hours after your son was born?"

"How do I know whether it did or not? He never spoke of it," Mary said, despite a tingling awareness in her rigid spine that he was the last person on earth to whom she ought to speak of this; yet somehow he was simultaneously the only person with whom she could without fear of doing offence or casting judgment on her.

"Have you considered that perhaps that's because there was nothing to speak about?"

"You said you never knew Matthew and me to have difficulty communicating-"
"I meant that as a jab at how you communicated with him to the exclusion of your then-fiancé. I should never have-"

"For heaven's sake, Richard, don't you see? That's the reason I considered marrying you at all! If only I'd been honest with Matthew about Pamuk from the start, we would have married years ago."

he spoke quietly, yet her words seemed to resonate in the closed confines of the car as the ones Edith had uttered a few days earlier echoed in her head. Do you know, we might have been married seven years by now?

"By the time I did tell him, I'd set a precedent of keeping secrets."

One which she'd held to.

Leaning her head back against the seat, she looked out the window at the rowhouses that lined Hanover Square, obscured red brick structures through the streaks of rain down the glass. Her secrets, her little white lies, had run together like rain…Clarkson's initial diagnosis-hay fever, she'd lied to Matthew, so effortlessly, and he had believed her, guileless, and so sure that the blame was his own-the secret trips to London…the operation…even, after all was said and done, what had been the exact cause of her infertility. And he had not even been angry with her-the thought flitted through her mind that Richard would have raged at her for so much secrecy, for so many lies-for Matthew had hidden much from her, too.

It had not always been so between them. You must never pay attention to the things I say, she'd told him at the beginning, while Matthew asserted, If you really enjoy a good argument, we should see more of each other. Once he had not been afraid to tell her what was in his heart, no matter how little she might like it, but a barrier had been erected between them, a no man's land more impassable than that which was delineated by trenches and barbed wire and machine gun fire he could not bear to tell her about.


"Not true-you stood bravely by when everyone thought he'd never walk again. Never produce an heir," Richard said, not without bitterness. He let out his breath, heavily, and asked, as he turned again coming around the square, "Did Captain Crawley seem happy to you, during your marriage?"

After a moment's consideration, Mary said, "We quarrelled a few days before the wedding."

"I believe that's quite normal, due to the various stresses of planning such a social event. Not that I know from experience."

"We also quarrelled over his plans for Downton," she said, ignoring him and watching her hands twist together in her lap.

"But eventually you came to a resolution?"

Mary nodded. "And I suppose our quarrel was more due to his timing than to his plans themselves. The morning after Sybil died…"

"Yet another time of heightened stress. And grief."

She felt his gaze on her and when she looked at him-she had to-she saw etched in the strong lines of his face real sympathy, compassion, such as she looked up and found there after Lavinia's funeral. When she'd let him draw her arm through his, the weight of his large hand on hers solidly reassuring,
and lead her back home.

He averted his gaze to the street, braking lightly to avoid splashing a pair of pedestrians who were picking their way around puddles to cross.

"Would you have considered yourself happily married?" he asked.

"Perfectly," Mary answered without hesitation.

"You got your prince charming, and your castle, and your heir. Some people might call that happily ever after."

The street scene swam in Mary's eyes, though not this time on account of the rain. Throat tightening, she choked out, "Happily for eighteen months."

"To those whom that settled life with a family and a proper home has eluded, eighteen months may as well be an eternity."

His voice sounded just as it had that last day at Downton, when he told her goodbye and, finally, that he'd loved her: tired, and stripped of all pretence. She dared not look at him, though in her periphery she saw his gloved fingers flex around the steering wheel, as if to bring himself back under control. He cleared his throat and went on in a deeper, yet measured tone.

"Eighteen months, Mary, shining with near perfection. Don't tarnish them by trying to find meaning in something that has no meaning. You owe it to yourself to remember the time with your husband as you experienced it. And to George."

"Poor Georgie," she murmured, looking down at her baby bundled up in the basket. He'd reached up in his sleep and tugged his little knitted cap down over his eyes. Her hand went out to adjust it, but stopped short of touching him, afraid she might wake him from the hard-earned slumber. "You must think I'm a terrible mother, too."

"Too?" Richard's head snapped toward her. "Who said that?"

"Perhaps not in so many words, but who hasn't?"

"Me."

Mary's lips quirked into a mirthless smile. "You've got a rare behind the scenes glimpse of my pathetic maternal instincts."

"You've been a mother for how long now? Seven, eight months?" The look he gave her as he pulled the car up alongside the curb and put the brake on was not unsympathetic. "Who's good at anything in so short a time? And your lot aren't trained in the finer points of child-rearing."

The playful glint returned to his eyes, and it drew Mary in.

"Unlike yours," she said. "But admit it-you didn't climb the ranks of society with the intent of playing nursery maid to your own children."

"When I was your age that might have been true, but I turned fifty this year. An age at which one stops and takes stock of one's achievements, and whether the sacrifices made to reach them were worth it."

"Thus driving yourself around London, rather than giving your chauffeur all the enjoyment of your
own car?” Mary said lightly, the back of her neck prickling hot beneath her coat collar at this second reference to wanting children.

For a moment their eyes held, an unspoken acknowledgment between them, and a softening about Richard's almost like gratitude for the way she expressed it.

Abruptly he broke their gaze, opening his car door and his umbrella as he slid out. He came around to her side of the car and got the door, holding the umbrella over the opening as he handed her down with a sure hand onto the slick pavement. When Mary was confident of her footing she turned back to reach for George's basket, but Richard caught her elbow and drew her back. As she peered quizzesly up at him he released her, plunging his hand into the pocket of his greatcoat.

"Speaking of your age, you've a birthday in a few days, haven't you?"

"Tomorrow, but I'm trying not to think of it."

Not only of Matthew's not being here to celebrate the milestone, but also the disappointment Mama tried unsuccessfully to hide when Mary phoned to ask her not to come, that she couldn't possibly face her family putting on smiling faces to mark the occasion of having reached the age of thirty with so little to show for it.

"In that case don't think of it as a birthday present," said Richard, drawing out a small rectangular box wrapped in smart striped gift wrap. "Think of it as a token of thanks for all your help with Haxby."

"I'm afraid I wasn't terribly helpful today, dominating the conversation with my own problems."

"We discussed everything I needed to about Haxby."

"Indeed? One wonders whether you needed to take the trouble of driving over here at all."

Richard's eyes dropped in that almost bashful way he sometimes had, though the accompanying nod at the gift cradled in his hand was smooth. "Well now you see I had an ulterior motive. I do hope you'll accept it."

"Of course," Mary said, but her heart quickened behind her ribs, and not because of the brush of their fingertips as she took it from him.

This was not, of course, the first present Richard had given her—there had been other birthday gifts, Christmas, engagement presents; all extravagant, though never Mary sensed they were given out of generosity so much the intent to indebt her to him further—as if Haxby had not been enough to do that. At least his taste in jewellery had not been so vulgar as his taste in country houses, though if it had been she could not have felt more bound by it.

This box, she told herself as she peeled back the smart striped paper was not flat enough to be jewellery, and it was the first gift he'd made to her that he asked her to accept, rather than assume she would: I wanted you to have this, he'd always said before.

"A fountain pen," she said, finding beneath the wrapping paper an unmistakable leather case. "That's very practical…"

The words died on her tongue as she slipped the pen out and saw, engraved in gold against the marbled green: Strong and Sharp.

"And personal," she said, her chest clinching. "Richard, I'm touched."
"If only I'd known all it took was a pen…"

He spoke glibly enough, but Mary saw the regret in his eyes, the slope of his shoulders, and again thought of their parting in the foyer of Downton. If only he'd known what she truly wanted. *I loved you, you know. More than you knew. And much much more than you loved me…*

She reached for the hand that hung awkwardly at his side, pressing it in a gesture of thanks—and perhaps also in apology. His fingers squeezed back and pulled her in, against his body beneath the umbrella. When he tilted his head in a familiar way she thought he meant to kiss her, and her heart raced—in panic, of course, not expectation.

But he only brushed his lips lightly over her cheek, his breath warm against her skin as he murmured *happy birthday* in her ear.

He lingered like that, his cheek pressed to her cheek, hand clasping hers, for a long moment, and Mary did not move, either. Until the splash of tires in the puddles and the moaning of brakes as the vehicle slowed on the wet street made them draw back and turn to see a cab pull up along the curb a few yards from Richard's Silver Ghost.

The passenger who emerged from the back door, clad in black, and regarded Mary with astonished brown eyes, was Isobel Crawley.
The cut-outs in the wide brim of Edith's summer hat dappled George's crisp white sailor suit with petals of sunlight and shade as she bent over him, allowing her nephew to clutch her forefingers in his dimpled fists so he could stand on legs as wobbly as a newborn colt's and watch the other visitors arrive at the front gates of the London Zoo. He babbled to them and showed off his new front teeth with a grin and glistening chin, a cheeky who beggar revelled in the attention they tossed his way like coins: *What a big handsome boy*, more than one person said; *How keen he looks to walk*, observed a few more, and one man followed with, *You'd best keep an eye on him, or he's like to toddle off into one of the cages!* From a few yards away Mary heard these remarks above the happy din of the crowd, and the latter struck her as rather a morbid notion. But Isobel laughed, so despite a scalp that itched as perspiration formed down her part from the mid-morning sun beating down on her own black straw hat and dark hair, Mary sat a little easier on the bench she shared with Aunt Rosamund who, true to form, huffed.

"Once again we find ourselves waiting for Sir Richard."

"You know, I've begun to detect a pattern to his tardiness." Mary glance from her son to her aunt. "It occurs most frequently whenever you are to be included in the party. What does that say?"

Rosamund's nostrils flared as she pursed her lips, for a moment looking so like Granny that Mary's mouth twitched—not so much at the physical similarity as at the thought of how indignant her aunt would be at the comparison.

"It says he'd do very well to be wary of me, after the ungentlemanly conduct I observed toward Miss Swire," Rosamund said, adding as Mary glanced away, "He's managed to put a bee in your papa's bonnet again."

"Yes, I know."

"About breaking up Haxby Park from its farmlands, and selling them to a beer manufacturer? Now how would you know that?"

Mary hadn't meant to let that knowledge slip; she'd been too hasty in her eagerness to change the subject from the uncomfortable reference to Lavinia and the Marconi scandal. "Oh…" Feigning nonchalance, she opened her handbag and rifled through it for her compact mirror. "Tom mentioned it."

He'd phoned a few mornings after she'd discussed it with Richard, with ill-contained laughter in his voice that took her back to his early days as Downton's droll, well-read, political chauffeur. Lord Grantham was enraged, Tom said, that the Russells' ancestral home had come to that. *Never mind he always thought the house was as vulgar as I did*, Mary remarked drily in turn, and then secured Tom's promise—which was not wholly convincing, given his chuckling, not to mention to Papa that she was the one who'd advised Sir Richard to go ahead with the sale. She'd had no notion when she had that Stephen Battle intended the land for commercial *hops* farming—not that she necessarily
Tom had gone on to tell her she’d done a fine job helping Richard settle his affairs at Haxby. *It's just as well I'm not attached to being a land agent,* he'd said, *because Lord Grantham may well decide you're the better man for the job. And wouldn't that tickle Sybil?* he'd added, brogue thickening as his voice became choked. *Wouldn't it just?* Mary agreed, and her throat ached when he pronounced George lucky to have a mother so capable of fighting for his interests.

*But not lucky enough to have a father so she wouldn't have to?* she'd thought, but hadn't said. She wished she hadn't thought about it now.

Ducking her head, she discreetly consulted her compact mirror, dabbing her red eyes with the powder puff.

"Isn't that Sir Richard's car?"

At Isobel's question, Mary looked up to see the familiar grey Silver Ghost round the corner, driven by the chauffeur today, with the top down, and waxed to a spotless sheen after its recent jaunt in the rain. The motor slowed to a stop beside the curb, and the driver hopped down and strode briskly around the elongated front end to get the door.

"Ah, Sir Richard." Rosamund approached as he disembarked, donning his trilby. They had scarcely shaken hands when she glanced around him at the boy who was sliding down from the cognac coloured leather seat. "And this must be your nephew."

"Yes, I'm very pleased to introduce Mr Mark Carlisle." Richard's eyes drifted over Rosamund's head to Mary, the dimples appearing beneath his cheekbones with the deepening curve of his smile as his big hands settled on the blond boy's shoulders. "Mark, this is Lady Rosamund Painswick. You should address her as Lady Rosamund."

He returned his gaze to Rosamund as he said it, quirking his eyebrows at her almost as if they shared a private joke. What captivated Mary, however, was the way be leaned slightly into his nephew, the gentle squeeze his long fingers gave the narrow shoulders, the softening of his oftentimes brusque tones as he instructed him. In turn, Mark darted uncertain eyes up at Richard—the same blue as his uncle's, and the same shape, too, beneath a strong brow—but he extended a steady hand to Aunt Rosamund and spoke clearly in his lilting Scots accent.

"How d'you do, Lady Rosamund?"

"Charmed, I'm sure." She moved aside for Mary, who told herself it was only her imagination that Richard introduced her in the same tone with which he spoke to Mark.

"Your uncle has told me so much about you. You're very fond of electric trains, I think?"

It seemed such an insipid thing to say' Richard had *not,* in fact, told her very much about his brother's children, this one included, and she seized upon the one thing that leapt to mind. Even that she didn't know for certain; he'd said he bought his nephews a train set for Christmas, not that the eldest boy, aged ten, particularly cared for it.

But Mark dimpled and his freckled face split in a gap-toothed grin. "Yes, m'lady, and real ones, as well. I didn't want the train ride to London to end."

Mary exhaled in relief—only to catch her breath again as she met Richard's eye and found him looking at her with something like pride.
"How splendid for you," she said. "The journey up from Downton always seems endless to me."

Isobel introduced herself. "Is this your first visit to a zoo?"

"No, ma'am. We've been to the one back home. Granddad took us." Frowning, Mark looked up again at his uncle.

"Edinburgh boasts a very fine zoo, indeed," Richard said. "My nephew may not be quite as impressed with London's as the locals might imagine."

A look of being vaguely affronted crossed Rosamund's features, but Isobel effused, "Yes, I've read about the Scottish National Zoological Park. They've adopted a more natural approach to housing the animals, rather than the typical steel cages, haven't they?"

"Modelled after Hamburg's," Richard answered with a nod.

"They've got real South Pole penguins!" Mark announced. "We got to see the chicks a while back. They walk like this," he said, and demonstrated a penguin waddle.

"They must be darling," said Edith, who stood at the back of the group with the pram.

"And the first bred anywhere but the Antarctic." Richard spoke as proudly as he would of one of his newspapers' achievements.

"Well, Mark," said Isobel, taking the pram from Edith, "since you seem to be our resident zoological expert, you shall have to tell my grandson everything there is to know. It's his first time."

Mark peeped into the pram, grinning, and gave the baby a little wave. "Uncle Richie says he's called George. Like my dad."

"Yes, he is," answered Mary, looking away from Richard's smirk, which reminded her of how he'd mocked her for this fact weeks ago.

"Talking of Mr George Carlisle," said Edith, glancing after the Silver Ghost as the chauffeur drove off, "I thought he was supposed to join us."

The dimples vanished as other, less pleasant lines etched themselves on Richard's face. "No, he…"

"... his hands found their way into the pockets of his trousers, soft grey lightweight summer wool. "I think he's not best pleased with me."

"Uncle Richie thrashed him at rooftop golf at Selfridge's yesterday."

To Mary's amusement, Richard removed his hands from his pockets and tugged at the knot of his blue striped necktie in clear annoyance; his scowl deepened when she teased, "Your brother takes losses as well as you do, then?"

"It might have had more to do with a remark about how if he'd had any ambition he could own a wildly successful London department store instead of a pokey corner shop in Morningside."

"Oh dear," said Mary, while Edith remarked, "Your relationship with your brother sounds like mine with Mary."

"The difference being that you've deigned to go to the zoo with your sister," Richard said.

Mary tilted her head, but was not gratified as usual by her younger sister growing indignant; Edith remained cool and said, "Only because she just had a birthday."
Richard excused himself to go purchase their tickets; Mark watched him stride away, looking a little forlorn, and his small child's chest heaved with a sigh beneath his old but neatly pressed and carefully mended Norfolk jacket.

"I wish Dad could've come with us. He hasn't been back home because he can't leave the store very much. We're only in London now to see-"

He stopped short, cheeks reddening, and ducked his head; his hand went up to tug at the fair hair that curled at the back of his cap, a mannerism so like Richard's. Obviously he'd said more than he ought to have about something, but it was his first statement that gave Mary's heart a little jolt, as with electricity.

How many times would she hear George say those words? I wish Dad could be here… She accidentally looked to Isobel, whose misty brown eyes indicated she clearly had the same thought. Or perhaps she heard the echo of her own boy asking that question.

"Well, Mark," she said, in that firm brave tone Mary had grown so accustomed to hearing as they nursed Matthew together during the war, "you must pay especially close attention to everything you see today, so you may tell him about in as much detail as possible. That way your father will feel as though he was here, too, and as an added bonus, you'll get to experience the zoo over again."

Richard returned with their tickets and gestured with a sweep of his hands and a smile for the ladies to proceed through the front gate with the Spanish tiled roof. Mark skipped ahead alongside Isobel, offering to push the pram so he could be close by to explain things to little George.

"What an excellent idea," she told him. "You must be such a great help to your mother with your younger siblings."

"Yes, ma'am. She says someday I'll make a young lady very happy, as my dad makes her."

"My." Rosamund glanced over her shoulder at Mary. "I hadn't realised how charm abounds in the Carlisle clan."

A sideways glance at Richard revealed his jaw to be working as he regarded the back of Rosamund's hat beneath his heavy brow, but his face softened as he returned Mary's gaze.

"You haven't had to cope with any awkwardness due to what your mother-in-law witnessed, have you?" he asked in a low voice as the conversation continued up ahead; Isobel consulted a guide map and advised they go up the terrace walk, past several aviaries toward the bears and hyenas, though Mark asked if they might skip the birds, as he did not find them very interesting unless they were penguins.

Richard referred, of course, to his kiss, the memory of which—the softness of his lips on her cheek, the heat of his breath and the solidness of his body so close to hers, the sharp tang of shaving lotion all combining to reassure her in that uniquely masculine way she'd experienced so often with Matthew but only once before with Richard, after Matthew pushed her aside at Lavinia's funeral—made Mary's cheeks prickle warmly.

Hoping he attributed her flush to the late May weather, she replied, "No, you handled her perfectly."

When Isobel had emerged from the cab and saw her late son's widow so intimately engaged, Richard passed his umbrella off to Mary and approached the older woman with an outstretched hand to assist her up the slick front steps. Lady Mary has kindly been advising me about Haxby, he'd explained with utter innocence, and I returned the favour and helped her get the baby to sleep. I'm so glad to
have bumped into you, Mrs Crawley, because you might be able to best advise me how to entertain a ten year old boy in town. Isobel, naturally, had taken the bait, suggesting the London Zoo, as the weather was forecast to turn agreeable; and she'd made no mention of the affectionate act after Mary followed Richard's lead and said, impulsively, *What a nice outing that would be for George.* Richard proposed she and Isobel come along, extending the invitation to Edith and Aunt Rosamund. *Make it a real family affair, the occasion of Georgie's first trip to the zoo.*

Lowering her voice further, so that Richard had to incline his head toward her to hear, the tips of his fingers just brushing her back, Mary said, "I think it's Aunt Rosamund who should concern you now, not Isobel."

When she phoned her aunt to invite her, Rosamund's response had been, *If it's such a family affair, why doesn't he invite Robert and Cora?*

"That might have something to do with Lord Grantham throwing me out of his house," Richard said when she told him. Mary started to point out that he hadn't been thrown out so much as asked to leave, but he spoke over her. "One wonders why your aunt accepted. She doesn't strike me as an animal lover."

"Boredom. She's always loved a good intrigue. I imagine she wants to see for herself whether this is intriguing enough to write home to Granny about."

"I see. Well, in any case, she plays into my plot to win the family over one member at a time."

*Win them over to what?* Mary opened her mouth to ask, but Richard walked away as they arrived at the bear pit. It was a stupid question, anyway, one to which she knew the answer perfectly well.

She tried not to think about it as they viewed the bears and hurried past the hyenas, which all agreed were rather unpleasant creatures, and at Mark's insistence bypassed the wading birds for the lion house. The great creatures basked in the sun that slanted down through the bars of their cages like overgrown housecats. Mary felt lazy just watching them, and heard herself remark inanely to Isobel that they ought to get a cat at Grantham House.

"George might like to pet it."

"If it's just the fur you want," said Aunt Rosamund, "I've a cheetah pelt in my attic."

"You never did!" Edith exclaimed, she and Mary wheeling to face her.

"You probably don't remember, but when you were quite little your uncle and I went to Kenya on safari."

"And he shot a cheetah?" Edith still did not sound convinced.

"Heavens no. I did."

As they made their way back toward the front of the zoo, where the map showed the primates to be housed, they chattered on about the evils of big game hunting—which, in Rosamund's case, were largely based upon her dislike of the use of animal print in décor. Their meandering path took them past the stork and ostrich house, where they paused because Mark decided that apparently very large birds were worth looking at. Mary, however, was more interested in watching Richard tap a man on the shoulder and ask him to step aside so that Mark could get a better view of emus. He kept his hands on the boy's shoulders, as if to protect his vantage point from the grown-up visitors, leaning in every now and again to read from the placards on the fronts of the cages, or to point out to him the differences between emus and their African cousins.
When George began to fuss they moved on, but he didn't seem to be any happier once the pram was rolling again.

"I bet he's upset because he knows the monkey house is coming and can't see very well," Mark suggested. Before anyone could say a word against it, he plucked the baby from the carriage and swept him up with wiry arms onto his shoulders. "My baby sister always likes this."

He flashed his snaggle-toothed grin beneath the cap which George-who had stopped crying and smiled, too-snatched off the towhead and set askew. Richard put it to rights, admonishing his nephew that should he tire, let them know and they'd help him get the baby down, then fell into step with Mary once more as they cut across the grass to see the monkeys.

"No need to be alarmed," he said. "George is in excellent hands."

"I'm not." Mary wondered whether she ought to have been, despite Richard's assurances, whether other mothers would have been alarmed by the sight of a boy being so daring with a baby. "Mark seems a fine young man. It's rather reassuring. Of course I hoped for a boy to settle the inheritance, but they are entirely foreign creatures to me. I've been at a loss as to what on earth to do with one."

She glanced at her mother-in-law, who was speaking very earnestly to Edith as she found a place to park the empty pram, the latter seeming to merely tolerate whatever the older woman was saying to her.

"Not that Isobel won't feel free to dispense advice," Mary added.

Richard chuckled, though his amusement didn't reach his eyes, which were fixed on his nephew. Mark was singing to George, his thin boyish soprano piping over the noise of the crowds around them. *Georgie Porgie, puddin' and pie, kissed the girls and made them cry..."

"Yes, I may criticize my brother for a lot of things, but not his children. Of course Aileen has quite a lot to do with that." His smile became pensive. "I ought to get up to Edinburgh more often. Each time they're so changed. I haven't seen the baby since her baptism."

Mary nodded. "Mama wants me to come back to see Sybbie."

"Is she very like your sister?"

"Her colouring is more like Tom's. Though her eyes are dark."

"Like her Auntie Mary's."

She looked up at him, and his eyes touched hers; the gentleness she saw there, and in his smile, encouraged her to go on.

"Mama and Tom are always looking for hints of Sybil in her. Personally I'm relieved the baby isn't just her miniature. Papa protested the name, and to be honest I agreed with him. It makes it so much more difficult to move on."

"Was it terribly frightening? To face giving birth knowing how it turned out for your sister?"

At the time, Mary had actually been more preoccupied at the time about whether she would be able to become pregnant at all. Of course she could not say that to Richard. Not here, not now.

"Forgive me." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I didn't mean to make you sad."
She gave him a wan smile. "You didn't. I just am, these days."

Having had their fill of monkeys they found the ape house, and Richard lifted George down from Mark's shoulders. He secured his nephew a good viewing position by the chimpanzee cage and held the baby up to see, too, but George twisted around in his arms, more interested in pulling Richard's necktie out from his waistcoat than in the chimps. Mary rescued Richard from being made untidy, and as she carried George away for a bottle Isobel procured from the pram she overheard him say to Mark:

"They remind me of you lads."

She looked to see three young apes scrabbling about, playing chase and wrestling, and looking every bit like long-armed, hairy boys roughhousing. Did he see himself and his own little brother?

Mark giggled as a larger chimp, presumably the mother, grabbed the littlest one out of the tangle. "Except Ma would never eat bugs out of Andy's hair!"

"Indeed," said Richard with a chuckle. "Although Andy's been known to eat bugs."

"Oh dear," Mary said. "Now I'm alarmed again about the prospect of raising a son."

"I fished a few from Matthew's mouth," Isobel reminisced.

"Joking aside," Richard said, propping his elbows on the railing as he observed the chimpanzees, "they are very like us. Darwin's theories in action. Although Granddad and your parents wouldn't like to hear me say that," he added, patting Mark's shoulder. "Are you hungry? It's about lunchtime, isn't it?"

"I saw a hamburger stand over there," said Mark hopefully, turning from the chimps to point to a refreshment pavilion.

Richard obliged him, and bought lunch for everyone else, too, except for Rosamund and Mary who declined.

"God forbid Lady Mary Crawley eat anything so undignified as a hamburger," he teased, eating his out of the paper wrapper and seated on the lawn with his nephew.

"It's less about dignity than saving room for an ice cream cornet."

"Ice cream for luncheon?" said Richard in mock disapproval. He licked a blob of mustard off his thumb. "What sort of example is that for your son?"

She glanced to the pram, where George had fallen asleep mid-bottle. "What he doesn't know..."

The ice cream Richard bought her did present something of a challenge to her dignity as she struggled to stop it dripping onto her hand in the midday heat. At any rate, she thought Edith looked the more fashionable of the two, lighting up a post-hamburger cigarette in front of the gorilla paddock.

"If we really are the descendants of apes, Sir Richard," she mused, puffing an O of smoke, "do you suppose the might share our regard for privacy?"

"They don't seem to mind making certain private matters public." Rosamund turned away from the exhibit and took a scented hankie from her handbag.
"I don't mean they're civilised, of course," Edith went on, "but look how they all sit with their backs to us. One wonders if they prefer not to be gawked at? It seems cruel to cage them, when they're adapted to the jungles of darkest Africa, that's all."

"Do I sense a topic for a future editorial in the Sketch?" asked Isobel with a smile.

Edith studied Richard as she drew from her cigarette; he leaned away as she exhaled. "Or for one of your publications? Mary tells me you wanted to speak with me about an offer."

"Not precisely. Not until I've heard about your ambitions." Richard gestured with his hands as he spoke, slipping as easily into business mode as if they he stood against the background of his office windows, and not a cage of gorillas, and Edith seated across his desk and not a park bench. "Where do you see your career in a year? Five years? Ten? Are you content to write nice little columns for ladies' journals, or do you wish to expand your horizons?"

"Nice? I write about quite controversial topics."

"The women's vote is hardly the controversy in 1922 that it was in 1912."

"Tell that to all the women under thirty who own no property!" Edith made an admirable effort at not looking as though he'd ruffled her feathers, but Mary noticed the tremor in her sister's fingers as she brought her cigarette to her lips.

"Yes, yes, I read your column. I know your views. I've no interest in debating women's rights at the zoo."

Edith released a long breath of smoke. "How like a man. " She dropped her cigarette on the pavement, stamped it out with her heel, and stalked away.

"How like a woman," Richard said, slipping his hands into his pocketed as his long strides caught him up to her, "to be lulled into a false sense of security about her talents because she's become romantically entangled with her employer."

"I won't subject myself to this tastelessness." She quickened her pace, and it fell to Mary, following not far behind with Mark while Isobel and Rosamund brought up the rear with the pram, to placate her so she might hear Richard out.

"Sir Richard doesn't lack taste, Edith-only tact." The glare he shot her over his shoulder turned to a pleased glimmer when she added, "I've learnt to look for his compliments. In this case, he thinks you could be better, which means he thinks you're rather good to start with. If he didn't, he'd leave you to his competitors."

For some time they walked in silence, making their way around front to the tunnel which ran beneath the Outer Circle to the section of zoo across the road, where the large mammals resided. But as they came out from underground into the sunlight, Edith considered Richard and asked, with a measure of dubiousness in her voice, "So you think my skills might improve if I wrote for you?"

"Kangaroos!" Mark darted away from the adults toward the fenced yard where the creatures took shelter from the afternoon sun beneath scrubby trees planted in approximation of the Australian Outback. He turned back to call, "Mrs Crawley, does Georgie want to see?"

As George was still napping and Mark had Isobel's full attention while Rosamund minded the baby, Richard continued his discussion with Edith.

"You would indeed improve—or you'd be let go. It's as simple as that. I don't accept mediocrity."
“Your writers must find you a demanding employer.”

Richard shrugged. "It's not my custom to ask whether they do. If they think my demands unreasonable, they are, of course free to give notice and find work elsewhere. Perhaps for your Mr Gregson.”

"Uncle Richie just wants everyone to do their best work," Mark chimed in, apparently having eavesdropped, as he hopped back to stand beside his uncle. "He always phones to ask if we're getting good marks at school. And he sends presents if we are.”

Richard tugged at the knot of his necktie as if he were not quite comfortable with this revelation to his softer side-as if it had not already been on full display today. "I believe in positive reinforcement." He slipped his hands into his trouser pockets, rocking slightly back on his heels. "Thus my employees are paid well."

"Perhaps sometimes he can be a bit lacking in taste," Mary remarked to Edith; as they walked on she caught Richard giving her a glare that may not have been playful-which made it all the more amusing.

In front of the rhinoceros enclosure George awoke unhappily from his nap, but cheered when Mary fed him the slightly soggy remains of her ice cream cornet. Mark, however, looked ready to cry with disappointment as they moved to the next cage, which normally housed the zoo's African elephant, and found it empty. He maintained a stiff upper lip, though, as Richard patted his shoulder consolingly, and there was only the slightest quaver in his voice as he declared that he'd seen elephants before at home and the hippopotamuses, giraffes, and zebras were down this way.

"Is it just me, or is it getting more crowded?" asked Aunt Rosamund as they proceeded, not sounding at all best pleased with the prospect.

"It's not just you," Isobel answered, though of course she seemed less troubled. "I wonder what the attraction is?"

In answer, one of the zookeepers came up the path, shouting and gesturing for the visitors to step to both sides to make way for the elephant. Which, as it turned out, was giving rides, the queue forming in front of the superintendent's house for visitors of all ages.

Mark's lanky frame quivered with excitement, but somehow he contained himself, except for his dancing blue eyes. "Oh Could I, Uncle Richie? I've done so well on all my schoolwork, and it's a rare opportunity."

Mary found herself pressing her fingertips to her lips not to laugh at that, even more as she noticed Richard struggling not to laugh at his nephew's slightly precocious, yet perfectly sincere question.

"Yes, Mark, it is a rare opportunity. One that would be a shame for us to miss. Wouldn't you agree, Lady Mary?"

Her answer died on her tongue as his gaze swung round to meet hers, regarding her from beneath eyebrows that were just lifted beneath the brim of his trilby in that all-too-familiar challenging expression, and understanding dawned suddenly what he implied. For a moment she hesitated as the throng of the crowd rose to a cheer when the elephant lumbered into view. If she'd thought eating a hamburger whilst walking around the zoo a trifle undignified, then being perched on a bench seat strapped high on an enormous beast's back certainly was. Yet as she felt her companions' gazes on her-Mark's hopeful, Richard's challenging, Edith's doubtful, Rosamund's disgusted and Isobel's full of anticipation-she made up her mind.
"As a matter of fact, I do." She lifted George from the pram, settling his bottom comfortably on her hip as she met Richard's eye. "How many boys get to say they've ridden an elephant before their first birthday?"

The look on Richard's face contained more approval than she thought she'd ever had from him, and she quickly turned away to join the queue, lest he see the colour it brought to her cheeks.

As they settled onto the bench for their turn a few moments later, George in her lap and Mark between the adults, Richard said, "I have to admit, I never thought I'd see Lady Mary Crawley on the back of an elephant."

"I could say the same thing about Sir Richard Carlisle."

"What made you do it?"

George squealed, and Mary held his pudgy wrist delicately in the circle of her fingers, waving his hand at his aunts and grandmother.

"I suppose I thought it seemed like the sort of thing Isobel would have done for her son."

"You know you needn't try to be Matthew's mother," Richard replied, softly. "He wanted you to be the mother of his children. And from where I stand, you're shaping up to be a very fine one."

For a moment Mary could not speak for the lump that formed in her throat. When she could, she said, "You're not standing. You're sitting on the back of an elephant."

"So I am," Richard said, returning her smile.

The elephant lurched into motion, then, and Richard slid his arm along the back of the bench—ostensibly to keep Mark secure in his seat. But his fingers found the edge of Mary's shoulder, squeezing lightly, and she leaned back, wondering how it was that the securest her world had felt since last September should occur on the back of an elephant, with Richard Carlisle's arm around her.

"I wish Dad could see us now!" said Mark.

"Me too," Richard agreed, glancing over his nephew's head at Mary. "I do so love to prove him wrong."

About me, she understood his silent communication. "Then I shall have to meet him, before he returns to Edinburgh."

"He's going back tomorrow, but he's planning another visit in a few weeks. I know just the thing. That is—if you're still agreeable to tennis?"

Mary raised an eyebrow slightly. When they were first becoming acquainted at Cliveden, they'd mutually bemoaned the summer sporting events they always looked forward to attending, including Wimbledon, had been suspended due to the War, which in turn had led to her admission that she enjoyed playing as well as watching. Though they'd never had the chance—or rather, had never taken the opportunity. If they had, might she have realised that such enjoyable outings were to be had with him? With her family—and his, too?

"You know I am," she said, realising she very much wanted another day like this, and to disabuse his brother of whatever judgments he'd made about her. "But after the thrashing you gave him at rooftop golf, do you think he can cope with me wiping the tennis court with him? Can you?"
"Oh no," said Richard. "That's why I've got tickets to the Queen's Club Championships."

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Game, Set, Match

Chapter Summary

Tennis proves more than a spectator sport when Mary and Richard attend the Queen’s Club Championship with their siblings.

June, 1922

"Lovely day for tennis," Edith deadpanned, clapping a gloved hand over her hat as a gust whistled through the eaves of the Queen's Club Pavilion, nearly blowing it off her bob.

Mary instinctively reached up to secure hers, as well, though the narrower brim of her mauve cloche, simply trimmed with black lace and a feather, was not so easily caught in the wind as her sister's flimsy sinamay.

"I concur with your assessment, Lady Edith," said George Carlisle from a few places behind Mary as they filed down the steps to their seats in the front row of the Royal Box Balcony. His voice was gravelly like his brother's but not so resonant, and of course tinged with the Edinburgh lilt that had been schooled out of Richard's.

Pausing at the entrance to their row, Edith turned back and squinted at George—for though the day was cool for mid-June, the sun shone. "Says the Scotsman, without irony."

He chuckled, the first pleasant sound Mary had heard from him since their introduction outside the tennis club entrance. They'd shaken hands, the auburn-haired man appraising her from behind his wire-framed spectacles with cold blue eyes that tested every ounce of her good breeding as they took her back to those strained last days of her engagement to Richard.

"Pity the weather we enjoyed in May didn't stick around," said Richard, just behind Mary; the tips of his fingers skimmed her elbow, helping her keep her balance as she sidled into the row of seats. His voice dropped to a more intimate register, and he peered at her beneath the brim of his light panama hat—the perfect complement to his dapper cream-coloured summer suit and pale blue shirt worn as if in defiance of the unseasonable temperatures. "Especially since it's forced you to hide your new dress beneath a coat."

She had to smile at his eye for detail—and also at the irony that the man whom she had believed could never make her happy was in no small part responsible for her having at last cast off widow's weeds.

Richard was not, of course, the only person to notice her shift to colour to signify a lessening of her grief. Isobel had complimented the modern cut of the dress—the one Edith had suggested for her at Selfridges—but she had made no alteration in the degree of her own mourning and asked whether Mary was certain that she was ready.

Such a bold statement to make at a social event like the Queen's Club Championship… Mary had only replied that nine months was longer than most young widows wore black these days, and it had occurred to her how Georgie had only known his mother to wear black. That can't be good for a baby now, can it? Isobel had conceded this point, though Mary knew it wasn't really about the clothes at all, but about where she was wearing them—and with whom.
"You seem more English every time I see you, Richie," George's voice drew Mary from her musing.

"If only you'd been able to join us at the zoo, Mr Carlisle. Even the most stubborn Scots couldn't complain about such a beautiful day."

"It was a wee bit warm," said young Mark, darting his eyes sideways past his uncle and catching Mary's with a glimmer.

George howled with laughter and squeezed Mark's shoulders. "Good lad. Mark hasn't stopped talking about that day," he added as he took his seat on the aisle, his son between him and Richard. "I feel I was at the zoo myself. Only without being too warm."

"The weather's been very changeable this summer," drawled Evelyn Napier at Mary's right—a pleasant surprise addition to their party.

"Perhaps we ought to leave off with further discussion of the weather," Mary told him, "or Mr Carlisle's liable to feel uncomfortable in the presence of so much Englishness."

"Says the Earl's daughter, without irony, as she attends the Queen's Club Championship." George leaned forward in his seat to look down the row past Mary. "So Mr Napier, you're the editor for Richie's competition?"

"That would be Mr Gregson," Edith answered, speaking loudly to be heard from the far end of their party, above the noise of the arriving spectators. "At the last moment he found himself unable to attend. You know the newspaper business."

And Mary knew her sister and that particular shrug, which failed to convey the intended nonchalance. Richard's demeanour conveyed scepticism, too, his eyes narrowed on Edith as if reading between the lines.

George, however, accepted the answer with a nod. "I didn't think you looked like a newspaper man," he again addressed Evelyn, who gave one of his self-effacing smiles as he took out his cigarette case.

"I'm afraid I don't look like much of anything."

"Evelyn!" cried Edith.

"He's quite the tennis player," Mary said.

"Note Lady Mary doesn't say what kind of tennis player." Evelyn lit his cigarette, then tucked the lighter back in his jacket pocket. "She, on the other hand, could play in the championship herself. She's got a wicked backhand."

"So I've heard." Though George's mouth curved upward on one side in a smirk, his cool regard left no doubt as to his meaning, even if a glance at Richard had not revealed him to be giving his younger brother a hard look.

"Something we share in common?" she retorted, lifting an eyebrow.

For a moment George stared at her, then with a nod he glanced away. She'd won—this game, anyway.

Out on the lawn, the tennis game was just beginning as the finalists, Henry Mayes and Donald Greig, took the court, and all conversation was restricted for a time to the sport. As the former made the first serve, Edith asked the group whether he or his opponent, who returned it handily, would
take home the title. While Richard was decisive in his believe that it would be Mayes, Evelyn disagreed.

"Really, Mr Napier? No solidarity for a fellow veteran?" For Mayes, Richard informed them, had fought in both the Boer and Great Wars-founded a Canadian horse regiment, in fact, before joining the RAF.

"It's nothing to do with his service record," Evelyn replied, smoothly as always, though Mary recognised the slight tremor in his hand as he drew from his cigarette. "Chap's had a good show thus far in the tournament, but Greig's at least fifteen years Mayes' junior."

"My point exactly." Richard leaned toward Evelyn as though Mary were not sitting between them. "Greig hasn't the experience, whereas Mayes made the Canadian Davis Cup team back in '13."

"Are you sure you're not making my point? That was nine years ago, Sir Richard. I'm afraid your man's past his prime."

"Not all that surprising he's Richie's man then, is it?" George quipped.

"I'm surprised he's not yours, then, as he's just about your age."

The lazy demeanour with which Richard had turned to his brother, and the bored tones in which he'd delivered his rejoinder surprised Mary. Given her knowledge of how he despised nothing so much as being made to appear ridiculous, she'd braced for the inevitable flare of temper that would spoil this afternoon as it had so many at Downton. Jokes, she supposed, were taken in better humour when dealt by siblings than by disapproving prospective in-laws.

"He might have been," George retorted, "had he not just lost possession."

"Dad?" Mark interrupted, tugging at George's sleeve. "Why did the umpire just say love?"

The brotherly banter gave way to father and uncle instructing Mark in the finer points of tennis scoring, though when Greig took the first set, George stretched his arm across his son's seat to slap Richard on the shoulder. "Shake your conscience in the old man a bit there, Richie?"

"Not in the slightest," he replied, standing up. "Mark-would you like to meet my sport editor?"

"Aye!" Mark hopped up, checking his enthusiasm to ask, "May I, Dad?"

"Sure-only see to it you stay close to your uncle." George smiled as he stepped out into the aisle for them to pass, plucking off the boy's straw boater to ruffle his hair, but as he watched Richard's retreating back, his brow furrowed. "Determined to make a newspaperman of my lad," he muttered as he resumed his seat.

"It's in the family, though, isn't it?" remarked Mary. "Your father operated a newspaper press?"

George's long fingers traced absent patterns over the arm of his aisle seat for a moment before he answered, quietly, "He did indeed, Lady Mary."

Had she misspoken? Perhaps she ought to inquiry after Mark Carlisle's health, or express her relief on Richard's behalf that their father had recovered from his recent illness. Before she could, George went on in his usual gruff way.

"And if he'd ever managed to afford a centre court seat at the Queen's Club, you can bet he wouldn't work during the bloody championship match."
Mary peered over the edge of the balcony to the press seats down below, where she spied Richard in his panama hat with a thin man holding a notebook. "I'm not sure introducing one's nephew to an employee constitutes working?"

"Richie doesn't know how to quit."

"He managed a day at the zoo without working."

That wasn't precisely true, Mary realised; even that day, he'd given Edith an interview of sorts. His mind seldom left the office. Hadn't that been Aunt Rosamund's first impression? I'm sure I'll love him dearly if he'll ever look up from the page.

"Mark tells me it's not easy for you to get away from the store."

"No." George hunched into the turned-up collar of his coat beneath his hat brim. "But I don't have a fraction of Sir Richard's income to support a wife and three children."

Out the corner of her eye Mary noticed Edith angled toward them, unabashedly eavesdropping; it seemed preposterous that her family had ever considered Richard ill-bred, Mary thought, her own hands fidgeting in her lap.

"You'd do well to remember, Mr Carlisle," she said, "that such events as the Queen's Club are as much social as they are sporting. And Richard is quite high society now."

"That's a different tune to the one your lot sang when you were engaged to him. I'm glad to hear it—but you must also appreciate my scepticism as to why our society's good enough for you now."

In her lap Mary chafed her thumbs against the edges of her curled forefingers, but she smiled blandly. "As you must appreciate the irony of a younger brother criticising the elder's move in one breath, and in the next being over-protective of a little sister making her debut."

She turned sharply from him, the smile widening on her lips as she faced Evelyn.

"I'm still not clear how you came to take Mr Gregson's today. Not that I don't prefer your company."

She glanced at Edith, who had either honed her skills as an actress, or truly was not perturbed by the dig at her lover.

"Evelyn happened to be in the office when Michael cancelled." She waved her cigarette airily. "It seemed only sensible to invite him."

"Mr Carlisle clearly isn't the only one who doesn't think newspapers and I mix."

"Perhaps not with ladies' newspapers." Or Edith.

"I'm helping Edith with a project."

"I've been compiling some of the stories of the soldiers who convalesced at Downton, before I forget them. Evelyn's kindly agreed to contribute some of his own experiences and impressions."

Though Evelyn had been nothing less than candid about the War, Mary still found this surprising. "That is kind," she said, "to further sacrifice four years' service to King and Country to the Sketch."

"It may not be for the Sketch." Edith did not elaborate on this, putting her cigarette to her lips and looking away, and Mary didn't have time to dig deeper before Mayes and Greig changed sides and
the second set began.

Shivering at another blast of wind, she looked down from the balcony to where Richard had been speaking to his editor, but he was gone. Her relief that he would soon return to her side was only temporary as Evelyn hunched at the edge of his seat, watching the tennis with greater intensity than she’d seen him apply to anything but the Ascot Derby.

She sat forward to speak to him. "Are you all right?"

"Hmm?" He glanced over his shoulder at her, but returned his attention to the court.

"I didn't mean to give offense about Edith's project."

"None taken." Evelyn ringed as Greig tried to attack to conclude the point but his efforts were ruined by Mayes' passing-shot. "As a matter of fact," he went on during the serve, "I can't remember the last time I found something so fascinating."

The tennis, or regaling Edith with tales from the trenches?

"So it would seem the War's good for something, then," said Mary. "The Honourable Evelyn Napier's developed a new appreciation for tennis."

Another backward glance at her revealed more than the ghost of the old smile he'd worn so carelessly before the War beneath the shade of his straw boater. "Perhaps I'll even get out on the courts."

"Perhaps I'll join you."

Evelyn cringed, so Mary guessed some misfortune had befallen his favourite on the grass, though she hadn't been paying attention. "And crush my already fragile ego?"

"Crushing men's egos," came Richard's voice, looming above her as he returned to his seat. "Now there's another championship Lady Mary could play in. And win."

"I find crushing unnecessary," she replied.

"Indeed?"

"If a man will admit to his fragility, a woman's already won."

"I admitted nothing of the sort," he said, but the dimples winked beneath his cheekbones.

As he lowered himself into his seat his gaze drifted over the top of Mary's head, the smile fading slightly as his eyes fixed on Evelyn. Lord, not this again. Her heart and stomach fluttered with the recollection of dozens of instances when that glare had been directed toward Matthew. I want to know where she goes...Whom she speaks to...But it was only a flicker of jealousy, quickly replaced by an easy grin he looked out at the court, where Mayes had just served another point.

"That's thirty-all, right?" asked Mark with a tug on his uncle's sleeve.

"You've got the hang of it, lad," Richard told him, then addressed Evelyn again, smirking. "And I expect it's really the old man out there whom we should hold most responsible for whatever confessions Mr Napier has made about the state of his pride."

"Greig can still come back."
Evelyn's confidence did not seem misplaced as the younger player did rally, winning two games after the early lead Mayes took in the set. Richard seemed unconcerned, however, more aware of what was happening in the box than on the court. A gust of wind whistled down the aisle.

"Are you warm enough?" he asked.

Mary refrained from shivering again. "Since you came back to block the wind."

"Happy to be of service. We can go up to the clubhouse, if you'd be more comfortable."

"I'm a Yorkshire girl. But if the Scotsman's cold…"

She pressed her lips together against a laugh as Richard huffed, making a show of annoyance as he reached into his coat pocket and took out his flask. He sipped, then proffered it to her wordlessly.

Mary shrugged. "Why not?"

The tips of their fingers brushed as she accepted the flask. Whisky was not a ladylike drink-though Grandmamma was partial to it. From some recess of her mind drifted her own voice: I'm not sure how feminine I am. She tilted her head back to drink and caught Richard watching with undisguised doubt; when she swallowed without a splutter, she lifted her eyebrows and her chin, and as she returned the flask, he grinned.

Warmth coursed languorously through Mary, and it seemed to her that Richard moved at the same pace. He drank again, twisted the cap back onto the flask, and tucked it back into his jacket pocket, eyes never leaving her until they settled back in their seats. Even then their shoulders touched as they each leaned toward the other.

She ought to move, she thought, but then she would miss the solid press of his arm against her, the sinewy outline of his bicep discernible through his lightweight summer suit. The spicy sandalwood scent of his cologne appealed to her much more than the stale odour of cigarettes which clung to Evelyn on his other side, and Edith was monopolising her old friend, besides. The old her would have swooped in and dazzled him with her wit, but Evelyn appeared to be enjoying himself and she knew she enjoyed flirting with Richard. There was no point in pretending it was not flirtation, when their tête-à-tête was coupled with such an intimacy as a shared drink.

Strange how comfortable she should be, when she'd actively avoided this sort of arrangement when Richard was actually her fiancé. Then again he had not been like this when he was her fiancé. Oh, at Cliveden he'd exuded a similar charm which made her prefer his company to every other man's, but it had not been enough to make up for his flaws. Though those seemed less glaring now, as their recent interactions had proved him slower to lay blame or take offense, quicker to apologise, and the superficial things, the social graces he had not been born to and she had not bothered to teach him, simply didn't seem so important to her as they once had. Marriage, motherhood, widowhood had changed her. At the very least, they had changed how she felt about being alone.

So lost was she in her thoughts that when she did become aware of her surroundings once more, several things seemed to happen in rapid succession: the umpire called game point for Mayes, Evelyn's lighter went snick, assaulting Mary's nostrils with the acrid smell of cigarette smoke, and Richard got up from his seat.

"What do you say, Georgie? Time to trust your big brother's sporting instincts? Or will you stick with Mr Napier's man?"

The younger Carlisle's cheek twitched in acknowledgment, but his narrowed gaze did not flicker
from Mary, giving her the distinct impression he'd been watching her for some time. She returned his
stare.

"I'm betting on Mayes," Mark announced.

Richard glanced sideways at Evelyn, who was lighting a cigarette for Edith, then beckoned to his
nephew. "That deserves a hot cocoa in the clubhouse."

"They've got cocoa?"

"They will if I order it."

As soon as they were out of earshot, Mary moved to the empty seat beside George and resumed their
earlier conversation. "Richard came to me first, you know."

"Did he now?" The gingery eyebrows shot up in genuine surprise, but he maintained a level tone.
"Why?"

Mary hesitated—for she realised she didn't know.

"For help selling Haxby," she answered, though she knew that was a far cry from the truth.

George knew it, too, and let out a bark of a laugh. "Is that what this is? Business?" He pushed his
spectacles up the bridge of his nose, and studied her levelly from behind the lenses. "Only from
where I sit it looks like courtship. More like a courtship that it did the last time around, if I may say."

"You have said."

"Look, I know how Richie can be. I've a pretty good idea of how he was with you. The thing is, he
knows it, too. Just as he knows it a woman would have her work cut out for her, putting up with
him."

"He's made it very plain that he accepts mediocrity from no one. But wives aren't employees."

"Neither are brothers."

They shared a smile, a silent acknowledgement of the bond of having fallen short of Richard
Carlisle's impossible expectations.

The moment was short-lived. Almost as soon as George's expression had softened the lines of his
face pulled downward again, cheekbones and jawline thrown into sharp relief in the shadow cast by
his hat.

"He believed you were up to the challenge, you know. And now you're allowing him to court you
again. Is it because you really want to be his wife this time? Or are you looking for a rich and
powerful protector to prop up a crumbling estate for your son the future earl?"

If he meant to intimidate her, George had a thing or two to learn about the art from his brother. The
words themselves were well-chosen, but his relaxed posture, one leg crossed over the other, did not
did not lend enough weight to their delivery. He had to stand when Mary did-down the row, Evelyn
had already risen to stretch his legs during the break between sets—but despite his having the
advantage of height, she had the advantage of being a lady.

"Surely it's occurred to you, Mr Carlisle," she said, clutching her handbag demurely in front of her
skirt, "that a great many women desire Sir Richard's fortune? He's more attractive now than ever,
with so few eligible wealthy men to choose from, and thus far he's resisted the allure. Do you think he's foolish enough to be taken in by the widow and son of a former rival?"

George may have had a retort to that, but Mary excused herself before he had a chance to make it. "I think I'll warm up in the clubhouse, too," she said, though the discussion had not precisely left her cold.

As she stepped into the aisle, Edith called out that she'd come, too. Mary waited while her sister squeezed past Evelyn and George, then they ascended the steps together to the red brick building. A backward glance revealed the men to have resumed their seats, angled toward each other now, engaged in what appeared to be quite lively conversation about the tennis across the expanse of the three vacant chairs between them.

"He seems much more like the old Evelyn, wouldn't you agree?" Mary commented.

"I really couldn't say. The old Evelyn never gave me the time of day."

"And now he's giving you interviews." Their eyes met as they paused for a liveried footman to get the door. "Mr Gregson didn't mind you bringing another man along in his place?"

"Why should he?" said Edith as she swept past into the clubhouse. "He's got a wife he expects me not to mind."

A fair point, if ever Mary had heard one.

The room they entered was a gallery, panelled in oak with a wall of windows that kept the place from feeling too dark or closed in and allowed spectators to view the tennis match from indoors. As Mary scanned the fashionably dressed minglers for Richard, waiters approached bearing refreshment trays. She looped her handbag over her arm and helped herself to a glass of champagne and a vol-au-vent.

"Your project with Evelyn sounds ambitious," she remarked to Edith as they moved deeper into the room.

"Is that why you belittled it?"

Mary rolled her eyes as she chewed her puff pastry. "I belittled the Sketch."

"I'd blame Sir Richard's influence, but you were nasty before you ever took up with him."

"I take it you're not giving his offer any consideration?"

"It wasn't an offer." Despite the previous disparaging remark, Edith's downcast gaze on her half-drunk glass of champagne indicated disappointment. "He did have a point about exercising my talents," she said, and quickly took a drink, her eyes darting about the clubhouse. "I think that's Kitty McKane."

Mary followed the gesture with the empty champagne flute to a young woman in a white dress, a pale blue scarf tied about her dark bob, dressed much as she might on the courts, but for the concession of white lace gloves.

"She and her sister will be at Wimbledon next month," Edith went on. "That might make for a good feature…" Her words trailed off as she moved away, placing her glass on a waiter's tray.

"If you get an interview," Mary said after her, "ask Richard to introduce you to his sport editor."
She looked around for him again as she stood alone, finishing her champagne, but still could not pick out his Panama hat among the boaters and trilbies, nor did she spy any children. As she traded her empty glass for another canapé, she glimpsed the familiar face of Lady Ashby, a great friend of her grandmother's despite having a face like a stewed prune. Not wanting to spoil the day answering awkward questions about why her parents were yet in the country-and who she was here with, which she would certainly write home to Granny about-and of course the inevitable condolences for the loss of Matthew, which Mary came to London to escape in the first place, she ducked down the corridor before Lady Ashby could see her, and took refuge in the ladies' room.

When she emerged a few minutes later, her wind-swept bob tidied, cloche adjusted, lipstick reapplied, along with a dusting of powder to hide the pink and slightly freckled tip of her nose, she met Richard striding around the corner, hands buried in his trouser pockets.

"There you are," he said, the lines of his face relaxing into a grin. Ridiculously, Mary's heart beat a little quicker; she blamed the champagne.

"Where is Mark?" she asked as they went back up the corridor.

Richard nodded toward the door to the Royal Box. "Back watching."

"Don't you want to see whether Henry Mayes beats Donald Greig?"

"He will, and I can read about it in the papers. It's you I wanted to see today."

He offered his arm and another glass of champagne as a waiter passed by; Mary took both, smiling a little to herself as she noted the deepening creases at the corners of Richard's eyes as he watched her fingers curl around the crook of his elbow. His own drink in hand, he wordlessly led her toward a different set of doors, which opened out onto a rooftop garden overlooking the practice courts. A half a dozen other people, a few of them couples, milled about conversing quietly, but no one took any notice of Mary and Richard. For a few minutes they sipped their champagne in companionable silence, arms still linked.

At length he asked, "Enjoying yourself?"

Looking up, she saw his brows drawn together above bright blue eyes in that look of genuine, almost boyish, concern that she should be pleased. The way he'd looked when they'd walked through Haxby together.

"I am," she told him, and his grin stretched—until she added, "Despite George's rigorous interrogation as to what my intentions are toward you."

"I'll throttle the bastard." He twisted back toward the red brick building as if to return to their seats and do precisely that.

Laughing, Mary tightened her grip on his arm and drew him back; the muscles of his forearm remained tense beneath her fingers. "I found it rather an enlightening glimpse into the male experience of courtship."

"Five years too late, you sympathise with my plight that first weekend at Downton? When the Dowager Countess pretended not to know I was a prominent publisher, and the Earl of Grantham deemed me an unsuitable husband for you because I wore the wrong tweed instead of a red coat?"

The words might have been bitter, but the low rasping tone in which he uttered them was not, and he smiled down at her.
Conversation lapsed again and gradually, as they stood enveloped by the other low conversations of the on the terrace and by the distant roar of the crowd watching the tennis on the other side of the building, his arm relaxed beneath her hand—which Mary realized had been absentely stroking his sleeve. She stopped and, withdrawing her arm from the loop formed by the hand hooked in his trouser pocket, she stepped to the edge of the balcony. She set her empty champagne flute on the brick ledge and rested her fingers there, too.

"There was another thing George asked about," she said. "Why did you first come to call?"

After a brief hesitation, Richard replied, "When I heard you'd come to down, I'd just learned my father was ill. I suppose part of me wanted to see someone more miserable than I was."

"Misery loves company?"

She looked over her shoulder; he stood a few feet behind her, having also discarded his champagne glass, the hand not in his pocket tugging at the curling ends of his hair.

"I'm not proud of it." His hand fell to his side, as his gaze, darkening, dropped to his feet, only to brighten with intensity when he looked up at her again. The soles of his shoes scraped on the pavement as he joined her at the ledge. "Another part of me wanted to see how you were bearing up."

"And how did you find me?"

For a moment her question hovered between them, almost a tangible thing in the air, as their eyes held. In her periphery she saw that Richard's hand, did, too-just for a heartbeat before long, warm fingers closed around her hand. He tugged her nearer to him, turning her to face him as he drew her hand up, and curled the other around it. A callused thumb chafed the notch of her wrist, beneath which her pulse fluttered.

"As strong and sharp as I'd always believed you were."

_We can build something worth having, you and I-if you'll let us._

She let him kiss her hand. The terrace had gone very quiet, and she realised they were alone, the others having returned to watch the tennis from the clubhouse or the stands. As his lips grazed her knuckles, closing so soft and warm over each, one hand left hers to settle instead in the curve of her waist. Mary closed the gap between them, the calf-length hem of her lilac dress swishing softly against his trousers, as their clasped hands came to rest against the front of her coat.

"Richard." His name came out half a whisper; could he feel her heart pound through her clothing?

His eyes had been intent upon her hand as he kissed it, but now they flickered upward to meet hers. His breath was hot as he murmured against her skin.

"Incidentally, what _are_ your intentions?"

Mary did not know how to answer in words-even if she could have found her voice—but she knew she wanted to reassure the doubt she read in his eyes. So she leaned into him, lacing her fingers through his and tilting her face up toward his as he bent to meet her kiss.

The sensation of Richard's mouth on hers was a familiar one, yet at the same time wholly different to the kisses they shared before. Perhaps the difference lay simply in her having initiated this time, in wanting to kiss him, and to be kissed by him. She didn't want to think about that, though, didn't want to think about anything at all except for the softness of his lips, the strength of his hand at the small of
her back, holding her snug against him, the scratch of his day's growth of stubble as she traced circles over his cheek with the tips of her fingers. For nine months now she'd been without her husband, without physical affection, and now that she'd had a taste of what she'd been deprived of for so long-the champagne sweetness clung to his mouth-she aroused to the hunger that had been her dull companion through the long lonely nights.

Even in the heat of the moment, the irony was not lost in her that the man rekindling this part of her was the man she'd left because she loved Matthew. She shoved that thought aside, too, for now anyway, and clung tighter to Richard's hand as she quaked at the increasing fervour with which he returned her kisses; for the first time she considered how it might be for him to apply the relentlessness with which he'd built his empire to the study of loving her.

*If you'll let us.*

Unexpectedly, Richard broke away-though just enough to murmur, "Good. Because those are my intentions, too."

Her arms twined about his neck as he cupped her face in his hands to kiss her again.
Chapter Summary

A night at the opera provides an interlude from Mary's troubles; will it also prove an introduction for something more?

July, 1922

The new desk telephone was meant to be a birthday present for Papa, but until he and Mama came to town, Mary intended to make good use of it. Cradling the earpiece and microphone comfortably in the curve of her neck, she trailed the fingers of her free hand along the cord that attached it to the handsome marbled base, enjoying how comfortably she sat behind the oak desk and imagining the speaker at the other end of the line mirroring her posture at his.

"You know, Richard," she said, "I'm starting to suspect you actually enjoy opera."

She spoke in a teasing tone, which lately he matched more often than not, especially in the conversations that followed their kiss at the Queen's Club, but now Richard's low rasping reply was tinged with familiar resentment.

"I would have thought that was obvious from the many invitations I extended you."

There had been many prior to this one, over the years of their acquaintance. It was always years, wasn't it, for her? If he thought he could shame her for the equal number of times she'd declined, he was sadly mistaken. Mary merely rolled her eyes and recalled the excuse she'd given him in brief letters and phone calls: that even if Sir Thomas Beecham was trying to bolster morale by keeping the London music scene alive during the War, she thought it bordered on unpatriotic to enjoy such luxuries while the brave boys suffered in the trenches; that with the Royal Opera House requisitioned for furniture storage, the performances could only be a shadow of music formerly enjoyed by society. Richard had accepted the latter excuse less grudgingly-I suppose in no case would it compare to what I've heard at the Scala in Milan- than the former, which he'd met with grumbles-Interesting that your conscience wasn't similarly pricked by attending Nancy Astor's parties at Cliveden.

"Or is it that you can't conceive of the notion that opera is too lofty for any but the highest members of society?" his voice crackled through her musings.

He was accusing her of snobbery, and Mary did feel slightly chidden for having misjudged him on the sole basis of his breeding. Not once had it occurred to her that he wanted to take her for any other reason than to show off his wealth or to impress her with his acquired refinement. She left off fiddling with the telephone cord, and instead picked up the fountain pen lying on the desk-the engraved one Richard had given her-pressing the tip against the pad of her finger.

"On the contrary. Opera is lavish. The musical equivalent of Haxby Park." She paused to allow him to take this in, and when he rewarded her with a snort of a laugh, she smiled. "And therefore the most likely to make you take notice. Frankly I'm more astonished I haven't heard you linked with prima donnas."
"Too high-maintenance."

Mary's eyebrows went up at that - yet you're courting me? she thought and though he could neither hear nor see her, Richard chuckled. She heard a creak over the receiver and imagined him leaning back in his swivel chair, stretching his long legs out beneath the desk, while she leant forward, pressing the tip of her pen to a page of miscellaneous notes she'd jotted down with regard to Haxby and Stephen Battle, and doodled a curlicue.

"Mmm, and I suppose that might tarnish the image of bold and modern values you like to present with jazz singers and night club openings and _en suite_ bathrooms."

"You obviously haven't seen my flat."

"Flat?" Mary put her pen down and sat up, genuinely surprised by this revelation. "Don't tell me you sold the Knightsbridge house, as well as Haxby."

"Haxby isn't sold yet. And no, I still have my town house. For the image I like to present of being one of _your_ lot, even if country life doesn't suit. But I don't live in it."

She wanted to question him further, but he asked, "Ought I to take all your objections to mean you don't enjoy opera?"

He was quite correct - though at the time she had objected less to the opera invitations than to the man who issued them - but Mary had no wish to admit so now. She was too intrigued by this surprising new side of him, which genuinely enjoyed an art form so many of her kind of people only feigned to appreciate because it was fashionable, the Royal Opera House a place to be seen.

"To be honest I haven't watched enough to form an educated opinion," she said.

"As if that ever prevented a Crawley from casting judgment."

Mary ignored him. "Papa has little patience for foreign languages."

Her pen hovered over the paper as she waited for the inevitable jab at her father; to Richard's credit he managed to sound only slightly mocking when he replied, "Then am I correct to assume you've not seen _The Barber of Seville_, as it's in Italian and a rather scathing commentary on social class?"

"And I thought you built your newspaper empire on being a persuasive salesman."

"Haven't I sold you on a night at the opera, Mary?" he asked, his voice husky, breath staticky in Mary's ear as if he'd leaned closer into the microphone it as he spoke. "Box seats? Supper after? Maybe a little dancing?"

She oughtn't. If ever she'd had reason to refuse Richard Carlisle, it was now: nine months widowed, with an infant she was only just growing accustomed to and a mother-in-law who seemed increasingly disapproving of all the time she was spending in his company.

"I can't come up with a single excuse not to," she said, smiling, and could hear in Richard's voice that he smiled, too.

"Then I'll pick you up at seven."

Aunt Rosamund had never appeared more ill-at-ease in her own Palladian-style drawing room than now, as George sat at Mary's feet, pushing a velveteen elephant on wheels back and forth on her
"I wrote to Mama this morning," said Mary, suppressing a smile at her aunt's rigid posture, perched at the edge of the sage green jacquard cushion of her chair, rounded eyes only darting briefly up from the rug to acknowledge she had spoken. "I told her it was time she and Papa brought Rose to do the season."

"Putting an end to your self-imposed exile from Downton, without actually going back?"

"Returning to Downton would present a bit of difficulty attending the opera with Richard Carlisle tonight."

Mary raised her teacup to her lips and became interested in the contrast of the gilt mouldings and cornices against the green-grey walls, but she felt Aunt Rosamund's eyes on her, at last sufficiently intrigued by the conversation to cease worrying about whether Georgie's elephant would snag the carpet.

"I'd never have pegged Sir Richard as the opera-going type. In fact I thought he had an affinity for jazz. Or is it just for the singers?"

Ignoring the last part, Mary replied, "We pegged him as a lot of things he isn't."

Replacing her cup gently on her saucer, she returned her gaze to Rosamund and saw that her aunt's expression remained impassive, revealing nothing of whether she agreed with the accuracy of the statement.

"Which opera?" asked Rosamund.

"The Barber of Seville."

"Does Sir Richard know it's a comedy?"

Mary could not restrain an eye roll. "He's not averse to laughing. Only to being laughed at."

"When did we ever do that?"

Though Aunt Rosamund meant to be cagey, Mary had to concede the point. "Is disdain preferable to mockery, I wonder?"

"I hope you're including yourself in the parties who disdained him, my dear."

Mary's gaze had drifted toward the windows overlooking Eaton Square, but the ornate mirror that hung between the framing panels of golden silk drapery caught her gaze instead.

"I always acknowledge when I'm in the wrong," said Mary, looking away again at a tug at her skirt that also made her raise her cup and saucer from her lap. George's round face peeped over her knees as he pulled himself upright, his appearance of having no chin accentuated by the habit he had of sucking at his lower lip. "That's not to say some, or even most, of his actions merited it," she added, breaking off a bit of a biscuit for her son, who opened his mouth for it like a baby bird, then plopped down on his heavily padded bottom and resumed playing with his elephant.

"And now?"

Now Richard was making gifts of toys to Matthew's son. The elephant had been delivered from Harrod's the day following their zoo excursion - To memorialise the occasion of Master Crawley's first
elephant ride, read his deliberate script on the card, though of course George was too young to remember it. Nevertheless, Mary appreciated the thought, and she leaned to wipe soggy crumbs from the velveteen trunk.

And now, of course, Richard was courting her. Again. But almost as if for the first time.

Straightening in her chair, Mary met her aunt's eyes. "Now I like him. I did like him at the start, you know. If I hadn't I would never have invited him to Downton in the first place, knowing he would probably propose."

"What if you'd known he was likely to turn out to be a ruthless blackmailer, as well?"

Mary very nearly choked on her tea; she hadn't thought anybody but Matthew, and her parents, knew how Richard had held her scandal over her-Rosamund raised an eyebrow as she turned to pour another cup of tea from the pot on the side table.

"I'm referring, of course, to Lavinia Swire and the Marconi scandal. Though to be fair," she added, as Mary released a ragged breath of relief, "that did expose a great many corrupt politicians."

"That's a different tune to the one you sang before, when you were so intent on tainting Lavinia's virtue."

"I always acknowledge when I'm wrong," said Rosamund, and Mary nearly choked again, this time with laughter as she recalled Granny's oft-whispered words: Rosamund is never so righteous as when she's in the wrong.

"So it would seem Richard has learnt to."

"Then he'd be the only man who has."

The reflective quality in her aunt's statement piqued Mary's curiosity, though she could not dwell on it for long before Rosamund's drifting gaze and rounding eye diverted her attention to George, who had crawled across the drawing room and now pulled up on the piano bench. By the time Mary had set down her tea and gone after him, he'd sidled around it and stretched up on the tips of his stocking feet to try and reach the keys.

"No no, Georgie," she chided as she bent to pluck him out of the way of the instrument; when he squawked she recalled the happy gleam in young Mark Carlisle's eyes as he'd chattered to her about how much fun it was at Uncle Richie's office, where he'd been allowed to pass an entire afternoon typing his own article about the London Zoo. When she expressed surprise that the newspaper baron had been so permissive within his lair, he only shrugged and said he was of the opinion that if children were never exposed to the adult world, how could they learn to respect it? At Mark's age, his brother George had informed with a grin, he'd been the reporter, editor, publisher, and circulator of Morningside's first gossip paper.

What stuck with Mary, though, was how easily Richard related to his nephew. Rather than take George away from the piano, she seated herself on the bench, holding him in her lap, and helped him to press the keys with his short dimpled fingers. His subsequent delight at the tinkle of the treble notes charmed Mary more than she had been since her infant son was first placed in her arms and his tiny hand grasped her finger. A glance at Aunt Rosamund revealed her to be, predictably, a good deal less so, but Mary paid her no heed and let George have his fun.

The cacophonous pounding reminded her of the slightly off-key accompaniment to a film as she scanned the framed photographs arranged on a shawl draped over the closed lid of the piano. There
was, of course, an obligatory one from her aunt and uncle's wedding which Mary could not linger on for the pang it produced, except to contrast the high-necked, wasp-waisted creation of ivory silk which had been the height of bridal fashion in Rosamund's day, to her own flowing one with its dropped waistline and subtle embroidery. The groom looked even more a product of the past, not that men's wedding fashions had changed so much in the past quarter-century, with his swooping handlebar moustache, the ends waxed to curled perfection.

"I remember how Uncle Marmaduke used to play the piano," she said, her fingers picking their way through an all but forgotten syncopated melody line. "He tried to teach us ragtime." Her and Edith, anyway; Sybil had been too little for anything more than sitting on their uncle's lap and banging the keys. Just like George now, Mary realised, the memory of small Sybil and her son blurring together through a sudden veil of tears. "Much to the governess' chagrin."

"And your grandmother's. My piano-playing banker, with his penchant for American dance hall tunes, she'd say, should not influence her granddaughters."

"Well I don't think he did, much. We were already far too rigidly educated as earl's daughters to get the knack for a swing tempo. Although perhaps that explains Sybil."

Mary swallowed the knot in her throat, and blinked, and saw that in her armchair across the room, the sofa and matching chair opposite all empty, her aunt looked so alone. All alone with plenty of money in a house in Eaton Square. She'd seen her like that once before, after Lord Hepworth had been found in her maid's bed. Against George's protests, she scooped him up and carried him back over to the sofa, on which she perched at the corner nearest Rosamund's chair, and appeased him with another biscuit.

"Mama liked Marmaduke's music," she said. Mama liked Marmaduke himself, and there had always been a fond, faraway expression in her clear blue eyes when she described him as having borne a striking resemblance to Theodore Roosevelt. Though Mary knew little about American presidents.

"I did, too. And I wish I'd realised how much I did before he wasn't here to play it."

After returning home late from tea with Aunt Rosamund, Mary counted on Richard's habit of tardiness to allow her adequate time to dress for the opera-and, after the melancholy turn the visit had taken, on an entertaining night out to lift her spirits. As her luck would have it, she approached the drawing room at nearly a quarter past seven to find him for once having arrived perfectly on time, looking indisposed to exchange pleasantries with Isobel, who was telling him that George had been put to bed early.

"He returned from his great-aunt's with a bit of a sniffle. Nothing serious, I'm sure, just one of those pesky summer colds. Do you feel anything come on, my dear?" she pounced on Mary as she slipped through the French doors. "Only your parents will think me negligent if you're taken to bed when they arrive. You look a trifle flushed."

Mary felt a little flushed, but she also felt fairly certain it had more to do with the appreciative sweep of Richard's eyes as he rose to greet her.

"She looks in the pink of health to me." He took her gloved hand. "Or would mauve be the more apt term?"

"Fuchsia, in fact."

His long fingers squeezed hers tighter, thumb scuffing the jut of her wrist through the second skin of
black satin before he released it.

"Obviously I've made more a study of things that are black and white and red all over." At his own joke, lips slightly parted as though in expectation; Isobel obliged him with a polite chuckle, though Mary only managed a twitch of an eyebrow. "Whatever that precise shade of purple is, you wear it well, Lady Mary."

She thanked him, but had a feeling as his gaze travelled downward from her face to examine her matching t-strap pumps, that he was complimenting the cut of her gown rather than the colour: the chiffon slip, with its overdress of gold lamé woven in geometric patterns, fell just below the tops of her calves, the shortest hemline she'd yet dared; even Richard must know that purple by any name was still mourning. Then again, this was the very man who'd thought tweed was essential for a Friday to Monday party, regardless of whether a shoot was scheduled or not.

In any case, after months of black and isolation and having no wish to be desired to any man but the only one who would never again gaze at her from across a crowded room, she recognised herself as a woman who wanted to be— and was— noticed. When Richard slid into the driver's seat and leaned across the seat to steal a peck on her cheek, Mary turned her head, her fingertips sliding over the strong line of his jaw as he kissed her lips instead.

Wrong tweed notwithstanding, Richard did make a rather splendid picture in evening clothes; he sat as though enthroned on the gilt and crimson velvet armchair in their Grand Tier box when they arrived just as the horns and timpani blasted out the opening notes of the Barber's familiar Overture, he as much as anyone present looked as though he belonged in the Royal Opera House.

However, when the house lights rose again at the intermission and Mary, putting her opera glasses away in the niche set into the railing, turned to him and found him not looking like he wanted to belong. Or as if he were fully present there at all. Beneath the ridge of his brow, his eyes fixed on the curtain, hard but not seeming really to see it, and the tightness about his mouth and chin recalled how frequently he'd worn just that expression at Downton. She thought particularly of that dreadful Christmas, when he'd nursed his Scotch with a glower during the charades game while she left him to his misery.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Not the opera lover you claimed to be?"

Richard glanced sideways at her. "Hmm? Oh." He straightened up in his seat, uncrossing his legs. "The truth is, I've seen much better performances. I daresay La Scala spoiled me."

"I daresay," said Mary, barely refraining from rolling her eyes. "Richard, if you think your repertoire of opera attendances will impress me—"

"Considering you don't care a great deal for opera, that hardly seems a worthwhile endeavour." His response was smooth, but Mary recognised the expression of almost feline nonchalance, of knowing he'd been called out, yet denying any embarrassment.

"It also hardly seems worthwhile to compare one of the premiere opera companies in the world to any other. We're still a few years out from the War…"

Sconces glittered from the balconies like fairy lights on a Christmas tree as Mary cast her gaze about the hall. The elegant opera-goers who stood in the pretence of stretching their legs but really showed off their impeccably fashionable clothes disappeared as she envisioned instead the space filled with heirloom furniture and precious works of art taken from historical buildings and stately family homes in the hope that it might be safe from German bombs. While the heirs to these dynasties, she thought, glimpsing a man with a pinned-up sleeve down below, shipped out to become the detritus of muddy
fields. Or, if they did return, never left the trenches entirely behind, or fitted exactly into the places they once occupied.

Where was Evelyn Napier now? Sitting in his dark corner at Murray’s jazz club, chain smoking? With he with Edith, recounting his experiences in the trenches?

She swung her gaze back to her companion seated to her right, and gave him a smile. "Enjoy it for what it is, Richard."

He sat back in his chair, his sharp features relaxing into a slight smile as he let out his breath. "You're enjoying it, then?"

Relief. Had he been cross because he thought the performance did not please her? Well-her cheekbones prickled—she’d set a precedent for that. But hadn’t he noticed her applause after each aria? Her laughter at all the appropriate moments? Figaro the barber conspiring with Count Almaviva to woo Rosina under the nose of her oppressive guardian Dr Bartolo, who wanted to wed her for her fortune, the former already counting his gold, the latter dreaming of his fair Countess…Rosina avoiding discovery by switching the love letter Bartolo caught her writing with her maid's laundry list…the Count barging into the house disguised as a drunken soldier whose cheeky recitative insulted the doctor and incited a riot which involved the entire neighbourhood…Then again, Mary neither applauded nor laughed to precisely the emotive degree that Mama, for example, would, so perhaps Richard truly had not realised. That's not who we are.

"Despite my rather rusty Italian, learnt from our German governess, yes. Very much."

For the fleetest moment, Richard’s dimples belied the genuine pleasure he took at her pleasure, and then his lips pressed together and twisted into a smirk. "Your Italian pronunciation must—"

"Leave a lot to be desired."

"Well-I promise not to ask you to speak Italian if you won't ever ask me to speak French."

They shook hands on it, but when Richard released her fingertips as their laughter faded, his hand went up to smooth his hair.

"I wish I'd thought to send you over the libretto to peruse this afternoon."

"It doesn't matter. I'm following along well enough to pick up on exactly why you enjoy this opera."

"Indeed? Do enlighten me, Lady Mary."

"Because you relate to Figaro. His position allows him to know everything that goes on in his city."

Mary followed the curve of his Adam's apple above the wing tips of his collar as he leaned his head back and chuckled. "Thank God you haven't cast me as Bartolo."

At one time she might have drawn a parallel, but now she said, "Destroying his rivals' reputations through slander? I thought your weapon of choice was truth."

The laughter that had been rumbling from him abruptly stopped. Something flickered in his eyes in acknowledgment of what that had meant in the past, yet a current seemed to pass from them into Mary, an electricity that had never existed between them before, but might have been…If you'll let us.

Three flashes of the house lights, signalling the audience back to their seats, brought the moment to
an end. Applauding as the curtain lifted for act two, Mary inclined her head toward Richard, who leant forward to hear her say, "Bartolo is a moustache-twirling villain. The barber has all the real power."

"More than the Count, whose title allowed him to escape punishment? Careful." Richard's breath was soft and warm on her cheek, and the tip of his nose bumped her temple. "People may think you're subverting the social order."

Mary sat rigid, schooling into submission the shudder that threatened to ripple between her shoulder blades to the base of her neck. "That's the point, isn't it? The lowly barber pulls all the strings, wreaking havoc on Bartolo's household and ensuring a happy marriage for the Count."

"Don't underestimate Rosina, though-a woman who wants to control her own destiny."

"It's a shame her destiny is the Count, though. He's not half so interesting as Figaro."

Richard straightened in his seat again, moving out of the shadow into the light that emanated from the stage so that she could see him scowling again.

"He's not half the singer, either…" He gestured toward the bass onstage, who was performing an ironic recitative about his suspicions that the Count was again attempting to woo Rosina in cognito, this time in the guise of a substitute for her music teacher. "And you may not have noticed in the first act that the Calumny was transposed to a higher key than Rossini composed it."

Of course she had not. "If I must contend with my own spotty Italian and your commentary, I may lose the plot entirely."

"Sorry. It's just that they ought to cast a bass who can actually sing bass-" He broke off as Mary reached out and caught his gesturing hand, drawing it back to rest on the arm of his chair.

"You realise, of course, that your negative bias may prompt me not to accept another invitation to the opera?"

"If I take you to another opera," he said, lacing their fingers together, "it'll be in Milan."

Richard did not speak again for the remainder of the opera, except to occasionally lean in and whisper a translation of the libretto-once or twice his lips brushed her temple as he did so-but he laughed often, both aloud or silently, his amusement evident as a glimmer in his eyes when they glanced at each other

as the onstage escapades of the barber and the secret lovers to outwit Bartolo and his cronies increased in hilarity-thanks to the arrival of a convenient thunderstorm-until the story crescendoed to its inevitable happy conclusion.

Mary was sorry when they rose from their seats to exit the box that it had to end, though as Richard tucked her arm through his, covering her hand in the crook of his elbow with his own, she was buoyed by the thought that the night was not quite over yet. As they descended the great carpeted staircase that led down to the lobby, she started to ask what arrangements he'd made for supper, when he abruptly disengaged himself from her grasp. Muttering an excuse almost as an afterthought, he left her side and hurried down the remainder of the steps, his eyes fixed as if he'd spotted some quarry. She did not follow, having no wish to attempt the stairs at speed in her evening shoes without his steadying arm, or to cut her own path across the people surging toward the exits, like a lone salmon swimming upstream, so she moved to the edge of the staircase and peered over the ornate railing, trying to pick out his top hat among the dozens of other seemingly identical ones worn by the
men mingling on the black and white marble floor. Instead she spied the bald patch at the back of his head, the top hat clutched by the brim in both hands as he stood locked in conversation with a man about his own age but leaning on a cane; his greying hair, she observed, could have benefitted from a dab of Richard's pomade, and the wing-tipped collar needed buttoning above his loose white bowtie. Dishevelled as Richard's companion was, Mary was miffed to have been abandoned by her escort— even more so when a female voice to her right glided over her name as if it were made of silk.

"I'd recognise your profile anywhere," said Amelia Semphill, sidling her way across the burgundy carpeted stair; she also had a distinguishing profile, though hers took the form of a prominent nose and thick eyebrows. "I've still never seen cheekbones the equal of yours. Lovely to see them again," she said, leaning in to give her a peck. "And you."

"It's been a long time," Mary replied, her chest tightening, as her mind supplied exactly how long: Lady Amelia Semphill had, along with her brother the Viscount Gillingham and their mother the dowager, attended her wedding. "I never would have imagined as I watched you walk up the aisle on your groom's arm that the next time I'd saw you I'd offer condolences for his passing."

That was so like Amelia, Mary thought, even as an ache pulsed behind her left breast, that the corner of her mouth twitched in a smirk. The Foyles may have been old friends of Mary's family, but it had been the son with whom she had been amiable, not the daughter.

"Your letter was very kind," she replied, glancing over the bannister to see that Richard was still engrossed in his conversation. "It comforted me greatly to hear from someone who understood the depth of my loss."

Amelia did not flinch. "If there's anything the British Empire abounds in these days, it's widows. You're in mauve, though," she breeze on, glancing back over her shoulder at Mary as she resumed her descent of the staircase, clearly expecting her to come along and leaving her with no real choice but to follow. "My mother will be pleased to hear you're out in society again. Is yours here with you?"

"No, my parents are still in the country." Hastily, to avoid further questioning on the subject, Mary asked, "And who did you come with?"

"Why, Tony of course." With an almost lazy flick of her glass beaded handbag, Amelia gestured vaguely across the foyer where the Viscount must be. "He's off somewhere, finding champagne. Would you care to join us? I know he'd like to see you."

"Or your mother would him to?"

"Indeed."

Mary smirked again. Like Richard, Amelia was many things, but never a liar. She glanced his way now, just in time to see his friend give him an awkward pat on the arm, then limp away, Richard watching him go with slumped shoulders and sliding his fingers over the brim of the hat clutched tight in his hand. Then, abruptly, he straightened up and swept the room with his gaze, which brightened as it alit on her.

"Thank you, Amelia, but I have supper plans. Another time? And please, do give Tony my regards."

As she met Richard, he offered her his arm, along with his apologies for abandoning her. "But it appeared you found acquaintance of your own?"
"An old family friend, Lady Amelia Sempill."

"The London Sempills?" Richard asked.

"By marriage."

Mary remembered, suddenly, that Evelyn Napier had been briefly engaged to one of the Sempill girls; it seemed strange that Richard should know them, too, though she realised that was an old prejudice, that his sphere had a broad scope, overlapping hers.

"Her maiden name was Foyle." A backward glance over her shoulder, idea suddenly occurred, and she decided to have a little sport with Richard. "She invited me for a drink with her brother, Lord Gillingham."

Glancing backward over her shoulder, she spied them standing together, Anthony having procured the sought-after champagne.

"I hope you refused," said Richard, following her gaze to the tall, dark, handsome younger man who, at least on the surface, appeared untouched by the War; to his credit, Richard's voice contained a joking note instead of a jealous one.

Anthony did not see Mary, though her glance didn't linger when Amelia caught her eye from across the foyer.

"I turned down the drink," Mary said as they stepped through the wide open glass doors, and when a glance up at him revealed him to be frowning as he put on his top hat, she said, "Perhaps I oughtn't to have, since you wouldn't even introduce me to your friend."

"He wasn't terribly amiable, you might have noticed," Richard replied, signalling to the valet, who wasted no time going to bring the motor around.

For the first time Mary wondered what his acquaintance would think of his renewed courtship of her; his brother, after all, disapproved.

She shrugged. "People might be more amiable if you didn't pounce on them with business when they're out for pleasure."

"It wasn't a business matter."

The Silver Ghost pulled up to the curb, and the valet hopped out, sweeping open the door. Mary looked up at Richard as he slid into the driver's seat, the pensive look masked by the return of his smile.

"I hope your refusal of a drink with Lord Gillingham means you're still amenable to supper with me."

"I am rather-if there's anywhere the factotum of the city can go without being recognised by his disagreeable friends."

And, truth be told, she would prefer not to encounter any more of her friends, who reminded her of her late husband, or the return to the loathsome marriage market she now faced without him.

After a moment, Richard said, "There is one place we're certain to have privacy." His fingers opened and then flexed again on the steering wheel, and the sidelong dart of his eyes indicated wariness to propose what he had in mind.
"Your house?" Mary prompted.

"Certainly not."

She was relieved. Though she'd never seen Richard's townhouse during their engagement—it would not have been proper—the prospect of doing so now did not intrigue her now, either. Tonight she'd seen facets of Richard he'd never revealed before, and she doubted a house he kept for appearances would show her any more of those hidden depths than Haxby Park had.

"Too many servants' tongues to wag," he added.

"Is that why you gave your chauffeur the night off?"

A dimple flashed but Richard said, "He's not getting the night off. The Ghost isn't my only car, you know."

And yet some parts of the Richard she knew would never change. For a moment she regarded him in silence as he drove, then she asked, "The aforementioned flat?"

He nodded, almost reluctantly. Was he concerned about propriety? Or hesitant to reveal his secrets to her? Of course, he'd been the one to bring up the flat in the first place. It was, certainly, improper. Though not the most improper thing she had ever ventured to do.

The Silver Ghost groaned softly to a stop as Richard braked for a traffic signal. He looked at her, awaiting direction, his face handsome and hopeful in the light of a streetlamp.

"So long as someone there can cook."
The someone at Richard's flat who could cook was Richard himself. Leaning against the white kitchen cupboards, watching him butter bread for cheese and pickle sandwiches, Mary wasn't sure if that entirely counted. Although she swirled the faintly cloudy mixture in her cocktail glass he had mixed a quite nice White Lady. So nice, in fact, that she'd drunk more of it than she ought to have on a mostly empty stomach, resulting in her present struggle not to laugh more at his anecdote about the second Royal Opera House fire than it merited...

…and not to glance at his forearms, divested of his tailcoat and bared by rolled-up shirtsleeves, the hairs on them red-gold in the light, more than was appropriate.

"Somehow I knew there had been a masked ball gone wrong," she said, dragging her eyes back up to his face, "but I've never heard the bit about the party being thrown by a magician."

"Give the man his due, Mary…" Richard looked up at her as he lay his butter knife aside, dimples flickering with the mocking twist of his mouth around the edge of his Scotch and soda glass. "Walter Scott didn't call him the Great Wizard of the North for nothing."

Mary had made the mistake of choosing that moment to sip her cocktail, and gave an unladylike snort. "All the more embarrassing for the ROH. He sounds like a character from an L Frank Baum novel."

He reached around her to draw a knife from the block by the sink, and her gaze found its way to his forearm again; she watched the tendons flex as he pressed the blade through a block of cheddar, cutting thin, precise slices:

"This wizard's personal life was hardly suitable for children's literature," Richard went on. "He fathered two bast-illegitimate sons with members of his troupe."

Smiling into her glass at his self-edit, Mary said, "Mm, that does sound rather more like content for one of your papers."

"In fact Mr Anderson had _five_ children." Richard arranged the cheese on the slices of bread in a methodical way that suggested this was not a unique occurrence. "Another son and two daughters with his wife." He brushed against Mary as he stepped around her to return the cheddar block to the icebox, and again when he came back to the counter with a jar of pickle chutney. He met her eye at her as he twisted the jar lid. "They all followed in his magical footsteps."

"That must have been salve for his pride after the humiliation of burning down the Royal Opera."

"Yes, I'm sure it must." The jar opened with a _pop_, and Richard turned to spread the pickle over the bread. The lines of his face tugged downward in a frown, and he added in a low tone, "Until he and his eldest son became bitter rivals."

Though he was clearly troubled by the family dynamics of the story, Mary couldn't hide her own
amusement. "Magician rivalry. My. And I thought my family were given to dramatics."

With practiced strokes of the knife, Richard cut the sandwiches into neat triangles, trimmed off the crusts, then offered her a plate. He lifted his chin, but the playful gleam returned to his eye, and when he spoke the tight quality left his voice. "I hope you appreciate the restraint I'm demonstrating in not remarking on that."

The tips of their fingers touched beneath the plate as Mary took hold of it. "As much as I hope you appreciate mine in not commenting on you deigning to make me a sandwich."

Glass in one hand and plate in the other, Richard shouldered through the swinging door to the dining room and held it open with his foot for her to pass through.

"If I'd known we were to end up back here for supper," he said, "I would have had cook do up something a little less…"

"Working class?"

"I was going to say bachelor fare," he said with a scowl that gave way almost immediately to a grin.

He placed Scotch and sandwich at the top of a table with u-shaped pedestal legs long enough to seat a dozen comfortably, drew out the chair to the right, upholstered in green leather edged with nail heads, and seated her. As he pushed her chair in, his thumbs stroked her arms unnecessarily, so warm in contrast to the cool metallic beading at the edges of her sleeve. Mary looked up to see him still smiling at her as he lingered, expectant of the response which she had been too distracted by his touch to think of. She glanced away, the room seeming to spin slightly, and as Richard took his seat she took a drink.

"I'm surprised you don't plan for any eventuality," she said.

Surely that was the point of a penthouse flat above his office-partially, anyway? A discreet place to bring women after nights out on the town? She ought to be flattered, she supposed, that he had not simply assumed she would approve of such a scheme. Had she agreed to one, though, in coming here?

"There's rhubarb and custard in the icebox," Richard replied, tucking into his sandwich, "though that was more a plan for the eventuality of my requiring a late-night snack. Actually there was a salad I never got around to at luncheon-watercress, tomato, and potato."

He started to get up, but Mary covered his hand on the glossy surface of the table which reflected the modern painting that covered most of the wall at the end of the wood-panelled room. "This is fine, really. I was only teasing."

As though to prove it she took a bite of her sandwich; there was no denying that the contrasting flavours and textures of cheese and pickle, however simple, combined to make a delicious supper. And, somehow, a perfectly suitable choice for a man of contrasts like Richard, who made his own sandwiches and then ate them in a dining room furnished with such luxuries as a pair of two-foot high silver table lamps with alabaster and glass-beaded canopies, and a bronze tiger which prowled the amboyna burl parquet sideboard in front of a painting in a geometric leaf motif, like Shere Khan in Kipling's jungle stories.

Easing back into his chair, Richard smiled softly down at the hand which Mary had forgotten still clasped his. She didn't like to pull away, not when he looked like that, but thankfully he spared her the awkwardness, sliding his long fingers out from beneath hers to pick up his sandwich.
"As you're in such a magnanimous mood," he said, "I'll make the perhaps unwise confession that there are some aspects of the privileged life I've not grown entirely accustomed to."

"Such as?"

"How seldom one can be truly alone. There ought to be a cook in the kitchen now, or a butler presiding in the corner listening in on every word we say." Richard contemplated her over his glass. "Though I suppose the notion of total privacy would never occur to you."

_It still seems rather odd to be found in your bed_, Matthew's husky morning voice drawled through her mind. She took a drink.

For a moment they sat silent, Mary watching Richard eat. In the privacy of his own home his manners left nothing to be desired, though as he finished off his sandwich he popped the end of his thumb between his lips to lick off a blob of pickle. She ought to have found _that_ ill-bred, but instead of her nose crinkling in disgust, her stomach gave a little twist as she imagined the purse of his lips and the flick of his tongue and the heat of his mouth on her own.

The scrape of chair legs against the floor-perhaps for the best-interrupted this daydream and Richard stood and announced he'd like another sandwich. He offered her one, too, but she asked only for another drink.

"Another White Lady coming right up," he said with a grin, and Mary thought again as she watched how easily he moved to the sideboard and found the necessary ingredients, glancing at her over his shoulder to acknowledge her as they chatted while he mixed the drinks, how comfortable he was here, as much in his element as in the office downstairs. Did he do this often with women? With that jazz singer, Josephine What's-her-name?

Mary carried their drinks to the living room while Richard retreated to the kitchen to make his sandwich. The grey-haired tabby who hissed at her when she and Richard first entered the flat greeted her again in a similar manner from the back of one of the sage green club chairs.

"Careful, William," she said; Richard had told her the cat was named for William Randolph Hearst, the American publisher. "Keep up that sort of behaviour, and all Sir Richard's visitors will know you for the common alley cat you really are."

As she placed Richard's drink on the side table nestled between two chairs, she bent to examine a photograph in a simple silver frame. Three towheaded boys in knee breeches and knitted jumpers who looked remarkably alike-and remarkably like Richard-except for their varying sizes, grinned at her from behind the glass. Mark she of course recognised, though he was missing his front teeth and his cheeks were plumper, the picture taken a few years ago; she assumed the middle boy must be George Jr and the youngest…what was his name? Andy. The baby niece-Joanne? No, Jeannie-was not pictured at all.

Mary moved about the living room, taking advantage of Richard's absence to look at the other family portraits and get a glimpse into his mysterious personal life. Most were displayed on a bookcase built into the corner of the honeyed oak panelled wall, preserving the uncluttered minimalism of the décor. A photograph of two elderly people she assumed were his parents revealed that Richard mostly favoured his late mother, who appeared formidable enough to rival Granny, though Mr Carlisle gave off an air of charm even in shadowy black and white, dapper with a pencil moustache. Richard's brother grinned proudly from a few, including one with his bride, a pretty but shy looking woman who, guessing from the fashion of her admittedly lower-class gown, couldn't be much older than Mary-and having borne four children! She found the baby at last, in a picture with the entire Carlisle clan at the Christening.
What struck her about that one, apart from how Richard rather stuck out against the humble Sunday best of his father and brother in his morning coat and top hat, was how free they all were with their smiles in contrast her own family's awkward restraint in the pictures from George and Sybbie's baptisms. Granted, they had been in mourning, but even in the best of times her family never looked so unreservedly happy as this. *That's not who we are…But Richard's dimples were as deep in his cheeks as George's* as he slung an affectionate arm around his younger brother's shoulder.

She turned from the bookcase and took in the rest of the furnishings. As in the dining room a single painting dominated one wall, unframed but set into an alcove framed with moulding carved in strong vertical lines, a modern abstract design done in earth tones. A sofa stood beneath it, upholstered to match the chairs, with jellyroll cushions serving as low arms and no back so as not to obstruct the artwork. On the adjoining wall stood a cabinet which held a phonograph and, curious to know what sort of music Richard enjoyed in private, Mary went to it; passing the chair where the cat perched, she reached out discreetly to stroke his grey striped coat, but he was wary and swatted her hand away. The curling tip of his tail quivered as it draped over the chair, and she returned his unblinking, dilated stare as she sipped her cocktail.

"You know, your suspicion reminds me of Richard's brother." She smirked as the absurd thought occurred that Richard might have confided to his cat about their torrid past.

"Is William warming to you?" his voice sounded suddenly behind her.

Mary steadied herself with a drink before she looked back to see the kitchen door swinging silently on its hinges behind him as he stepped through carrying a plate and two trifle bowls of the aforementioned custard.

"Do cats ever warm to anyone?"

Richard shrugged. "He likes me."

He placed the dishes on the table with his drink, then stood beside Mary, sliding his hands over her hips and turning her toward him. Instinctively she tilted her face up toward his as he leaned in as though to kiss her, but he paused, grinning down into her eyes.

"They tend to be little cold and careful at first, but once they're assured of being in charge, they can be quite affectionate. I find."

He angled his head to close the gap between them, and despite puzzling over the subtext uttered in his low teasing tones, Mary allowed him to kiss her, and returned it—though only briefly before she drew back, eyebrow arched.

"That's how it is, then? William the Cat presides as sovereign ruler over your flat?"

"He left me little choice but to agree to this arrangement after he insisted on living here."

With a gentle nudge at the small of Mary's back, Richard indicated she sit in the chair to his left, facing the painting; he sidled around the front of the other chair with the cat and lowered himself into it, shooting William a sideways glance as it descended on wary paws along the curving arm to settle there before Richard could rest his elbow on it. The green eyes stared back at him through slits, and in the end it was Richard who sighed in resignation and muttered that he was going to eat and did not require the armrest anyway.

Around bites of sandwich he spun a yarn of how William came from the back alleys of Fleet Street to live in the penthouse above the *Capital Herald* offices, though Mary only half-heard as she
contemplated how his actions revealed that Richard apparently did have it in him to be conciliatory after all; that he could share his space and acquiesce to someone else's demands. Even if a cat was only a small example, it was nevertheless a start.

Then again, she thought, sipping her drink, this shouldn't be so awfully surprising. What was Haxby if not an enormous failed attempt at mollifying her? He'd put her own preferences for living arrangements above her own, this flat made abundantly clear.

"...until he one day he decided he'd killed enough mice for the warehouse lads," the rumble of Richard's voice drew her back to awareness, "and began to leave them on the chief press operator's desk, instead."

Mary wrinkled her nose. "Charming."

"McClintock wasn't so much disgusted as insulted that William didn't think he was capable of catching his own mice."

"Do you feel that way when William leaves you little presents?"

"He doesn't, so he must respect my ability to fend for myself." Richard set aside his empty sandwich plate and started on his custard, and Mary followed suit.

"Have you considered he might be plotting to starve you out so he can seize the flat for himself once and for all?"

"What a diabolical mind you have, Lady Mary," said Richard-and his mouth curved in an expression that made this seem much more complimentary than it ought to have.

"The most likely scenario, of course, is that unlike you, William doesn't care to revisit his roots. Why go to the trouble of catching mice and dragging them up four flights of fire escapes when there are servants' hands to feed you? Even for privacy's sake?"

"He takes the lifts, actually."

Mary nearly choked on her custard as she laughed, and had to clear her throat with a drink. "You must be joking."

"I swear," Richard said, spoon clinking against the glass dish as he scooped out the last of his custard. "That really was how William and I became acquainted. I stepped into the lift and he leapt in as the doors shut, rode up here, and claimed this chair."

"I'd never doubt your word. Although I'm a little disappointed you didn't find him sat behind your desk conducting a board meeting."

"Oh, Miss Fields caught him there-once. But she's highly allergic and wouldn't stand for an office cat."

"How fortunate you've a formidable secretary to protect your empire from a coup." She dabbed the moisture from corners of her eyes; how good it felt to cry with amusement, for once. "You would have a self-made cat who's bold and modern enough to make his social climb via lift instead of the stairs."

Richard chuckled, but glanced away, watching his fingers stroke the scruff of William's neck. "If only such a quick and easy path had been available for mine."
For a moment Mary considered him as she finished her custard, then she asked, "How long since William made his rise?"

"Six years? Seven?"

So William padded on little cat feet into Richard's life before she did. "I'm surprised you managed to keep a cat secret from me. Even more than the lat."

"The secret cat in the secret flat…Sounds like something you've been reading to George. But why?" he asked, angling his body in his chair as he met her eye again. "Don't I strike you as the animal-loving type? I did, after all, ride an elephant at the zoo."

The furrow between his pale golden eyebrows said he expected her to wax philosophical about his personality, but Mary had no such deep notions. "Because I never saw a trace of cat hair on your suits."

Briefly the lines on his forehead deepened, but a drink washed the disappointed look away, and he smiled at her, as he scuffed his thumb over the edge of his glass, ceding to her game. "A valet's not worth his salary if he can't clean a suit to pass muster with an earl's daughter."

He certainly did that tonight, Mary thought, eying him in his shirtsleeves and waistcoat; while he was in the kitchen he'd loosened his tie, and she could see the curve of his throat between the open wings of his collar. Her face warmed as he caught her scrutinizing him—or was it the alcohol?-and she raised an eyebrow at him.

"Your valet isn't here now, so perhaps you'd better get up from that chair while you still can."

"What would I do once standing?"

"Well…" She swallowed the last of her White Lady. "I believe you said you'd take me dancing if I attended the opera with you."

"I see how it is—you only humoured me by sitting through Barber because of the lure of more appealing entertainment."

The twinkle in his eyes belied the sulky tone he affected. He drained his Scotch, and though Mary knew he was watching her she couldn't stop her gaze drifting down to follow the roll of his throat as he swallowed. He set his empty glass on the table and stood, William leaping off the chair arm, startled by the sudden movement, and extended his hand to Mary.

"I promised you supper, too," he said, and she followed the nod of his chin to the empty sandwich plate. "Oh dear. After cheese and pickle, I suppose I ought to lower my expectations."

But she placed her hand in his, and his long fingers closed around it, drawing her effortlessly to her feet. He kept hold of her hand as he guided her to the end of the room with the phonograph and put the needle on the record. Instantly, the living room was filled with the jaunty sounds of muted jazz horns and winds playing a faintly eastern sounding melody. Well I'm the Sheik of Araby, a baritone crooned as Richard led her in a foxtrot. Your love belongs to me…

"On second thought," she said, stumbling a little over the steps on the cushiony beige plush carpet, "perhaps you're the one who ought to set the bar a little lower."

"Would you be more comfortable with a Strauss waltz?"

After her two cocktails Mary wasn't sure it was the particular dance that was the problem; the way
Richard's arm tightened about her, the flat of his palm pressing firmly against her back, holding her more securely against him, made her suspect he knew that was not the case.

"Before today, I would have asked if you actually own something so sentimental as a Strauss record, but now I know you enjoy opera…"

"Alas, the ballroom's back at Haxby."

*The stars that shine above*

*Will light our way to love*

*You rule this world with me*

*I'm the Sheik of Araby*

High up as they were above the rooftops of Fleet Street's office buildings, too much emanated light from the city and too much smoke chuffed from the warehouse chimneys to make out any stars from Richard's floor-to-ceiling windows. Instead, electric light beamed down from a bronze chandelier whose linear arms terminated in boxy alabaster shades. She thought of the gilt monstrosity suspended in the middle of the gallery in Haxby, with its dozens of fluted globes and overly curling branches. Would she ever have seen him as clearly in that light as saw him here, tonight?

And what she saw, her mind drifted lazily, unable to form any more coherent thoughts, she liked. So very very much. He was charming and handsome, if informal and improper in his rolled-up shirtsleeves, but she preferred this Richard who was comfortable enough in his own space, at ease enough with her, to relax, the only lines on his sharp-featured face the creases that formed with his smile. Even his pomade had relented its grip on his fair thinning hair. Speaking of grip, while he kept a firm hold on her waist, her hand, technically leading her in their improvised dance, he slightly less impaired than she by the liquor, she sensed that he was placing himself entirely under her control. Lady Mary Crawley and William the Cat, in charge of Sir Richard Carlisle.

"This suits you much better," she said.

*Well I'm the sheik of Araby*

*Your love belongs to me…*

The day's growth of stubble at his chin prickled lightly against her temple, and she felt the roll of his hips and an unmistakable hardness against hers as he moved with the sensual slide of the music. She ought to have been embarrassed by his arousal, but a companion urge stirred inside her at the husky tone of his voice.

"And how does it suit you?"

Much as he did. The flat was rich and masculine as the man who owned it, and unlike any other place she might have been at this hour of the night. There were no painful reminders to gnaw at her thoughts; in fact she did not have to think at all. She could enjoy herself, as she had enjoyed herself at the zoo and the Queen's Club and the opera, and most of all she could simply be, as he was. On a whim, she stopped dancing, keeping hold of his arm for balance as she bent to unbuckle her t- straps, kicking the pumps aside, and let her pinched, aching feet sink luxuriously into the carpet. Richard stepped out of his shoes, too, and they resumed their dance in stocking feet, his eyes searching hers for the answer to his question.

"Well…" She clung harder to his shoulder, her lips just skimming the place where his ear met the
sharp angle of his jaw. "I'm in no rush to leave."

It was something of an irony considering the tempo of the song and the dance they were doing to it-not to mention the rapid pulse of Mary's heart behind her ribcage as Richard drew their clasped hands against his chest, the back of his hand cupped in the valley between her breasts. The thought came into her head that perhaps things were progressing rather too quickly, only to flit away, or float away, the gin she'd drunk giving her the sensation that everything had in fact slowed down, from the rate at which the living room revolved around her, to the rotation of the earth on its axis. He bent his head, scruff rasping over her cheekbone, then tilted to meet her mouth as she as she turned her face in towards him, and they kissed, at first a supple glide of his lips against hers, like the movements of the dance, but her own met him, hard, and he responded in kind.

_The sun that shines above_

_Will light our way to love_

_You rule this world with me_

_I'm the Sheik of Araby…_

Holding her yet tighter around the waist, Richard broke the kiss briefly as he sank down upon the low sofa behind them, only for her to claim his mouth with increased fervour when he drew her into his lap. She let go of his hand to clasp both of hers behind his neck, and his free one curved over her breast. When one of her hands flew down to cover it he started to withdraw, thinking she found this advance too bold, but she held fast, moving it so that the tips of his fingers found the centre slit in the blousy _lame_ overlay of her bodice. His hum of approval tickled her lips as he followed her lead and his palm warmed her skin through her gown's thin chiffon slip, while the other hand left the small of her back to push the hem of her dress up over her knee. She shivered against him as the calloused pads of his fingers skimmed along the ticklish inside of her knee and up higher along her thigh.

"Sorry," Richard murmured, his lips leaving hers to trail soft kisses along her cheekbone and nibble at her ear.

"Don't apologise," came her breathless reply.

Months had passed-long months-since she'd felt the intimacy and comfort of a man's touch, and the only thing she thought she was not strong and sharp enough to bear in this moment was if he should stop-which Richard did not do, his hands not withdrawing from her skirt or her bodice. His thumb found her nipple and teased it to a point even through the layers of slip and chemise and corselet, and his hand slid higher up her thigh, touching the lace trim of her knickers.

And it wasn't enough, not enough to make her forget how long it had been, or why it had been so long.

With his face burrowed in the hollow of her collar bones and his hand up her dress, she eased backward off his lap, answering the questioning lift of his head by hooking her fingers through the sleeves of his waistcoat and pulling him down toward her. He didn't hesitate to do her bidding, stretching out alongside her on the sofa, his back to the living room, almost a shelter as she lay beside the wall. Her head rested on a cushion but he slid an arm beneath her neck as well, fistling the hair at her nape as he supported himself on his elbow and kissed her more deeply than before, and hooked one leg over hers.

Their movement had twisted her dress and hiked the hem up around her hips, and Richard's hand crept higher, too, teasing her through her knickers. Mary was almost ashamed at how readily her
body responded to so slight a touch, constricting her lungs but not managing to completely stifle a muffled moan against his lips as her hips arched up into the heel of his hand, but he chuckled low, pleased. And that made her buckle inside, as well.

"Smug," she murmured, but two could play at that game. She slipped her arms around his waist, pulling his hips snugly against hers so that the next rock of her hips pressed against his arousal.

In the bright light of the sconces which hung at either end of the sofa, she saw the sheen of his pale golden lashes when his eyelids fluttered was a flash of white as his teeth nipped out to bite down on his lower lip, but unlike her he made no attempt at stifling his reaction. He groaned-and when his eyes opened again, slowly, her heart missed a beat at how rich the blue of them was, the crisscrossed lines at the corners deepening as he gazed down at hers. His desire was evident-and then he uttered her name, the rasp of his voice caressing the syllables, and she remembered how he had once told her he loved her.

Before she could think what she was doing, her hands at the small of his back made a bold move, slipping beneath his waistcoat to undo the clasps of his braces. The next moments were something of a blur of trousers being unfastened and underpants and knickers drawn down or pushed out of the way, of positioning their bodies on the sofa, which was only just long enough for them, and then the joining.

Mary gasped when he pushed into her, fingers digging into his arms, crumpling the sleeves of his white shirt. It didn't hurt, precisely, not like the first time, but it wasn't entirely comfortable, either, though whether because her body had changed or because her lover had, she wasn't altogether certain. Richard seemed to understand, kissing her tenderly; though she appreciated his attempt to proceed without haste, she wrapped her legs around him, focusing on the tightly coiled ropes of muscles at the backs of his thighs, and pulled him fully in. She did not immediately urge him to move, however, but closed her eyes and rested beneath the his weight, remembering as if from a long-ago dream how reassuring a man's body could be in the dark.

If only they'd taken the time to fully undress, she thought, running her fingers over his back and shoulders, taking stock of the smooth planes and sharp angles and wishing she could feel them through bare skin, his and hers…Then he be withdrew, so slowly, and she arched up to meet him as he returned, and she gave herself over to physical sensations of his hands beneath her underclothes, his kisses on her mouth and face and neck and shoulders, riding her pleasure again and again until they reached its peak…

"Mary…Look at me?"

At his request, she tore the heavy lids of her eyes open to meet his intent gaze. As if by mutual assent they came over the precipice, crying out together, as much in agreement as ever they had been.

It was like releasing a breath she'd held too long, she thought, her body going limp beneath his weight, limbs uncurling from around him to fall on the soft sinking sofa cushions. Richard, however, remained buried in her, curled around her, arms embracing, murmuring her name against her skin as he kissed her cheek, her shoulder, seeking her gaze in between, searching her eyes for the answer to some unspoken question-as if in coming undone, his need of her increased. When she opened her palms against his chest, pushing softly against the firm muscles, he at once slipped out from her.

"Not in a rush to go now, are you?" he asked, his voice husky, with the rattle of a laugh in his throat-and an uncertain look in his eye.

Mary swept an errant lock of hair back from his forehead and kissed him. "Only to the bedroom."
Mary never would have pictured Richard sleeping on his stomach, but apparently he did. At least he did now, only pushing off of her to collapse again, spent, on the mattress beside her, one arm slung across her waist as she lay on her back. Almost at once his breathing deepened and evened as if in slumber, though his fingers did not slacken their grip on her hip. While she'd felt drowsy beneath his warm weight after they finished making love for the second time, her eyes snapped wide open, nipples standing erect with goose bumps beneath the sheet as she realised that all her earlier reluctance to go home, and the reassurances that she wanted to stay with him, meant she had tacitly agreed to stay the night at his flat.

Which meant that in the morning she would have to face Matthew's mother with this truth.

"Richard," Mary half-whispered.

He groaned into the pillows; he must be awake after all—partially.

"I haven't any clothes."

It wasn't at all what she meant to say, but it was all she could manage, perhaps due to the distraction of his arm lying heavily on her stomach, which fluttered like a debutante's, and the contrast of how lightly his callused fingertips stroked the hollow of her hipbone.

"Hmm?" Richard lifted his head. In the light of the sconces at the far end of his long narrow bedroom, which was reflected in the faint sheen of the silvery-grey patterned wallpaper, she saw his pupils contract as he blinked; the dimple deepened as the corner of his mouth pulled upward in the start of a smile. He ran his fingers over her ribs, sliding them into the notches between, and up to her breast. "So you haven't."

As he spoke he leaned over her, so that his stubble rasped and his breath whispered against her skin, and she shivered. Her stomach hitched inward as his lips closed around the already hardened nipple of her other breast, teasing it with his tongue until she nearly couldn't stand it.

"Richard…" came her feeble protest, and she undermined her attempt at pushing him away by sliding her hands over his muscular shoulders to rake along the edges of the blades.

He heeded her anyway, his mouth leaving her breast and trailing kisses to her shoulders as he settled once more against the pillows. This time he lay on his side, slipping one arm beneath Mary to draw her against him.

"You can borrow a pair of pyjamas if you like," he murmured into her hair. "In the tallboy…"

Soon he fell asleep again, and though Mary thought she was too alert, the warmth of his breath against her neck, the plodding rhythm of his heart at her back, even the brush of his flaccid penis against her bottom, relaxed her. How could anything go wrong when it felt right to be here in
this bed, with him? It could, and probably would, in a multitude of ways, but it hurt to think of them. A headache pulled at the backs of her eyes, so she closed them.

When she opened them again, the bedroom was light-not from the sconces, but daylight which filtered in through the sheer white curtains between long panels of raisin-coloured velvet. To her initial dismay, Mary discovered she lay alone in the expansive bed, but muted clanking sounds from beyond the door, which stood just ajar, assuaged the disappointment: Richard might be pottering in the kitchen again, and she could do with tea, or even coffee; sleep had not cured her headache.

She threw back the duvet, dark like the draperies with a white diamond pattern to which she’d given little notice when they fell into bed previous night, and the startlingly cool air that drifted against her skin from the raised window reminded her that she was naked. Not only naked, but had nothing to dress in but the previous night’s mauve evening dress. She burrowed back beneath the bedclothes, contemplating Richard’s offer to lend her pyjamas. In the end she decided that her movements and the glare of the lights against the silvery-grey wallpaper and various reflective surfaces of the furnishings had made her temples throb, so she stayed put, closing her eyes as she massaged her forehead between her thumb and middle fingers.

She didn’t intend to doze off again, but must have done, jerking with a slight shift in the mattress.

"Sorry," said Richard, whose weight at the edge of the bed had awakened her. He wore a dressing gown of burnt orange silk which picked up the reddish hues in his unshaven stubble and in the chest hair suggested by the loosely drawn-together v of his lapels-for he wore no pyjamas underneath-and contrasted the vivid blue of his eyes as the corners crinkled with amusement. "It's earlier than you're accustomed to waking, but I've a nine o'clock meeting."

The crisp white linens rustled as Mary turned her head on the pillow to look at the silver clock that stood on the shelf built into the honeyed maple headboard which spanned most of the wall. A quarter to six.

She looked up at him again, an eyebrow raised. "How much time do you require to dress for work?"

There were more questions which she didn't voice aloud: Would his valet come to assist with his morning toilet? Shave him? Or did Richard do for himself in this flat where he made his own sandwiches?

A slight smile formed on her lips as she puzzled over his personal habits, only to fade with the memories that pushed to the front of her mind, of mornings in the early days of marriage to Matthew, in their villa in the south of France, or in the green-painted bedroom at Downton, when the revelation of these private details, though dreadfully mundane, had been as delightful and deeply satisfying as the solution to a Sherlock Holmes mystery. Early days. Her heart gave a little lurch; in a marriage of just eighteen months, wasn't it all early days?

"I do like a little time in the office before meetings," Richard's wry voice thankfully brought that sad train of thought to a halt. Both their gazes flickered downward, to his fingers tracing a circle along the edge of her knee where it formed a peak beneath the sheet. He added, in a lower tone, "And I imagine you'll want to get home before you're missed."

Mary nodded. "I walk early, some days…"

Lots of days, if she were completely honest. So did Isobel -if the baby was up she took him out, too, and sometimes they met coming around the square and they tried not to acknowledge what had drawn them from their beds.
"I'm afraid that explanation won't be terribly convincing if I'm dressed in my opera clothes."

"You won't be."

Richard's hand skimmed from her knee upward over her thigh, tracing the outline of her torso through the duvet until it curled around her bare shoulder, his thumb scuffing absentely over her exposed collarbone. Her skin contrasted starkly with the earthy hue of the coverlet.

"A borrowed pair of your pyjamas will hardly be a less incriminating alternative," she said and pushed into a sitting position, clutching the sheet to her bosom.

He laughed quietly at that, looking as if he'd imagined her strolling around Hanover Square thus, but then his hand fell from her shoulder and he drew himself erect, tugging at the sash of his dressing gown as he regarded her with eyebrows and chin raised.

"In fact," he said, "Miss Fields is on her way to Grantham House now, to get you a day dress. With strict instructions for your maid to be discreet about it."

This was the Richard she knew well-deep-voiced and authoritative, brisk and businesslike, no detail escaping his attention. As if this was the sort of cover-up-in the most literal sense-he was well practiced at, with other women. And yet his eyes-and his hand, for it had returned to her knee-rested so gently upon her. Fond. Affectionate. In love.

She swung her gaze past him, to the foot of the bed where a burl wood tray, lacquered to a high gloss, rested. A cup of coffee. A plate of toast with a mound of butter and a pot of marmalade. A glass of water and, she noticed as Richard took her glance as a cue to move it closer to her, two aspirin tablets.

"I wasn't sure how accustomed you are to gin." Richard squeezed the curling ends of his hair that brushed the collar of his dressing gown.

"Cocktails have at last made their way to Yorkshire, you know," she replied, but the dry sarcasm stuck in her throat.

All of this was not merely Richard looking after her, but giving her a way out. Even now.

"You do think of everything, don't you?"

It was the subtlest change, the slightest flicker of his facial muscles, but his smile vanished and his eyes hardened, the old defensiveness flickering across his face. His hand left her knee, but before he could sit back from her, Mary caught his belt and held him in place. She let go of the sheet and it pooled around her waist, baring her breasts as she traced his hairline and pushed an errant lock of hair back from his forehead. She leaned in and kissed him softly on the lips, hoping to convey that she meant it as a compliment this time, and was grateful.

In response, Richard wrapped one arm around her waist, pulling her against him amid the tangle of sheets; the other cupped the back of her head, long fingers raking into her bobbed hair, curling it around them, as he pressed his mouth to hers with such an unrestrained passion that she caught her breath and opened without hesitation to the sweep of his tongue. He tasted faintly of strong black coffee, and again she sensed need in the way he held her, kissed her…Yet when she clutched the sleeves of his dressing gown in her fists and tugged it off his shoulders until the tips of her nipples pressed against his bare chest and she felt the pound of his heart against the pulse in her temples, he abruptly broke the kiss. Still Mary clung to him, pressing her forehead against his, and he feathered
kisses along the bridge of her nose and her brow.

"Isobel will find out about us eventually," she said raggedly between breaths, "but getting caught sneaking home isn't the ideal circumstance."

The criss-crossed lines at the corners of Richard's eyes deepened with his smile. "Us," he murmured low, and he disentangled his fingers from her hair to take her hand instead, lacing their fingers together. She moved to kiss his lips again, and he tilted his head to meet her gently, as soft as the pillows he eased her back against with his firm arm behind her and his weight above.

Last night had been frantic, an urgency on Mary's part to surrender to physical sensation and the pull of alcohol into the sweet oblivion where she knew pleasure and forgot the plaguing pain. Now again she tugged at his dressing gown to remove it completely, then grasped his hips to draw them into alignment with hers before she could think and ruin everything. Richard resisted her, catching her hand and drawing it over her head, pressing it into the pillow.

"Why do you think I allowed so much time before I need to be in the office?"

He nuzzled at her ear, then worked his way downward, trailing light kisses down her neck and clavicles and the rise of her breasts, determined to make love to her in the morning light. Mary let out a breath of relief as the languorous attention he focused on her rendered coherent thought nigh impossible. His touch rekindled her desire, as did her own exploration of the hard edges and angles of his body which she had felt but not seen clearly in the night.

That he was capable of such tenderness came as something of a contrast to the defined planes of his chest, the ripple of back muscles and the jut of his shoulder blades and spine beneath his pale skin, which seemed to record as boldly as typeset the hard climb he'd made from selling newspapers on the streets of Morningside to the top floor of the Capital Herald building. A tough world formed him, and no one in it had coddled him.

Mary had grown lean, too, these last months. Though she harboured no delusions about her life being anything like Richard's, she wanted to believe she knew something about struggle, that she had endured and been made stronger by it rather than been broken to bits. As he positioned himself over her, she watched how her hipbones slotted just between his; when they at last joined, he fitted her, filled her. I think we'd do well together. We could make a good team. Probably not what he meant by that, or by strong and sharp, but she couldn't help but think it as her fingernails pressed half-moons into the quivering lines of his biceps beneath his pale skin before they buckled with their climax.

As unhurried as he had been performing the act of love, Richard did not hasten to leave her afterward, nor did Mary encourage him to do so. Some moments passed as he lingered in the cradle of her thighs, she in his arms' embrace, ending much as they began, with soft kisses and his fingers combing through her hair.

But end it must, and did, when he pressed one final kiss to her lips and asked as he sat back from her, searching through the unkempt sheets and duvet for his dressing gown, "How was that for a headache remedy?"

"A lot more exciting than taking an aspirin," Mary replied, but was unable to return Richard's grin as he slipped his arms into the sleeves of his dressing gown and tugged it up over his shoulders. "Alas not as effective."

Wincing, she pushed upright in bed, and Richard adjusted the pillows behind her against the headboard.
"I'll get you a fresh cup of coffee." He brushed his lips to her forehead, cleared the mug from the tray, and padded from the bedroom.

Mary washed the tablets down with a glass of water and, waiting for the medication to take effect, became suddenly self-conscious about her state of undress. Clutching the sheet around her, she swung her legs over the edge of the low bed, pausing to wriggle her toes in the thick cream and brown-striped rug, and leant to open the top drawer of the tall chest beside the bed. She found several pairs of pyjamas—all silk—and selected a pair of sapphire blue ones, recalling that Richard once complimented her on a blouse of hers in that colour, which she'd made a point of not wearing around him again after that, even though the next weekend he'd come bearing a pendant and earring set to match it.

As she pulled the pyjamas from the bottom of the pile, a dull rattle against the wood suggested the drawer held other contents than sleeping clothes. For a moment she hesitated, hand hovering over the open drawer, then she glanced over her shoulder toward the partly open door. William the cat stared at her from the ivory armchair at the foot of the bed. Judging her.

She slipped her arms into the too-long sleeves of the pyjama top, staring back into the unblinking feline gaze as she did up the buttons. Cats always looked judgmental, she told herself, ignoring the prick of her own conscience about snooping; and if any creature understood the irresistibility of piqued curiosity, it would be a cat. Of course there was that rather dire adage on that subject, but the thought slipped as easily from Mary's mind as the burgundy, hunter green, pinstriped, and even paisley silk slid through her fingers as she delved into the drawer again. When they closed around a small velvet cube which could only be a jewellery case, she forgot about William's watchful gaze entirely.

What jewel it contained she was fairly certain of, but she felt compelled to open the box anyway to confirm her suspicion. The spring hinge of the lid opened with a pop that echoed in the high-ceilinged room and, remembering where she was, she glanced backward again. William opened his mouth as though to meow at her, but no sound emitted from the bared teeth. Then, he gracefully leapt down from the chair and slunk through the door.

Alone, Mary looked down at the pearl solitaire that had graced her fourth finger for more than a year. "Sorry I took so long," Richard's voice startled her. "Miss Fields brought your..."

She turned to see him holding her valise in one hand, her coffee in the other, but his attention was held by what was in her hands. Which felt as though they'd been caught in the biscuit barrel. Slowly, cognizant of how foolish she must look dressed only an ill-fitting man's pyjama shirt which scarcely covered the tops of her thighs, her hair dishevelled from sleep and sex, Mary stood and faced him, making no attempt to hide what she clutched. Unlike Aunt Rosamund, she did always admit when she was in the wrong, and apologise. Though the presence of William, whose mouth seemed to smirk as he caressed Richard's calf with the curling end of his tail—had he been spying for his master?—heightened the indignity of the situation.

"I oughtn't to have snooped."

"No matter," Richard replied, lips tight around the syllables. He came further into the room and placed the valise on the chair and the coffee on the bed tray. "Technically that's yours."

Intimate as they had just been, Mary couldn't help but feel a twinge of sympathy for the humiliation, perhaps even the heartbreak, he'd felt when he opened the envelope containing the engagement ring she'd returned to him. But she'd made her apologies for that, and meant them.
"Those ground rules we laid..." She stepped forward on the carpet, sliding her hand along the smooth straight edge of the footboard as she rounded the bed to stand beside him. He did not look at her. "We agreed, no bitterness over the past. Or does that apply only to our Haxby business meetings?"

Richard's chest fell sharply beneath the silk lapels, and his jaw muscle flickered under the shadow of his stubble. When he lifted his gaze he still did not look directly at her, instead over her shoulder at the open bureau drawer, though the tautness left his voice when he rasped, "I'd forgotten I put it there."

"You don't open your pyjama drawer often, then?" Mary attempted levity, but her voice fell flat, and the quirk of Richard's lips did not truly count as a smile. "Why did you keep it?"

The dint in his cheek deepened as his eyes snapped to meet hers beneath an arched eyebrow, the look seeming to say, *I kept Haxby, too.*

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his dressing gown and shrugged his shoulders. "What does one do with returned engagement rings? Sell them? It seems bad luck to give a woman from a failed relationship, wouldn't you agree?"

Mary did, of course, though she didn't say so. "Superstition?" she said instead. "That doesn't sound like the Richard Carlisle I know."

He made no reply, and she considered what to say next, swirling the tip of her index finger over the smooth curve of the pearl. At length, she spoke:

"Perhaps pearls are unlucky in and of themselves. They represent tears, you know."

"Is that what you thought when I gave it to you? That our marriage would bring you grief? That we were doomed to fail?"

*We're cursed, you and I.*

Lifting her chin, Mary answered, "Honestly I was relieved. I thought you'd inflict something gaudy on me."

Richard's eyes narrowed and he opened his mouth in retort. Before he could she went on:

"Now I've seen where you really live, a pearl makes perfect sense."

She looked around the bedroom and its furnishings which, like the living and dining rooms, were simple in design, the materials with which they were constructed providing the luxury.

"I thought it suited you," he said.

Her gaze snapped back to him, and the way he looked at her took her breath away. How many times he'd worn this expression when she was too busy noticing whether he wore the correct tweed?

"Beauty that required no embellishment," he elaborated. "My pearl of great price."

"I did cost you." So much more than whatever he'd paid for Haxby and its twelve thousand acres; that she didn't know an exact figure seemed all the worse. She looked down at the ring clutched in her hands, the pearl shimmering as she came as close to tears as she ever had over the whole ordeal. Or was that the glint of the diamond on her fourth finger?
Richard's hand closed around it, squeezing. "But we've got past all that, haven't we?"

"Of course we have." Blinking back the tears, Mary looked up at him. "That's who we are. Strong and sharp."

His grip tightened around her hand again, though not in a reassuring squeeze so much as a clutch. "Strong and sharp enough to tempt superstition?"

"Tempt…?"

"Would you wear it again? If I returned it to you?"

Mary's heart missed a beat and hung in her chest, suspended on the breath she could not release as she gawped up at him. Richard's other hand closed around her wrist, drawing her so close against him that the knot in the belt of his dressing gown pressed into her stomach. His forehead almost touched hers as he searched her eyes for an answer to the question she only now understood him to be asking.

"Richard…You want…?"

"I want to marry you."

He sounded so very like he had when he proposed to her on the Downton Station platform-certain and straight-forward-that for the fleetest of moments she thought she had somehow travelled five years back in time. She registered the difference in his wording, though: I want you to marry me. And he kissed her now, which he hadn't done then.

"You've seen the life we can build together," he said between brushes of his lips to hers. "You will be loved…"

Loved… Her eyes closed at that, the sweet word she had not heard since...She kissed him back, but Richard broke away, and looked her in the eye.

"And George…Mary, I swear, I'll treat him as my own…"

He tilted his head to kiss her again, releasing her wrists to cup her face in his hands. But as the tips of his fingers skimmed her jaw she stepped back from him.

George.

Matthew's son.

Her son, who she'd left at home with his grandmother while she slept with a man who was not his father.

The ring box slipped from her grasp. Mechanically, she stooped to pick it up; as she did she saw the bag Richard's secretary had brought for her on the ivory armchair and grabbed it, too.

"I should dress," she said. "It's time I went home."

Richard said nothing as she thrust the ring at him and swept past to the en suite bathroom. She shut the door behind her and leaned back against it in the dark as her throat knotted. When she thought she could contain her tears no longer she flicked on the light, blinking at the glare of the lights off the white tiles which contrasted the room so starkly with the warmth of the rest of the flat, and turned the tap on full blast to drown out the sound of her sob. Not, however, before she jumped at the slam of a
drawer, and Richard's curse.

Oh, what had she been thinking? She plunged her hands into the blast of cold water, cupping her hands to splash her face. That was the problem: she hadn't thought at all, but simply acted. In the mirror she watched the water run in rivulets down her forehead and into the creases that had etched themselves around her eyes and mouth these last months-oddly juxtaposed with the smattering of freckles revealed as the vestiges of last night's powder and rouge washed away, colouring the immaculate white marble sink. A child with her toys, as Papa once said. This friendship and romance she and Richard had built so carefully, toppled like a precarious tower of blocks because of youthful, selfish impatience.

When she emerged from the bathroom wearing a simple blouse and skirt and a cloche pulled down over her unkempt hair, as she might on any morning she woke before the maid could be reasonably expected to help her dress for a walk, Richard stood in front of his dressing table, having donned trousers and shirt, looking grim as he knotted his necktie. His eyes flickered briefly to hers in the mirror, then narrowed in a frown when he noticed the tie hung too long. As he undid the knot and tugged at the end to begin again, she started to speak.

"Richard, I'm-

"It's I who should beg forgiveness-for being so bloody awful at proposals," he cut her off, the lines of his face pulling taut as the silk he was drawing about his collar with his stilted attempt at deflecting embarrassment with a joke. "I always believed there was something romantic about spontaneity, but it never seems to yield the desired results when the lady isn't ready."

With a final tug at the half-Windsor knot, apparently satisfied, Richard turned around, his eyes raking over her outfit as he picked up his waistcoat which was draped across the dressing table bench and put it on.

She watched him button his waistcoat, then turn once more toward the dressing table mirror. He opened a drawer and took out a tie pin, which he promptly dropped; it rattled on the marble table inlay as it rolled, and when he caught it, somehow pricked his index finger in the process of removing the back. He shook his hand and swore again.

That he apparently had not planned to propose to her any more than she had planned to spend the night with him made her feel slightly—but not completely—better about the whole situation.

"If we're comparing proposals, this one was certainly had more of the moon and the June than your last one," she said, and winced at her own awkward attempt at humour. "I didn't say no."

"I don't expect you to say anything." Richard said.

She appreciated it. "I want to, though. But I'm afraid all I can say is, not right now."

"I'll wait for you."

Again hung unspoken between them as their eyes met in the mirror.

"I wish I didn't have to ask it of you."

They said little as he drove her back to Hanover Square in the Silver Ghost, parking around the corner so that in the likelihood that Isobel was awake by seven, she shouldn't see the car and suss Mary's ruse. He came around to her side to let her out, then slid across to the driver's seat.

"Well then," he said, "you'll phone me to say whether our scheme worked?"
Mary nodded, and he started to release the break, but she lunged forward, resting her hands on the edge of his door—for the top was down.

"Thank you, Richard. For all of it."

He gave her a small smile, but as he turned the car about in the square, she couldn’t help but feel that instead of giving him her thanks for the wonderful night they had spent together, she had made him an apology for ruining everything.
Mary must confront the truth that the choices she makes—and doesn't make—affect other people than herself. And that she is not the only one whose actions may lead to regrets.

Molesley was so peculiar and unnerving a man on a regular basis that when he admitted Mary into Grantham House, his bobbing and stammering demeanour gave her no clue as to whether or not he knew she had been out all night, or believed she'd just returned from an early morning walk.

He took her handbag, and she handed her hat off to him, too, pausing in front of the hall mirror to smooth her somewhat unruly hair.

"Mrs Crawley is in the study, your ladyship," he told her, "answering her morning letters."

"Thank you, Molesley." Mary hardly spared him a glance as she swept a wary gaze toward the library door, then made for the stairs.

"Master George is still sleeping," he said, at her heels.

She stopped, hand on the bannister and foot on the first step, recalling that on her way out with Richard, Isobel had mentioned a sniffle. Her heart missed a beat and then accelerated at the thought of Nanny Philips—or even Isobel—bathing a feverish brow in the night, and she was at the cusp of asking whether George had become more ill, when the certainty of giving herself away occurred to her.

"I'll look in on him," she said, and resumed her ascent. "Will you have Peggy start a bath?"

"Very good, Lady Mary."

Molesley had scarcely scuttled off when Isobel emerged from the drawing room, her good morning halting Mary's progress again. She forced a smile as she leant over the railing to speak to her mother-in-law—but it faltered the instant she saw that no smile accompanied Isobel's greeting.

"It's so humid, so early." Mary drew a handkerchief from her skirt pocket and dabbed at her collarbones and forehead. "I thought I'd bathe before breakfast."

"Oh, Mary, please!" Isobel's voice was harsh with reprimand. "It's bad enough you think a change of clothes enough to deceive me. Don't add injury to insult by lying to my face."

Isobel will find out about us eventually, but getting caught sneaking home isn't the ideal circumstance. This was even further from the ideal than Mary had imagined her understatement to be.

"Before either of us says anything we regret…" She came back down the stairs again, rounding the end of the bannister so that she faced Isobel. "Do you really believe any good can come from having this discussion?"

"More than if we don't have it."
"All right then." Mary clasped her hands together in front of her skirt; the fingers of her right still curled around the handkerchief, which really was moist with perspiration now, and not merely a prop for her fictional walk. "I've only just got home. I stayed the night with Sir Richard."

A sharp indrawn breath and a rapid blink made it plain that Isobel was scandalised, if not surprised.

Barely stopping a roll of her eyes, Mary said, "You can't be so very shocked. Edith has a lover."

"I am becoming rapidly acquainted with the new sexuality of your generation." Scandalised—but not too shy to speak plainly; Isobel was finding her footing again. "But your situation is entirely different to Edith's. You're not so desperate as she…"

"What position?" Mary's hands flew apart, palms opening at her sides; her crumpled handkerchief fluttered onto one of the black tiles of the chequered floor. "The Almost, But Never Quite, Countess of Grantham?" Who lived at Downton Abbey, looked after by her father for the time being, or someday by her son, but never chatelaine in her own right? An object of ridicule and pity. "I'm not even a Dowager!"

"Do you require a title to be assured of your own significance? You're the mother of the future Earl. The widow of an honourable and exemplary man. A national hero."

\textit{I want a good man for you. A brave man.}

It was just as well the handkerchief lay on the floor, or Mary might have dabbed it to her eyes rather than fight back the tears and swallow the lump in her throat as she lifted her chin.

"Am I to wear black and remain celibate forever?"

"Nine months is hardly forever. And I've known you to bear up for much longer in the past."

"In the past I never had to bear Matthew's death." Only the constant fear of it.

Isobel's face softened, as if an unspoken communication occurred between them. She took a step nearer to Mary. "You never had his son to help you. My dear girl--I have walked the Valley of the Shadow, too. It wasn't a rod and staff that comforted me."

Mary closed her eyes--as if that would block out the sound of her mother-in-law's voice uttering the inevitable next words:

"It was my child. That part of Reginald who would remain with me always. You need George every bit as much as he needs you."

At the touch of wizened, roughened nurse's fingers on her hand--or perhaps it was the small encouraging smile on Isobel's lips, the shine of hope in her eyes, the lines that formed about them with her damned certainty that this was the way it must be, the only way--Mary jerked her arm out of reach.

"Perhaps if I find comfort elsewhere, I'll have something to do in my old age besides meddle in my daughter-in-law's private affairs."

The smile faded from Isobel's eyes before it fell from her lips, and then her face sagged with her slumping shoulders. Thin, stooping shoulders beneath a black blouse, and no strong son's arm to slip around her as she walked once more through the dark night of the soul. Should anything happen to me, she heard Matthew's earnest whisper, shivered as she it almost as the prickle of a ghost at the base of her skull, \textit{will you promise to look after Mother?} Her own reply had been, \textit{Of course. But it}
won't. How spectacularly she had failed.

"I didn't mean--"

"Didn't you?" The smile ghosted across Isobel's face just before she stepped around Mary to the staircase. "I'm glad we're finally being honest. You do have a point--and you certainly wouldn't be the first person to accuse me of meddling. Even Matthew..." She paused at the foot of the stairs, one hand on the bronze finial, the other resting lightly over her stomach. "We may wish to reconsider our living arrangements--"

"That won't be necessary--"

"--especially in light of your parents' imminent arrival." Isobel placed one foot on the first step, but still did not go upstairs. "I know you don't believe it," she said with a backward glance at Mary, "but I do want you to move forward. I want George to have a father. And a happy mother."

Matthew was George's father, Mary thought, hands balling into fists at her sides. For one hour, she had been a happy mother.

"If Sir Richard is the man to do that," Isobel went on, "I shall try not to put my foot in it. Just know that when I do it's from a desire to see you heal, and not be more deeply hurt." ~*~

"This is why our lot have nannies," Mary muttered to George as she moved him, for the dozenth time, from the lawn and back onto the blanket he'd crawled off of.

Her son squawked his protest, drawing the stares of several women in the park who filled that position, but she didn't have time to dwell on their obvious disapproval as the beating of his pudgy fists alerted her to the fact that one of them clutched something it probably oughtn't. She prised apart his surprisingly strong fingers, grimacing at the imagined possibilities of what treasure she would find this time, but grateful that it wasn't his mouth, from which she'd already fished soggy blades of grass, clumps of mud, and even a beetle. It was an acorn, and her head span to think how Nanny Philips would relieve her of George if she knew her precious charge had got hold of a choking hazard.

"Time to go in, darling boy," Mary said, kissing him as she scooped him up. She placed him in the pram, then bent to retrieved the blanket they'd been sitting on, the toys he'd ignored in favour of nature, the book she'd naively thought she might read while he played in the fresh air.

As she pushed the pram back toward the house, George rubbed his eyes and yawned, and Mary stifled one of her own. "My sentiments exactly," she told him. "Does Nanny feel like this in the afternoons?"

She made a mental note to ask Papa when he arrived tomorrow to give Philips a pay rise, and chided herself for letting Isobel's insinuations guilt her into proving her mothering abilities by taking over these duties for the afternoon. After all, Richard thought she was doing just fine.

Of course she'd also fled the house to avoid further confrontation with Matthew's mother, and she was relieved when Molesley informed her Mrs Crawley had taken to bed with a headache--although she didn't like to think she was the cause of it. Bed appealed to her, too, and when Nanny plucked George from her arms she confirmed that Mary looked as in need of a nap as the baby.

However, when she lay still clothed atop her counterpane, sleep eluded her. So many nights and early mornings and afternoons before tea whiled away like this, hands folded across her waist and eyes on the ceiling as she tried to remember lying beneath it in the dark with Matthew. Now, rather
than despair over her tenuous hold on memories that obscured and fragmented into the pieces of a fading dream, she noted peeling corners of wallpaper, frayed hems of curtains and furniture from another century. Papa was barely keeping Downton afloat; there were no spare funds to update Grantham House in the latest styles. Especially not to the gleaming standard of modernity presented in Richard's flat.

She stretched the tips of her fingers until they touched the jut of her hipbone, and applied a gentle pressure. Her eyes closed and her breath seeped out slowly as her belly dipped beneath the heel of her hand. How willingly her body had relaxed beneath the weight of his, how effortlessly she'd dropped off to sleep in his arms. Why did she not feel ready to answer his proposal with a yes when she'd been so comfortable to be naked with him in his bed?

It wasn't as if the idea of marriage had never entered her mind--or even into the conversation. At the Queen's Club there had been George Carlisle's tactless interrogation as to her intentions, the answer to which she shared with Richard in the form of a kiss: a tacit agreement that this time they would have what they had not before.

But had she meant to tell him she wanted to marry him? Or only that she wanted him?

Through the floorboards, she heard the muted clang of the telephone, and remembered Richard had asked her to ring and tell him how it went with Isobel. The prospect of repeating that conversation--the accusations and implications Isobel made, Mary's retorts in her own defence which, as predicted, she regretted--settled almost as a physical weight, pinning her limbs to the mattress. By the time she time she mustered the willpower to get up and go downstairs, she met the maid coming up with a note taken down in Molesley's handwriting: Sir Richard Carlisle phoned about a dinner invitation.

Mary returned the call but Richard was unavailable. Instead, Miss Fields gave the details--Edith wanted to hear a new jazz singer at the Hotel Cecil; Evelyn Napier and, of course, Michael Gregson would be there. Shortly before eight o'clock Mary found herself accepting the chauffeur's hand into the back of Richard's Silver Ghost.

Richard looked up from his Evening Herald, lips pinched together into a colourless line and shrewd eyes narrowed as they raked over her outfit--a pewter and silver beaded one, with full-length black satin gloves. Last night he'd been lavish with his compliments of her mauve opera dress; she could only take his present speechlessness for displeasure. She refrained from making a snippy explanation that he'd have to give her a little more time between dates to expand her half-mourning wardrobe--it wasn't his place to criticize--and returned his silence as she slid onto the leather seat beside him, smoothed her skirt, and plucked a loose thread from the beadwork.

The instant the driver closed the car door behind her it shut out the familiar smells of the neighbourhood, her nostrils pricked at the musty odour of tobacco.

"Have you been smoking?" she asked.

"Ought I to have asked your permission first?"

The dialogue hung suspended for a moment as the driver opened his door and climbed into the idling vehicle. Mary looked out the window as the Silver Ghost pulled away from the curb in front of Grantham House and saw the reflection of Richard buried once more in his newspaper.

"I thought you gave it up as a nasty habit," she said.

"And I thought you liked the image of me wreathed in smoke as I plot in my newspaper lair."
"If it helps, by all means. Your recent plots certainly have room for improvement."

"What do you mean?"

The newspaper crinkled as Richard lowered it; though his tone remained defensive and demanding, his eyes belied the insecurity she'd learnt to recognise through his harsh-featured mask. The look extinguished her temper.

"She knows," Mary said in a hush, with a glance toward the front of the car; the driver's gaze did not so much as flicker from the road to the mirror--of course no employee of Richard's would dare acknowledge being witness to so private a moment. "Isobel...She couldn't be more displeased if I'd come home and announced we'd eloped. In fact she'd have preferred that."

"Well," Richard rasped--and she didn't think it was her imagination that the timbre of his voice had thickened, as though he'd smoked a deal more than one cigarette today--"I did present you with the opportunity."

Accustomed though Mary was to dealing with Richard in a strop--indeed, the familiar ground of bickering with him made her feel steadier on her feet than she had since her confrontation with Isobel--she could only do so up to a point. Which was when it became personal.

"Richard, please..." She chafed her thumbs inside her gloves, the satin sticky to her clammy skin. She wanted to peel them off, fling them away--he wouldn't have minded; it was too sultry a summer's night for the old fashion of evening gloves--but she thought she might have felt too exposed. "I said...truly dreadful things to her."

"Were they true?"

His nonchalance was somewhat reassuring. It even aligned with her own thoughts that her assessment of the state of things with Isobel was, technically, accurate. Still, her conscience nigged. It was Richard's way to say what he thought; her life had been a lesson in the opposite.

"I'm not sure it's that simple."

"I think it's exactly that simple. The trouble with you, Mary, is that you overthink and overcomplicate everything."

"Look what's happened the two times in my life I've acted on impulse!"

He'd unfurled the broadsheet again, and it acted almost as a shield between them as he lobbed his offensive. Her last barb must have got through to him--the paper was crumpled in his long-fingered grasp--but his reply was smooth as silk.

"How much time have you wasted because you allowed yourself to become paralyzed by indecision? Not just your own."

"If you have a better way to spend your time tonight, you needn't have accepted Edith's invitation. I'm sure she only made it to butter you up about that job."

"I'm extended far better offers than hotel jazz concerts and never gave anyone a job for it yet." Richard's eyes darted sideways at her. "Look on the bright side, Mary. You and Edith have common ground at last--Mrs Crawley's disapproval."

Hotel Cecil was sandwiched between the Thames Embankment and the Strand. The familiar grand Edwardian Baroque façade loomed as they disembarked the motor in on the Strand side. Mary had
visited the hotel's restaurant once as a debutante, but the out-of-date décor left her unimpressed. Since then the building served as headquarters for the RAF during the War and been remodelled and redecorated after, but though she would have liked to take in these changes, Richard hurried her through the entrance at such a clip she didn't have the time to take in much of anything.

Passing through the colonnade on their way to the Palm Court, however, her eye was drawn to a group of foreign men whose slightly old-fashioned European evening suits jarred with the fez hats atop their heads; others stuck out even more in long white tunics and keffiyehs.

"Do you think they're here for the jazz?" Mary quipped, for the sole purpose of lightening the oppressive mood that hung over them. "Will the band play "Sheik of Araby" for them?"

"That's the Palestinian delegation," came Richard's humourless reply. "I doubt they'd be terribly amused, as they've spent the better part of the year here at the Cecil, protesting the terms of the British Mandate to no avail. Which will no doubt plague us for years to come."

Mary had nothing to say in response to that; Edith would have, she thought. Don't you read the papers? Her sister's accusation drifted to her through years' of memories, along with her own caustic reply: I'm too busy living a life. Did that mean she was living a life now? She clung to Richard's arm with both hands as they descended powder blue carpeted stairs into the palm-lined ballroom, allowing him to weave a path around the clusters of mingling patrons, some standing to show their glittering flapper fashions to best advantage, others demonstrating the stylish informality by lounging in comfortable armchairs and settees arranged around small tables to set their cocktails on when they got up to dance.

Edith waved to them from one such arrangement tucked in front of a navy blue folding screen that suggested intimacy in the midst of the vast and crowded hall. She shared the settee with Gregson, while Evelyn Napier occupied one of the three chairs opposite. Before Mary and Richard even had a chance to seat themselves, a waiter approached with a tray of champagne.

"Impeccable timing," said Evelyn, by way of greeting, in his old easy drawl as he eased himself back into his seat after he'd shaken hands. "We were just about to have a toast."

"To what?" asked Mary, taking the seat beside him.

"Why not the Crawley sisters?" Richard suggested, without warmth, as he thrust a glass at her and sat on her other side. "And their unsuitable newspaper men."

Edith looked at Mary a little askance, and Gregson did not appear at all amused; nevertheless, they raised their glasses without argument.

"But you've omitted Mr Napier," Mary said.

"He may as well be in the business," said Gregson, "for all the time he's spending with Edith lately."

"Michael," Edith hissed, and his smile faltered with a wince. Mary had sat through enough dinners with her sister to guess that he had probably just been the recipient of Edith's trademark jab to the ankle with the pointed toe of her shoe.

"Oh," said Evelyn with a wave of his hand, "I'm quite happy to be the fifth wheel."

"It seems a Crawley sister trait to bring one along," muttered Richard.

After the rather half-hearted clinking of glasses, they all raised them to their lips with greater haste and necessity than was customary for a toast among friends, Mary included. Why? They had all
endured enough similar awkward affairs at Downton that they ought to feel right at home.

Would staying at the house with Isobel have been less uncomfortable? There she might have at least had the mercy of her mother-in-law retiring early.

The ripple of applause drew Mary's gaze to the front of the ballroom to the blue-curtained archway through which the members of the band came onto the stage with their shiny brass horns and trombones.

"I'm glad you and Sir Richard made it in time for the show," Evelyn bravely breeched the silence that hung over their own quintet, leaning a little around Mary to catch her escort's eye, too, as if mindful of not threatening him as he had--inadvertently, no doubt--Mr Gregson. "This Jack Ross chap's all the rage since he began his European tour."

"The six o'clock train from Edinburgh didn't get in till nearly seven," Richard said.

"You came here directly from Edinburgh?" asked Evelyn.

The furrows in Richard's brow deepened as he sipped his champagne.

"His brother," Mary answered. "Richard met George at King's Cross."

"You should have invited him to join us," said Edith. "Then Evelyn wouldn't be the odd man out."

It was Gregson who appeared the odd man out as Edith and Evelyn shared a smile across the latter's eyes reflecting the glitter of his champagne as he regarded her over the glass. If Richard sympathised with his fellow newspaperman, she was glad to see the difference in her old friend since she saw him at Murray's in the spring.

"That's what I told him," she said, turning her attention to Richard.

He raised his chin to shoot an impatient look at the stage over the crowd. The musicians were still taking their places in chairs arranged around the glossy blackbaby grand piano, casually chatting and joking among themselves as they organised music on stands and tooted a few notes on their instruments to warm up. Richard's shoulder bumped hers as he fished in his black waistcoat pocket for his silver watch, glared at it, than snapped it shut.

"Surprisingly, George has other business in town than hearing jazz bands," he said.

Apparently so did Richard, thought Mary, brows pulling together.

"At eight in the evening?" asked Edith.

The same question had been in Mary's mind since Richard knocked at the door of Grantham House nearly three quarters of an hour later than he'd said he would be, but he seemed no more inclined to explain himself now than he had then. Thankfully, louder applause--even a few raucously enthusiastic shouts and whistles from the younger patrons waiting around the perimeter of the honeyed oak parquet dance floor--redirected their attention to the stage. A black man several years younger than herself flashed a debonair grin at the audience from beneath his neat pencil moustache, then he turned to the instrumentalists and set the tempo with four precise flicks of his hand. Jack Ross, presumably. His coattails swayed as he span back toward the audience as if carried on the lilting turns of the clarinets and muted trumpets whose tune reminded Mary of a carousel at the Thirsk fair she'd attended every year of her girlhood.

"Do you ever sit and ponder," he spoke-sang, leaning back against the lid of the piano, "sit and
wonder, sit and think...why we're here and what this life is all about?"

He held the audience in thrall as he scanned their upturned faces; Mary's breath caught as the soulful dark eyes met hers and the corner of his mouth quirked upward in a sad and knowing smile.

_It's a problem that has driven_

_Many brainy men to drink…_

_It's the weirdest thing they've tried to figure out!

"Alas, Jack," Richard twisted in his chair to signal a passing waiter. "It's not the meaning of life that drives men to drink. If this is the sort of philosophical drivel we're going to be subjected to tonight, I'm going to require something stronger than champagne."

"Amen," said Evelyn, who was lighting a cigarette. He offered one to Richard, who darted Mary a sideways glance before he accepted; Edith had her own in an elegant ivory holder which she extended across the table for a light.

Meanwhile, Jack Ross sang on:

_Life's a very funny proposition after all,

Imagination, jealousy, hypocrisy and all.

Three meals a day, a whole lot to say…_

_Young for a day, then old and gray;

Like the rose that buds and blooms and fades and falls away…_

"It's Prufrock set to a jazz tune," said Evelyn, exhaling a puff of smoke. "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons."

"I grow old, I grow old," said Gregson, absently. "I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled."

At least Mary could count on Richard, no matter how foul a mood he was in, not to join in an impromptu poetry recitation. He took a drag from his cigarette as Jack Ross' bright tenor rippled off the high walls in the second stanza:

_Losing health to gain our wealth as through this dream we tour…_

_Ev'rything's a guess and nothing's absolutely sure;

Battles exciting and fates we're fighting until the curtain falls…_

But, leaning to tamp the cigarette out in the ashtray, Richard rasped, "I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker...And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker...And in short, I was afraid."

For a moment they all sat in morose silence, then the waiter returned with the men's drinks and Edith sniggered. "My God. Three men quoting Eliot in a jazz club. I think I need a stronger drink."
"I'd never have guessed Richard would be more fun at the opera," Mary agreed, though the last swallow of her champagne soured in her mouth.

"Dare I hope those lines Sir Richard quoted pertain to the state of the Herald?" asked Gregson with a stiff grin.

Richard raised his head and an eyebrow as he looked across the table at the Sketch editor.

"That you'll stop trying to pinch my writers?" Gregson elaborated.

"I'll stop." Richard raised his whiskey glass to his lips, but stopped short before he drank to add, "There's only the one worth pinching."

Aware of Gregson's discomfort, Edith tried to check her smile, but she was never one to shrug off a compliment--and Mary didn't think she'd ever had two men after her at once. Even if it was for professional reasons.

*Life's a very funny proposition after all.*

The song ended, to tentative applause from the audience; apparently their little party were not alone in feeling the song a bit gloomy for a dance hall setting. In another sweep of coattails, Ross conducted his musicians in a jaunter--and louder--tune which competed with the screech of chair legs being pushed back and the thunder of men and women getting to their feet. Gregson was one of them, and he extended his hand to Edith in a wordless invitation to dance. She gave him her hand and her smile, though her gaze was for Evelyn before she was pulled away from the table.

Mary turned to Richard expectantly. Though he wasn't in the mood for talk, he might be receptive to body language. At the same moment, the singer crooned into his microphone:

*After you get what you want, you don't want it*

*If I gave you the moon, you'd grow tired of it soon…*

It was just as well she'd worn black tonight, Mary thought, looking away again; watching would be as close as she came to dancing tonight.

"Any luck selling your place, Carlisle?" asked Evelyn. "Only I have this pal--Charlie Blake--who might be interested…"

Evelyn's words receded beneath the song's lyrics that resonated through the hall on the swinging tempo:

*Don't you say that I'm unkind*

*Think it over and you'll find*

*You've got a changeable nature*

*You're always changing your mind*

"…very modern and unsentimental," Evelyn's voice drifted back into her consciousness.
"How delightful for Papa," Mary cut in to drown out the song which hit too close to home, "since he's lost Richard as a neighbour."

Had the words really seemed so innocuous in her mind? Spoken aloud, they took on another tone entirely, like an unexpected key change in a song. She'd meant, of course, to make light of Richard selling Haxby, but had not considered the context of this morning's proposal, in which he apparently took it. Big hand white-knuckled around his glass, he knocked back the whiskey, then stood.

"I beg your pardon, Napier, but I unwisely left a rather tenuous situation, and it's distracting me from Mr Ross' performance."

"Of course, old fellow," said Evelyn, and Mary didn't think it was her imagination that the lines of Richard's face deepened at the word *old*. Or perhaps it was when he looked at her and asked her to make his excuses to Edith.

"I'll take you home if you're ready, but don't feel you must leave on my account."

"I'll see Mary home if she wishes to stay," Evelyn offered.

She nodded--unsure whether merely in acknowledgment or in commitment--and caught Richard's elbow. They exited the ballroom in much the same fashion as they had entered it, her steps doubled to match every one of his long agitated strides. He seemed almost unaware of her, and as they stood beside the curb, searching for his Silver Ghost in the long line of automobiles parked in front of Hotel Cecil, she wondered if he would speak to her at all.

Much to her surprise, his hands encircled her waist, pulling her against him as he leaned in to kiss her.

"I'm afraid I've been an ogre tonight," he said, when he drew back, his forehead not quite touching hers, though she felt the tickle of a strand of fine hair that had broken free from the stiff pomade. "It's been a hell of a day--after such a promising start, too."

The regret in his eyes made Mary looked down at their shoes, almost toe-to-toe on the pavement. "I've spoiled everything."

Richard's grasp tightened around her waist. "You must stop thinking that way." She met his eye again. "That everything I touch turns to ashes?"

"That everything is about you."

"If it isn't, then what?"

His lips parted slightly, and for a moment she thought he meant to tell her something. Then he shook his head and said, eyes and voice softening, "You were the promising start."

He kissed her again. This time she expected it and responded, not caring that they were standing in full view of a line of chauffeurs and hotel staff and people coming in and out of the brightly lit building because the only person who mattered right now was Richard, and he needed to know that she'd meant what she said this morning, and wasn't going to change her mind. She caught the lapels of his evening jacket to hold him against her, then let her palms slide over the silk and fine worsted wool shoulders until her fingers rested against his warm, smooth-shaven cheek.

"I could be a promising finish, as well," she murmured. "We *are* at a hotel."
"Tempting as that offer is…" Mary knew that it was, pressed close to him as she was; he disengaged himself from her embrace. "I'd prefer to be assured you made it because you want to be with me, and not because you're running away from your mother-in-law."

Mary opened her mouth in protest, but found she had none. As he strode away from her toward the Rolls Royce, where is chauffeur stood to open the door, she managed to call out: "Tell George hello, and I hope to see him again while he's in town."

She entered Hotel Cecil for the second time that night and although this time she was not being dragged through by Richard, she still paid little heed to the décor, too lost in her own musings to notice. The music guided her back toward the Palm Court, as if Jack Ross were the Pied Piper; she felt mousy, at any rate, after Richard's rejection.

And though I sit upon your knee

You'll grow tired of me

'Cause after you get what you want

You don't want what you wanted at all

Perhaps Richard was right, it wasn't about her; maybe it was him who'd discovered, having had her, she was more trouble than she was worth. Though she knew it was wrong she couldn't help but feel a little pleased to find Edith alone at the table.

"Evelyn's found a partner," she explained with an airy wave of a martini glass toward the dance floor that was too nonchalant, "and Michael stepped out. Frankly, I'm glad." She picked the olive out of her drink and popped it into her mouth. "I don't think we'll last much longer. He wants to become a German citizen so he can divorce his wife but…that seems in rather bad taste. And what about you?"

"I'm surprised a woman who sleeps with her married employer can distinguish between bad and good taste at all."

"What are you doing with your former fiancée?"

His glass of un-drunk champagne still stood at his empty place, and Mary contemplated reaching for it—but that would have been pushing the bounds of taste. "He might not be former. He's asked me to marry him. Again."

That old resentment flickered in Edith's hazel eyes as she sipped her martini. "I see." She set her glass down with deliberation. "Ran off to stop the presses for the engagement announcement, did he?"

Richard might not think writing for The Sketch was improving Edith's writing ability, but she was learning to give back almost as good as she got.

"He asked this morning. I haven't given him an answer."

"There's an expression about that, isn't there?"

"About history repeating itself?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice…"
Mary frowned at her hands, twisting the beaded overlay of her skirt in her lap.

"I think you ought to accept him, Mary."

"Do you?" Her head snapped up; her eagerness and the crack of hope in her voice sounded pitiful even to her, and Edith's smirk indicated she thought so, too.

"If you don't," she said, "do you think he'd still give me a job?"
Chapter Summary

Luncheon with Richard's brother reveals much about the inner workings of the Carlisle family, but there are some secrets he continues to keep. And how will Mary keep her own when her family finally arrive in London?

In the corner table of the pub, George Carlisle contemplated Mary over his beer. The sunlight from the high arced window behind her glinted off the pint glass and the lenses of his spectacles, obscuring his eyes, but she sipped her wine and returned his gaze as if she could see them.

"Mr Carlisle…" She set down her glass and folded her hands over one another in her lap. "Your thoughts are quite transparent. Please allow me to disabuse you of the notion that I've never dined in a public house."

"You perceive people with great acuity, do you, Lady Mary?" George took a drink. "I hope you're not basing that off your experience with Richie here. You can read him like the front page of a newspaper."

"That's what it's called." Richard still did not lower his menu, though he did turned his head to regard Mary blearily from beneath his furrowed brow. He didn't look as if he'd slept at all. "I assure you the George and Vulture is a perfectly respectable establishment-"

"-patronised by some of the most important businessmen in the City. But if you'd be more comfortable with a more feminine clientele, we can of course go elsewhere."

The dining room was the ultimate in masculine décor with its dark walnut wainscoting, above which the parchment coloured plaster was adorned with antlers; it served to emphasise that Mary was the only dress-wearer amidst the other patrons dressed in dark pinstriped business suits.

"Didn't we establish once that I'm not terribly feminine?" She patted the back of her bob where it showed beneath her hat, tilting her eyes up toward him under the brim. Would Richard recall the conversation to which she referred?
"It was my understanding that we concluded exactly the opposite."

The corners of his eyes crinkled with the start of a smile, though it hadn't time to form on his lips before he raised his beer to drink, again leaving Mary with the impression of weariness. She'd thought perhaps it was a trick of the telephone when he'd rung to ask whether she had time to join him and George for luncheon before her family arrived in town-I want to make it up to you. For being such poor company last night at the Cecil-but the deep rasping timbre was very much present in person, as well.

There was that raw quality, too, which had been there when he made his impromptu proposal because he could contain the depth of his feelings for her no longer. Despite what he'd said last night about his mood not having been about her, she knew he must be upset by her inability to give him an answer. In light of that, the last thing she wanted was for him to think she looked down on his choice of restaurant, of all things.

Or on his family. She swallowed her wine, along with the impulse to take George down a peg by remarking that if Richard had taken them to the Ritz, one of their party wouldn't feel at his ease.

"Charles Dickens frequented this pub, didn't he?" she said instead, unable to resist darting a glance at George. "Along with a number of his characters?"

"Fan of Dickens, are you?" he asked.

"What self-respecting Englishwoman isn't?"

"I think he was deplorably sentimental," said Richard, laying down his menu and beckoning to the waiter. "And long-winded, for a journalist."

"You're neither a woman nor English."

"I'll drink to that last part, especially." George stretched his pint glass across the table in toast to his brother and Richard clinked his against it.

When he settled against the back of the booth, his shoulder brushed Mary's. He said pleasantly, "In Dickens' defence, I never could resist a story about a rise from poverty to importance."

"And now we know the true reason he chose the George and Vulture," she said to George, who shook his head.

"Richie's full of it. You should have heard him when he was at school. He drove the teachers mad with his rants about how Dickensian characters never rise from rags to riches because they work for it. They only ever get extraordinarily lucky."

Mary shrugged, thinking how Matthew had joked on more than one occasion that between being named Papa's successor and Reggie Swire's heir, he felt at times as if he'd wandered into a Dickens novel. "Truth can be stranger than fiction."

The waiter scuttled over, apologising to Sir Richard for his slowness, and took their orders before hurrying back to the kitchen.

"Not big on luncheon?" said George, referring to the salad Mary ordered. "I suppose when you have breakfast in bed and afternoon tea and full-course formal dinners that mostly go to waste a lady doesn't require a working man's luncheon." He had ordered steak and kidney pie; Richard, simply a steak with roast potatoes.
"We'd require more dress fittings than we already do."

"What time does the Yorkshire delegation arrive in London?" Richard asked.

"Six o'clock," Mary replied, grateful for the change in subject. "If they're on time."

"They won't be."

"Another reason why every course of tonight's dinner will be much appreciated."

"What is on the menu?" Richard asked. "I assume you planned it? That you've presided over Grantham House as it buzzes with preparations for the Earl and Countess and the exacting Dowager?"

For a moment Mary gawped at him. She'd never known Richard to have any patience at all for small-talk—she was all too familiar with the expression on George's face as he retreated into his beer—but she noticed that the lines of his face had softened slightly, that his eyes were not so dull with fatigue, not precisely bright with excitement, but interested nonetheless. His gaze was fond. Her stomach fluttered as it occurred to her that his thoughts might have turned in a domestic direction. Where did he imagine her reigning supreme over household staff? Not Haxby anymore, surely? His flat above the newspaper offices? The Knightsbridge house at last becoming a home with her feminine-such as it was-touch?

"Granny's staying with Aunt Rosamund," she answered. "She says at her age she can't afford to lose sleep in a house with two babies."

"Has she ever at any age?" Richard scuffed his fingers over his jawline. "Two babies— you convinced Mr Branson too come along with the family, then?"

"I believe a return to city life will do him good. He must find Downton terribly quiet after Dublin."

"Will you," George broke in, "after London?"

"I'm sure I shall," Mary replied, and she felt Richard's arm flex as he leaned against her. "Certainly it will seem less entertaining, after trips to the zoo and the Queen's Club and the opera and jazz concerts… But I've no firm plans for my return."

The rigidity of Richard's posture eased slightly with his exhale, though his long fingers curled over her knee beneath the table, turning her thoughts to the need she'd felt in him as he held her through the night.

She took a drink and continued, "It would be a shame to go back too soon when the staff have been thrown into a state of chaos."

"Ah, the pressing concerns of domestic workers," said George. "Honestly I don't understand why Ma was so adamant against our going into service. I wish my problems at the store were as trivial as the silver not being shiny enough for a dinner party."

"The Earl of Grantham's servants get half a day off at Christmas and New year," Richard said.

Mary was not entirely sure what to make of this remark. Was it meant at Papa's expense? It seemed unlikely that it should be at Richard's own. His fingers pressed hard against the hollow of her knee, and she covered his hand with her own, sliding her fingers between his knuckles until his grasp relaxed.
"It's rather a relief to get out of the house, actually," she said, smiling, and told him about the hubbub of preparations: the incessant clanging of the doorbell as deliverymen filled orders, the roar of the hoover terrorising the baby, who'd been left to her and Isobel as Nanny Philips had been on the phone to the Downton nanny, coordinating their plans for both children in the London nursery. "You know, it may be something of a miracle you managed to put a call through to me at all, between her and Molesley. He'll be returning to Downton while Carson's here."

The waiter brought their food, and Richard's hand left her knee to unfurl his serviette with a snap.

"As I recall, Mr Molesley was always very keen to rise in the ranks of Lord Grantham's staff. I should imagine it's a blow to be displaced when he's looked after you and Mrs Crawley all these months."

Mary took a bite of salad, slowly chewing the idea of just how acutely Richard had observed the inner workings of their household. He had understood how they operated, even though he had not found his own place within it.

"On the contrary," she said, "I believe he's very keen to get back to Downton. His father's getting to an advanced stage of life, though he's an indefatigable gardener. The only villager to beat Granny's roses in the annual flower show, and Molesley likes to help him."

She noticed that both men had become very quiet, though in neither case was it because they were eating. No one seemed to be breathing, either. Laying down her fork, Mary mustered a gracious smile, as if this were a dinner party she were hostess of and it was her duty to ease her guests when the conversation became awkward.

"How is everyone in Morningside, Mr Carlisle? I'm sorry Mark couldn't accompany you this time. I should have liked to see him again."

Richard resumed cutting his steak as George replied with less mockery in the curve of his mouth than had been there prior to now, "Thank you, Lady Mary. He'll be pleased to know that. He's holding down the fort for me while I'm in town."

"He can run the shop?"

"You should see him at the till, Richie-the lad has a real head for figures."

"A born businessman, like his uncle?" Mary nudged him lightly in the ribs as she picked up her fork again; his eyes darted downward, acknowledging her as he chewed.

"And his old man," George said around a bite of his steak and kidney pie. "He's more bookish, though. He can't wait for term to start."

"It'll be his last year of grammar school, won't it?" asked Richard, shaking his head as he peered out one of the high windows. "That seems unbelievable."

"Aileen's weepy about it. I think it's making her hanker for another wee one."

"You won't be sending your boys away to school, though, will you?" asked Mary, her voice pitching a little higher than she would have liked with her effort to steer the conversation yet again from this indelicate direction; the back of her neck prickled hotly. "They'll attend day schools?"

"That's right. Strange as that must surely seem to one of your lot. How young will you pack little Lord Grantham off to...?"
"Eton," Richard answered before she could, his knife scraping against his plate. "They're an Eton family, George. And you could be, too. If I've told you once I've told you-"

"He'll begin when he's eight," Mary said.

"Will you pack your own kids off at such a tender age, Richie?"

Richard held his stare across the table for a long moment, before he finally returned his attention to his food. "You know sometimes I think it's you who's the vulture, Georgie."

As the brothers ate, the clinks of their silverware ringing in Mary's ear, she experienced a new appreciation for what it must be like for outsiders to be subjected to interactions between her and Edith. The lapse in conversation persisted, and she felt the weight of responsibility to continue it. Richard had said that morning in his flat that she'd seen what life with him would be. Had she, truly? Would it be the Royal Opera and the Queen's Club and intimate nights in flat? Or would it be diplomacy with his family across rustic dinner tables?

"And Mark's namesake…" she inquired, timidly. "I hope his return to good health continues?"

Both men looked up, and a shift in the shadows in the high window revealed George's eyes to have gone round behind his glasses as he sought his elder brother's gaze, expecting him to give her an answer. When Richard did not, George'sAdam's apple bobbed above his stiff collar, and he rasped, "Dad-"

"Took a bit of a turn," Richard said over him, calmly. Too calmly. He turned slightly toward Mary in the booth, and his pale lips twitched into a bland smile. "But he's strong."

She didn't dare let her gaze waver from his, and anyway she didn't need to; George huffed and in her periphery she saw him shake his head as he hunched over his food. Clearly, there was more to the story than Richard was telling. But of course it was not her place to question him here, especially not in front of his brother. If there was any subject on which she could claim to be an expert, it was that there must be a reason for withholding information. I never proved myself a reliable confidant, her own words whispered through her mind.

"And sharp?" she said, mirroring Richard's expression.

Beneath the table he said caught her hand and squeezed it tightly.

Richard had sent a car to convey her to lunch, but she rode with him in the back of the Silver Ghost for the return drive to Hanover Square. He kept hold of the hand he'd taken at the pub, but did not keep up conversation. From time to time she caught him looking at her as if there was something he wanted to say; George, who sat up front with the chauffeur in spite of-or perhaps to spite-his brother's insistence that this was ill-bred (We are ill-bred, Richie, he argued), glanced frequently at Richard in the mirror, as if he expected him to say it. But Richard steadfastly ignored the looks-or failed to notice them. He didn't seem aware of much, his eyes glazed as the motor rolled along, as though lulled by the motion, and gradually the lids drooped over the too-bright blue. By the time the Rolls Royce pulled up in front of Grantham House, his chin nodded toward the knot of his necktie, and he snored softly.

Mary didn't intend to wake him-clearly, he needed the rest-but when she tried to slip her hand from his grasp he stirred. He disembarked the vehicle, handed her out, and walked her to the front door where, with rather more energy than she would have expected, he pulled her against him and covered her mouth with his own, his tongue parting her lips almost at once. The kiss stole her breath, yet he scarcely gave her time to return it before he broke away, his forehead pressed to hers.
"I missed you last night," he murmured, then kissed her again; Mary was glad, not merely because she enjoyed it, but because it spared her having to admit that she'd missed him, too, even as she struggled with the conflicting worry of whether Isobel wasn't correct, that nine months was too few to grieve a husband.

"Richard..." She pulled her lips from his this time, but clung to the crooks of his arms as they encircled jer, searching his eyes. "I can't help but notice you seem... preoccupied."

His gaze flickered sideways, narrowing; Mary followed it to the car, where George leaned, smoking a cigarette.

"There is a matter I need to discuss with you, yes."

After his previous evasiveness, Mary was almost startled by how frank he was now, though she tried not to show it, hoping her eyebrows seemed arched with interest rather than surprise. Perhaps she overdid it; one of Richard's hands left the small of her back, turned palm out in a restraining gesture.

"Not at this very moment, of course-you've a lot on your mind with your parents' arrival."

"Now burning curiosity as well as all that?"

A chuckle rumbled low as he pulled her in, brushing his lips across her forehead. "It'll keep until we can meet in a more private setting."

He trailed kisses along her brow, over her eyelids, the tip of her nose and her cheek... At first she allowed him—after all, she had initiated a quite public act of affection last night in front of Hotel Cecil—but those were strangers—the Palestinian delegation—and here were neighbours who had known her from birth and her parents for longer. When Richard tilted his head to kiss her mouth once more she turned so that he only caught the corner of it. He pulled back, giving her an uncertain look.

"I may have a difficult time slipping away without questions," she said.

There was nothing uncertain about the wounded look that hardened his features and his grasp on her waist; she'd seen it before, so many times, though she hadn't recognised it.

"You're an adult woman with a child of your own, Mary. You're entitled to leave your father's house without explanation."

Mary looked down at his hand and drew a deep breath. "And will I be entitled to another luncheon invitation tomorrow when you realise you've been a troll again?"

At once Richard released her, sweeping his hand up to remove his hat and swipe his hand across his brow. "Forgive me. It was a long night, and a long morning, and I fear it'll be an even longer afternoon. Thank you for giving me an escape."

"From what, Richard? Your father?"

"I'd best get to the office."

Mary did not rebuff him when he leaned in to kiss her one last time, though his lips were soft, almost chaste against hers, and then he turned away. He turned away, and she watched him go, her gaze drifting to George after Richard had climbed into the back seat of the Silver Ghost. He took a final drag from the cigarette, then flicked it into the street, giving her a hard look as he ground it into the pavement with his heel.
Not six hours later Mary stood on the front step once again, watching another car pull up along the curb in front of Grantham House.

"The train was on time," Mary greeted her family as they disembarked the Renault; behind her in the foyer Isobel waited with the baby and Molesley in as much of a receiving line as they could muster.

"It was, can you believe it?" Papa replied.

Mary shook her head, pressing her lips together against the instinct to add, Neither will Richard, when I tell him. She was nervous enough about how her parents would treat her after her escape from Downton in the spring, without adding Richard into the mix as a certain recipe for disaster. As it turned out she needn't have worried, the watery pity that had been ever present in Mama's bright blue eyes since last September now absent as she embraced her and swept her with an appraising gaze.

"My darling, you look wonderful. What a pretty dress." She fingered the flared sleeve of the floral print silk dress Mary had worn to luncheon; her relief that it was not black was evident. "London's obviously been good to you. I had a letter from Lady Gillingham yesterday-she said Amelia saw you at the opera?"

Mary's heart missed a beat, but resumed pounding-double-time-when she realised Mama would certainly not have looked pleased if any mention had been made of whom she had attended the opera with.

"Did Mr Napier take you?" Mama asked. "Only odd that Amelia wouldn't have recognised him. Wasn't he engaged to one of her sisters-in-law? Tony's engaged."

Over her shoulder, Mary saw Isobel looking on, but she looked away quickly, turning her attention to George in her arms.

"I've been seeing rather a lot of him," answered Mary, not untruthfully. "I bumped into Amelia alone-though she was never a bright mind. She didn't say a word about Tony being engaged." Had Amelia in fact chaperoned him and the fiancé? There had been that undertone of meaning, when she said Lady Gillingham would be pleased to know she was in society again.

"I'm glad. About Mr Napier, I mean." Mama embraced her and kissed her cheek. "You were right to come to town and renew your outlook. Now I" She released Mary abruptly and wheeled to go through the house, removing her hat. "Wet me see my precious grandson!"

"Dear me," said Mary, as Tom came up the front steps, Sybbie in his arms, her mop of curly brown hair on his shoulder. "Somehow I'd forgotten Mama's appalling way of speaking to babies."

"I do fear sometimes worry what sort of incomprehensible accent Sybbie'll acquire, learning to speak from a Dubliner and an American."

"For the first time it isn't Mama's being American that concerns me."

Tom chuckled softly as he greeted her, and she put out a hand to stroke the dishevelled curls back from the plump rosy cheek; her niece slept on his shoulder, petal lips slack around her thumb.

"Poor darling," Mary crooned, hoping she didn't sound as soppy as Mama. "How was she on the train?"

"Wide awake the entire six hours, utterly fascinated. She fell asleep the instant we got in the car, but I'm the one who could use the nap. I'm knackered. I ought to have taken up your grandmother's
suggestion that I go to Aunt Rosamund's with her and Rose."

"I remember a train ride much like that with her mama," said Papa, coming up behind. He was thinner than when she saw him last spring, his hand more dependent upon the iron railing than she'd known it to be.

"Only it was the nanny who required a nap afterward, not you," Mary said, and he brightened as she leaned in to peck his cheek.

"As I recall, the nanny's exhaustion was more due to the demands of an elder sister."

There had been two demanding elder sisters, and Mary opened her mouth to remind him of this fact even if he would prefer to pretend Edith did not exist so long as she lived in sin. Before she could emit any sound, a shriek from the hall made them all wheel to see George stiffen his back and resist Mama's attempt to take him from his other grandmother.

"There, there, Georgie Porgie," said Isobel, patting his back as he recoiled in her arms; Mary didn't think it was her imagination that she saw possessiveness in that embrace, a hint of relief, even satisfaction, in the brown eyes as her mother-in-law explained to Mama, "He must not remember you."

Mama stepped back from them, shoulders slumping, looking in her pale coral traveling suit like the last rose of summer. But only for an instant, as she turned and plucked Sybbie, who had startled awake at George's cries and begun to cry herself, from Tom's arms and bounced her on her hip. "We'll just have to remind Master Georgie who Grandmamma and Cousin Sybbie are, won't we? We'll have such a fun time together, yes we will!"

"If Sybbie's fascinated by trains, there's a lovely electric train set in the nursery," Isobel suggested, and without further discussion the two grandmothers carried the children upstairs.

"Wouldn't you like tea first?" Papa called after them.

"Who cares about tea when there are grandchildren?"

"Papa?" Mary raised her eyebrows at him.

"This English grandpapa."

"And this Irish pa," said Branson, and Mary asked Molesley to have their tea brought up to the drawing room.
Catching Up

Chapter Summary

As Mary readjusts to life with her family, secrets become harder to keep. But she is not the only one who's been hiding things.

When Mama asked, across the table, what opera she had been to see, Mary swallowed her wine too quickly. Surely this topic been exhausted earlier? Was Mama determined to know every detail? Unable to immediately answer for fear of a coughing fit, Mary thanked her lucky stars that at least a prior engagement with a parish colleague made Isobel absent from the first meal following the family's arrival and prevented her being helpful and revealing not only what opera Mary had seen, but with whom she had seen it.

Of course, Aunt Rosamund was present, but as she seemed preoccupied with serving herself from the tray of asparagus tips, and her modus operandi was generally not to blurt out gossip at the dinner table, but to write it in letters to Granny and let her be the deliverer of the news, Mary believed she had little to fear from that quarter. Not to mention Rosamund had intimated that she had influenced her niece's personal life enough already -her word; Mary's would have been interfered with-and at the ripe age of thirty, she ought to be able to muddle through it on her own.

When her throat had ceased to burn and she had drawn reassurance from the pair of dark eyes that regarded her with some concern beneath the heavy drawn brows as Carson poured wine for Tom, Mary smiled-which made his face relax into a smile in turn-and at last answered her mother.

"The Barber Of Seville."

"Was it a good production?"

"It was amusing." Mary couldn't resist adding, a smirk twitching on her lips as she cut her meat, "Although I heard one person say it was much better in Milan. But isn't everything?"

"Oh, I quite agree. The Italians ought to keep more of their culture where it originated. Catholicism, for example."

"Aunt Violet!"

Rose's eyes rounded with horror, her gaze bouncing from Granny to Tom, who was so accustomed to such remarks as these that he scarcely rolled his eyes as he raised his glass to his lips; or perhaps it was because no one had troubled to dress for dinner that he looked more at ease than Mary had seen him in black tie in the dining room at Downton.

"Robert," Mama said, "we ought to go to the Royal Opera while we're in town. We haven't been since before the War."

"That's one aspect of our pre-War lives I wouldn't mind never going back to," he replied.

"Tell me how things are at Downton." Mary seized the opportunity to change the subject. "You're all such appalling correspondents."
"I wrote to you!" Mama protested.

"Village gossip." Dismissing the thought that her own narratives of the past several months could at best be described as *patchy*, Mary again addressed her father. "Have you and Tom decided how to pay the…" *Death duties.* "…taxes?"

At once she regretted her lack of fortitude and wished she'd uttered the correct words instead of euphemisms, as Papa laid down his silverware to regard her with pity.

"Now my dear, no one wants to discuss that."

"Of course no one wants to," said Mary. "No one wants to pay the death duties, either, but we must." There. She'd done it. She took a drink. "Will you sell some of the land?"

"I had thought to," Papa said in tones of resignation as he wielded knife and fork once again, as though taking up arms for a battle he'd rather not fight, "but I'm loath to allow all North Yorkshire's farmlands to go to the Theakston Brewery."

"You're referring to Haxby Park."

Cutlery screeched on china as Papa's head snapped up, eyes flashing on Mama. "Was that some of your *neighbourhood gossip*?"

"I mentioned it," Tom leapt to his mother-in-law's defence. "I thought Mary might find it interesting."

Mary watched Papa's thumb twitch over the handle of his knife; was he more vexed, she wondered, that Tom would have written to her about estate matters, or that he had written to her at all?

"Now why would Mary be interested in reminders of *that* time in her life?"

"Really, Papa…" She stopped her own thumb scuffing against the edge of her index finger. Somehow, with Mama's pleasure that she was getting on with her life, she hadn't expected that her father might still treat her as though she must be wrapped in cotton wool and kept safe from the hard knocks the world might deal her. "Tom only mentioned it in passing. That you weren't pleased."

"Who would be?" Papa muttered. "Besides self-made millionaires who cannot possibly appreciate the Russells' legacy?"

*I'm not ashamed to be what they call a self-made man*, Richard's voice rasped through the years' of memory, but Papa uttered the words as though they tasted foul on his tongue; from his post by the sideboard, Carson's face expressed a similar sour sentiment, his chin tilted upward as if in approval with his master's distaste.

Mary lowered her hands into her lap, her own appetite gone. "What legacy? An empty house and twelve thousand acres?"

"The new rich want to flaunt their wealth by buying big houses and throwing parties," said Tom. "They don't want to farm."

"At least those poor tenant farmers will have work again," Mama added, but Papa's retort deflated her:

"If they haven't all moved to the cities and taken factory jobs."

"Oh I do hope Haxby's new owner will throw parties!" cried Rose, only to be withered by Aunt
"And think to invite the Earl of Grantham's bored young cousin?"

"If this hypothetical owner thinks I'll grant permission," Papa said, "he's quite mistaken. Of course buying that house rather sets a precedent."

"Evelyn Napier mentioned a friend who might be interested," Mary said, unwilling to let Papa bring the discussion to a premature end. "Blake something. No. Charles. Charles Blake."

"That bodes well," said Papa, "if he's a friend of Mr Napier's."

Clearly he'd forgotten that Mr Napier had once brought a friend to Downton by the name of Kemal Pamuk.

"Modern and unsentimental, I believe were the words Evelyn used to describe him," said Mary; she glimpsed Tom mask a grin with his wine glass, while Carson lifted his eyes heavenward.

"Robert?" Granny spoke up, having remained uncharacteristically silent till now, Mary realised, all the while regarding her appraisingly. "Mightn't this be the time to inform Mary of the… development?"

"Development?"

Papa did not-would not-give Mary so much as a glance. "No, Mama," he said through tight lips, "it wouldn't. I'm taking her to see Murray later this week."

Mary twitched her thumbs in her lap. "It would seem all my days have been planned out for me."

And that her presence at the table was not really necessary at all, as they had all got accustomed to speaking about her as if she were not there.

At least her mother spoke to her, even if it was with affected levity and a smile plastered too broadly across her face. "Oh dear. I hope this isn't a bad time to say I thought we could all go to the International Horse Show at the end of month? And since you've been seeing so much of Mr Napier, I thought I might ask him along?"

Perhaps hoping to ingratiate himself once more to his wife, Papa remarked that this was the best turn the conversation had taken all evening. However, Mama seemed concerned only with what Mary thought of it, the hollow smile fading from her face as her eyes rounded and bulged as she perceived a marked lack of enthusiasm.

"I only thought…" she faltered. "I remember Mr Napier was such a great rider….He and his father both…"

Granny quite agreed that on the occasions she'd spoken with the Viscount Branksome, he'd scarcely had a word to say that had not been about horses.

"Perhaps you ought to invite him, then," Mary explained. "Evelyn was a cavalryman in the War. I'm sure you can imagine how that might have affected his enjoyment of equine pursuits."

"I'm sure I can't."

"Poor fellow." Papa drank, but as he set down his glass again added in less sympathetic tones, "Though I must confess I'm surprised. Mr Napier always seemed far too exemplary a gentleman to
discuss such gruesome subjects with ladies."

"I don't imagine many men who went down to the trenches came out unchanged," said Tom, quietly, and even Papa did not have it in him to rebuke that statement.

Mary hastily spoke, purely for the sake of filling the void before those questioning voices she had not quite silenced in her own mind on the subject of how the battlefields of France had changed Matthew, could overwhelm her.

"It's Edith who's heard all the really gory details. Evelyn's helping her write a book."

Granny made a sound of dismay. "And we thought it was ghastly to have a journalist in the family. Now she's a novelist…"

Rose attempted to reassure her that female writers weren't so scandalous these days. "And just think—Cousin Edith could be the Jane Austen of our age! Or the next Brontë!"

"Which Brontë? There were three, you know," said Mary drily, but Rose did not hear.

"Oh, I wonder if she's met Virginia Woolf!"

"Not the best point to make your case," Aunt Rosamund told her, but there was no further opportunity for Rose to enumerate on the properness of female novelists, as Papa, whose face had grown very red as the ladies chattered, at last blurted out:

"Edith's career, and indeed Edith herself, are subjects which I do insist we not discuss at dinner, or any time."

"Robert, please," Mama implored, her voice husky with tears, but he deliberately resumed cutting his roast duck. She mumbled her excuses and stumbled blindly from the dining room, and after the click of her heels ceased to reverberate in the tiled hall the dinner continued in silence.

Nobody had much appetite for dessert, and when they had all picked at it enough for Mary to reasonably suggest the ladies go through for coffee, Tom did not resume his place at the table as the footman cleared it and Carson brought out the brandy.

"Cigar, Tom?" Papa asked.

"No, thank you," Tom replied. "I thought I'd just look in on Sybbie, then turn in early. It's been a long day."

Papa looked at him, hard, for a moment, then opened the cigar case Carson set before him. "Fine. Good night, then."

Tom held the dining room door for her, and as Mary stepped through Rose asked if she would make a fourth at bridge. The idea did hold its appeal, Mary thought with some surprise, for at Downton she had avoided the family after dinner most evenings, unable to bear the drawing room and all the memories it held of bantering there with Matthew.

"In a moment," she replied. "Tom and I are just going to the nursery."

As Mary joined her brother-in-law, who had paused to wait for her at the foot of the staircase, they shared a grin as Granny's voice drifted from the drawing room, bemoaning the infiltration of middle-class notions of child-rearing—which, of course, Rose praised.
"At least there's also an infiltration of upper-class notions of chivalry," Mary teased when Tom swept his hand in a gallant gesture indicating she mount the stairs ahead of him.

"Nice recovery after you almost spilled the beans about Haxby, by the way," Tom said in rejoinder when they were out of earshot. "You're still seeing Sir Richard, then?"

"More personally than professionally," Mary confessed. Her ascent slowed; the swish of her satin glove over the polished handrail seemed to produce more sound than it ought.

"So I gathered from your letter about the zoo. It seemed an unlikely location to conduct a business meeting."

"Indeed."

"It wasn't Mr Napier you attended the opera with, was it?"

They had reached the top of stairs, and Tom fell into step with her as they made their way down the hall toward the nursery. His intent gaze made warmth prickle over her cheek; an errant lock of hair fell loose from an opal barrette and tickled. As happy as she was that Anna had not allowed her delicate condition to stop her accompanying her husband to town, the maid needed a little practice dressing the new bob haircut. Mary reached up to tuck the curl behind her ear, unwilling to hide behind it.

"No," she replied, "but please don't disabuse Mama of the notion."

"Mary." Tom gave her a wry look as they stopped outside the nursery door. "Surely you haven't forgotten I've a lot of experience keeping secrets for Crawley ladies."

He started to turn the doorknob, but Mary arrested him with a raise of her eyebrow. "Speaking of family secrets...Do you know anything about this appointment with Mr Murray?"

Shaking his head, he replied, "If it's any comfort, your father tells me less about your private affairs than he tells you."

"A small comfort. But thank heaven for small favours."

Tom opened the door and a beam of light slanted from the hall over the sweetly slumbering faces. "And for small children," he whispered.

If Papa's strop at dinner served any purpose, it drove home to Mary that when Edith moved to London to be Gregson's mistress, Mama had essentially lost two daughters in as many years.

Of course it was not the first time she'd been faced with the truth that her own stay in town deprived Mama of having any of her children at Downton-mostly when Isobel asked whether her mother would be too lonely. She wouldn't, Mary reassured Isobel, as well as herself: Cousin Rose would keep her company.

But as she observed her family during the first few days of their stay, it became clear that Mama endured rather than enjoyed the young girl's incessant chatter at tea. The blue of her eyes occasionally dimmed behind a veil of brief tears when it alit on the girl across the card table after dinner, rather than resting on her so gently and lovingly that it seemed almost a physical caress, as Mary had so often watched it linger upon Sybil, and on Edith...as it must have done upon herself.

She felt it now and looked up with a start from the book she hadn't really been reading, to meet
Mama's eyes watching her across the drawing room from over the curly head of Sybbie, who had fallen asleep in the middle of *Jemima Puddleduck*.

It was love. Not the pity Mary was sure she saw in every pair of eyes when she fled Downton last winter, but the love she had not been able to see for all those years Pamuk’s corpse hung between them, cold and heavy. *I'm a lost soul to you!* she'd cried out once in anguish, but she'd been found. Now it was the others who were lost, Sybil forever, and Edith...

Edith was a name not spoken at the dinner table.

"If it would ever stop raining," Mary said, looking out the window at the wet street as she replaced her marker in the book and set it on the side table, "we ought to take the children for some outings. Sybbie’s a better age for the zoo than George."

"I wasn't entirely sure I believed you enjoyed it as much as you claimed to in your letter. Now you're saying you wouldn't mind going again?"

"How could I mind a walk around the zoo, after I rode an elephant?"

"How I wish we had photographic evidence of that."

A soft laugh drew Mary's gaze, and she smiled a little as she watched her mother carefully move Sybbie off her lap to lie curled at the end of the settee, then rang for Nanny. If there had been a photograph from that day, it would not be the elephant at which Mama would gawk.

"Next time, perhaps," said Mary, and poured herself and Mama tea from the service on the coffee table.

Was that her answer to Richard's proposal, then? Did she feel such a certainty in her heart that there would be a next time to ride elephants with her son, his nephew…their family?

To her surprise, when the first bright day dawned, Mama suggested an outing not with the children, but only with Mary.

"Don't you want to at least take Sybbie?" she asked as they checked their hats and faces in the hall mirror while the car was brought around for them. "You wrote about a little birthday party with Auntie Mary."

"I did," said Mama. "But you'll need a party dress, won't you?"

As it was a deal more tactful than saying she needed to expand her half-mourning wardrobe, Mary allowed herself to be whisked away to the dressmakers'. She might have felt almost a *débutante* again, selecting day dresses and dinner gowns for the season, if only everything weren't mauves and greys-and if her thoughts did not keep turning in a decidedly maternal direction.

"London affords so many opportunities for children," she said, as they eschewed the car and strolled Regent Street toward Liberty, in search of shoes and accessories. "I wonder if my future might include more frequent stays in town than I've been accustomed to."

"You know your father will expect to have his fair share of time with George at Downton. He'll have to learn estate management."

*Papa or George?* Mary wanted to ask, but did not; she settled for: "He probably ought to learn to say the word *estate* first. Or anything but da-da-da-da."
"It's a small step from da to Downton."

"Speaking of steps, walking's another skill he ought to master first." He was close, quite proficient at toddling about clinging to the edges of furniture, or people's hands, but refused to let go and walk independently.

They passed a pub, and the sight of a bespectacled man hunched over a newspaper through the window made her think of George Carlisle and his unanswered question of whether she would find Downton dull after London.

"We'll have to go back sometime, I suppose, but the truth is, I've got used to the pace of life here myself. The country sounds so quiet, from your letters. There really isn't much neighbourhood gossip at all."

"You've no idea how happy it makes me to hear you say that," said Mama, and Mary looked at her, askance. "I mean-it's very sad that so many of our friends have gone. But that's the reality of our world now, isn't it? Being here's like a breath of fresh air."

As if to prove her point, she inhaled deeply, as one would in springtime in the country; Mary crinkled her nose against the fumes the automobiles and omnibuses that packed the streets, which still smelled faintly of the recent rain that now lingered in stagnating puddles.

"You know me," Mama went on. "I've always been a city girl." She looped her arm through Mary's, slowing their pace as they walked shoulder to shoulder. "I hate the thought of you wandering about the house in black like a lost soul, without Matthew or your sisters."

Mary's chest tightened, and she pictured herself doing exactly that for the better part of last autumn and winter. "Well. I wouldn't be in black, as we're shopping for a half-mourning wardrobe."

"It's just that I've begun to realise how isolating Downton could be, even when the neighbours were still in residence. Your father and I did you a tremendous disservice."

"You were raising us to be proper earl's daughters."

Mama nodded, but gave her a sad smile. "It doesn't seem to matter very much anymore whose daughters you are, does it?" Before Mary could remark on this, Mama asked, in less philosophical tones, "What would you say to a trip to Newport next summer, to see Grandmamma?"

"I…" Mary's heel scuffed on the pavement. "I'm not sure I can say anything. I haven't thought of America since…" Since she thought to go there to avoid the scandal when Richard published. Which he never had done.

Mama was talking again, about how the traditional summers at Duneagle were yet another thing of the past, with Shrimpy and Susan now in India-And O'Brien, she couldn't resist adding, and not without a hint of bitterness that her long-time ladies' maid had left her so abruptly last autumn to heed a sudden wanderlust.

"I know a lady never admits her true age, but I'll be fifty-four next week," Mama said with a sigh.

"If it ain't too bold, madam, I'd never guess a day over forty!" said a passer-by who'd overheard, with a doff of his hat and, though flushing and laughing nervously, Mama looked backward to thank him for the compliment.

But she quickly became serious again. "Mother will be eighty. She talks of visiting Downton again, but how realistic is a transatlantic voyage at her age? It would be more appropriate for us to go see
her."

Mary nodded. How lucky was she to have not one, but two living grandmothers? And Mama was right—she would not-could not, for very much longer. Why, when she saw Papa for the first time in months, she noted how he had aged. He was, after all, a grandparent himself.

*I turned fifty this year,* Richard had said. *An age at which one stops and takes stock of one's achievements, and whether the sacrifices made to reach them were worth it.*

How was his father, whose illness had—she saw now—been the catalyst for Richard's self-examination? For his re-entrance into her life? Her gaze fell to the ground with the shameful realisation that not only had she still failed to give him an answer to his proposal, but she also had not called on him, or even phoned, to see how he was getting on.

"It's so difficult to plan ahead," she said. "One never knows what the future holds. Even the very near future."

By next summer, she might well be Lady Mary Carlisle. A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth, made her look up again as she considered that Richard would be more than game for a trip to America. Grandmamma would like him. Love him, even. Funny how that never occurred to her before, when they were engaged. But then, it had never really occurred to her that she might love him, if she had troubled to know Richard in a place where he was free to be himself.

Of course that brought her back to Mama's point: return to Downton was inevitable. She and Richard might get on like a house on fire in London, but was it enough to dispel the ghosts that lurked at home?

Abruptly, Mama stopped in her tracks in the middle of the pavement and released Mary's arm to open her handbag, rifling through its contents until she found an embroidered hankie to dab at her eyes. Another pedestrian knocked shoulders with her, sounding harassed even as she apologised, and Mary shared the sentiment. She hadn't meant to be maudlin—it was Mama who'd raised the subject, after all—and she certainly had no intention of indulging an American lack of emotional restraint, in the middle of Regent Street, of all places.

"Although as far as we do know," she said, "I've an important meeting with Mr Murray tomorrow, and I haven't a thing to wear. Do you think I can find a suitable outfit off the peg, or will I be reduced to borrowing something from Edith?"

With a laugh, Mama blew her nose one final time, then folded her handkerchief and returned it to her bag. "We're modern women with wonderful fashion sense," she said, looping it over her arm as they resumed their walk; the Tudor-style Liberty storefront loomed not far ahead. "I don't think it'll come to that, surely."

"I hate to admit it, but I think the new styles suit her better than they do me."

"All three of you have-had-your own kind of beauty. I'm so pleased to hear you acknowledge Edith's."

It was the first time Mary had heard Mama acknowledge it, either-*She has fewer advantages than you,* she'd gone so far as to say—but once more she held her tongue.

"Just don't tell her."

She only meant it as a joke, but Mama's eyes watered again as she remarked sadly, "I won't even have the opportunity. Your father's forbidden me to see her, or even write to her."
"Didn't you just call yourself a modern woman? Papa can't forbid you to do anything. She's as much your daughter as she is his."

"And she's hurt me as deeply as she's hurt him." The flare of temper died almost at once. "Though of course we hurt her, too."

Mary could include herself in that we-Edith did. She could have been married to Anthony Strallan for seven year, by now… But honestly, who would want a man so easily swayed? Who would abandon a proposal because of a sister's lies? Because of a father's guilt trip? Richard had faced as much disapproval from her family, but he stood fast under pressure.

"For what it's worth," Mary said, "I don't think Edith's created very much scandal. The world is changing."

It was not the first time she'd uttered those words to her mother; the reply this time was not likely to be Not that much, and not fast enough for you, yet she still went on before Mama had a chance to say anything:

"I believe her infatuation with Gregson's run its course."

They stopped again, having arrived at the department store, but as the liveried men swept open the doors Mama remained rooted to the pavement. "Oh, Mary!" makes you think so? This book you mentioned her writing?"

Mary shrugged. "That's only my view of course." She moved to enter Liberty. "If you want to know Edith's, you'll have to ask her."

She waited as Mama came through, a thoughtful expression on her face, and softened.

"If you like, I'll arrange it. That way you can hold me responsible. After all-Papa won't be very hard on a poor widow."

Though Richard's voice, muffled behind the heavy oak door, bid his secretary to enter after she knocked, he seemed unaware of the interruption when Miss Fields swept it open. He leaned over the end of his paper-strewn desk, fountain pen in hand as he scratched furiously away at one of them, and Mary couldn't stop herself admiring the lean lines of his body afforded by his being clad in only his shirtsleeves, the coat of his charcoal pinstriped suit draped over his chair. His fair hair poked between the fingers of his left hand as he leaned on his elbow, lips moving faintly as he read to himself.

Miss Fields cleared her throat. "Lady Mary Crawley to see you, Sir," she said, and he turned his head, blinked as though to clear a haze, and at once unfolded to full height.

"Mary," he rasped, dropping his pen to tug at the hem of his waistcoat, "this is unexpected."

Though his tone was not one of reproach, Mary nevertheless felt a little twinge that she'd neglected him.

"In the best way, I hope," she said, and approached his desk.

"Naturally." Richard's voice pitched low, and she heard the door click shut behind her just as his fingers curled around her elbow, drawing her in for a kiss. His lips touched hers softly, but too briefly; she'd scarcely begun to kiss him back when he pulled away with a sigh, raking his free hand through his hair again as he swept a rueful glance at his paper-strewn desk. "If only I weren't on my
way out the door." The dimple winked as he squeezed her elbow and said, "But feel free to stay a
moment, while I finish going over these contracts. Shall I buzz Miss Fields to bring tea?"

"No, thank you. I told Mama I'd be at Lyon's anyway. So to Lyon's I shall go."

Mary leaned against his desk where she could both face him and appreciate the picture he made as he
resumed his work. This was the most at ease she'd ever felt in the office, perhaps because the clutter
destroyed the illusion of his being in total control. She found no difficulty at all imagining days spent
much like this one, shopping or socialising in town, dropping in on him for a chat. A golden lock of
his hair caught the light of the desk lamp as it fell across his forehead, but he appeared not to notice,
his fair skin furrowed deeply in concentration. Could she break that focus?

She told him about the morning's shopping, but he never faltered in his task until she mentioned how
she'd convinced her mother to see Edith.

"Dissent in Lord Grantham's ranks? I approve." Even then, he only cut his eyes sideways at her as
he turned over a leaf and trailed the tip of his index finger over the next one as he scanned it.

"When I offered to arrange a meeting, I didn't think she'd want to drop in at the Sketch immediately."

"At last the mystery of where Lady Mary learnt to make up her mind so quickly is solved."

"You say that," Mary retorted, clutching her handbag in both hands as she tried without total success
not to sound piqued, "yet I came to tell you Mama's talking of spending next summer in Newport.
And I thought you might like to visit America and meet my grandmother and Uncle Harold."

At that, Richard stopped writing; Mary watched his knuckles whiten, the tendons ripple across the
back of his hand, as he pressed the pen point hard to the paper for a long moment before he at last
raised his eyes to meet hers. It had not been an outright yes to his proposal, but her heart quickened
as she saw that he understood her implicit answer.

He lay his pen on a sheaf of paper and side-stepped the desk to put his arms around her waist.

"Now I really wish I didn't have to go," he said, and angled his head to kiss her.

When Mary's lips parted in a gasp as the corner of the desk pressed into the small of her back below
his arm, he took it as an invitation to deepen the kiss, but she hardly minded, responding in kind
setting her purse down so she could twine her arms about his neck and work into the curling ends of
his hair above his starched white collar. It seemed there were ways she might distract him from his
work.

His lips left hers to trail along the line of her jaw, and she obliged him by tilting her head back to
expose her neck, hooking her fingers over the knot of his necktie for balance as she perched
precariously at the edge of her desk. She'd told Mama she'd return to the Sketch in no longer than
half an hour, but they wouldn't require that long.

"The news can wait, can't it?"

"Mmm…afraid not," Richard mumbled against her skin, then raised his head, relaxing his hold
around her waist. "The House of Lords is full of gossip about this Mussolini fellow in Italy."

Probably for the best, Mary thought, releasing her disappointment with a sigh as he stepped back
from her. She leant away from the desk, rubbing the base of her spine. "So long as he intends to stay
in Italy. Granny had a few things to say the other night about Italian imports. Including opera."
"Preferable to German, though, I should imagine." Richard retrieved his jacket from where it hung over the back of his chair, and Mary watched the roll of his shoulders as he shrugged it on.

"Quite."

They exited the office together, and Miss Fields was waiting in the anteroom to give Richard his greatcoat and hat and take instructions for his absence. When she left to see to the contracts he'd left strewn on his desk, Mary impulsively straightened his tie where she'd tugged it loose and then, when he started to don his trilby, reached up to smooth his mussed hair back into place; her fingertips lingered at his temple as his eyes crinkled at the corners, obviously pleased at the intimate gesture, though there was more to it than that. Soothed. She hadn't asked him about his father, she realised, or what he'd wanted to speak to her about next time they were alone, though there wasn't time now.

He caught her hand in his large one and drew it to his lips. "When will I see you again?"

"Papa's taking me to see his lawyer on Thursday."

"His lawyer? Why?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. I won't be much out of your way, though, so I'll try to sneak over."

Richard smiled, and his thumb caressed her hand as he continued to hold it, his gaze steady upon hers. For a moment she thought he might tell her he loved her, but he simply said, "I'll look forward to it."

"I will, too," Mary replied.
The Cat Is Out

Chapter Summary

Secrets at last come to light, prompting Mary to action. Will the truth set her free, or trap her in a life of leisurely repentance?

Chapter Notes

Two words of warning: this is a long chapter, so you might want to get a snack or a drink and a comfy chair before you settle read it. ;) More seriously, I've incorporated a fairly major plot point from S4. I hope this won't put anyone off from continuing with the story, but I understand wanting to remain spoiler-free. Of course the scenario's a bit different here, if that helps!

Heiress.

A big improvement over poor widow, though a far cry still from the golden future dream Mary had foolishly pronounced herself envious of: all alone with plenty of money and a house in Eaton Square.

She watched the rain run in rivulets down the Renault's windows, giving the stone office buildings and black umbrella-wielding pedestrians the look of an Impressionist painting. Its soft drumming, along with the even swish of the wipers back and forth across the windscreen, matched the repetition of the words in her mind: heiress of Downton Abbey. Just as she had always wanted-well, half of what she had always wanted. But it was the thought that counted, and Matthew would have left it all to her if all of it had been his to give. Of course he would. Matthew had looked into how the entailment might be broken for her, at cost to himself, before he ever loved her. Certainly before she loved him. Perhaps that was when she'd begun to.

The crinkle of paper drew her gaze down to the envelope clutched in her black-gloved hands as they lay against the skirt of her new dress, pale lilac flowers against black silk. She hadn't even read the letter it contained; her name scratched in his handwriting, a message to her from beyond the grave, had been enough to test her self-control in Mr Murray's law office. Even now, seated beside Papa in the back seat of the car, she didn't trust herself not to weep. She couldn't even be sure that it was rain that blurred the street scene.

"You read my letter," she said, a statement, not a question, her voice as crisp as the envelope's edge she slid her thumb and forefinger across, sharpening the fold; it might slice her skin with the precision of a razor, a perfect straight line of scarlet dividing the pale white, if she were not wearing gloves. "You and Murray."

Papa's brows and cheeks sagged with his frown, and his lips parted slightly, a soft sigh escaping them. Mary hoped it was a look of contrition, but then he spoke: "The firm had the parcel sent to Downton, and you weren't there to receive it."
"So Murray said."

The lawyer had explained to her that some of Matthew’s personal effects had been misplaced when his Ripon office was cleared out, and had only just turned up a few weeks before. Including a letter which had been tucked into a book, which apparently named her and not George the sole recipient of his fortune—such as it was, invested in Downton.

"You couldn't have had it forwarded on to me at Grantham House?" she added.

"I didn't want to distress you."

"I couldn't possibly be more distressed than when I was told Matthew was killed in a car crash an hour after our son was born." She turned her head to look her father full in the face. "You withheld my post, then you read a letter that was plainly addressed to me." A thought occurred as she recalled the first mention of the whole business had been made to her. "And so did Granny."

"For what it's worth, your grandmother shares your opinion that I ought to have sent the parcel to you straight away, unopened."

"At least one of you understands I'm not a child whose difficult decisions must be made for her."

Papa tilted his hat and scuffed at his brow where the brim had rubbed it. She fully expected him to argue, but when his eyes met hers he said quietly, "Forgive me. It was wrong." His gaze drifted over her shoulder, fixing on the scene beyond the rain-streaked glass. "I loved him, too, and I suppose…I wanted to read his words, and to remember the sound of his voice."

Blinking, Mary looked away; she tried to convince herself it was the sun that had broken through the clouds and glinted off the drops that clung quivering to the car.

"Will you read it now?" her father asked.

Her response was a slight twitch of her chin, scarcely a head shake. "No, I'll wait. I always liked the sound of Matthew's voice best in private."

There seemed little chance of privacy as they entered the house to be immediately greeted by the cries of both children, and Mary tucked the envelope into her handbag. Papa muttered something about the proximity of the front hall to the nursery in townhouses as Carson helped him off with his greatcoat, which Sybbie’s volume—thankfully—prevented Tom from hearing as he came around the corner carrying her, patent shoes kicking his legs.

"Gracious," Mary said, "whatever can have caused such unhappiness? Did Gorgie Porgie kiss the girl and make her cry?"

Tom glanced sideways as Aunt Rosamund and Granny ventured out from the drawing room—Mary remembered Isobel invited them for luncheon; Rose had gone out with her sister-in-law—and grinned sheepishly.

"It's Little Miss Sybbie who's to blame," he explained. "She refused to share the train."

Mary reached out to brush back the curls which had escaped the grosgrain ribbon to fall into her eyes, but her niece only howled louder. "Your papa will have to set you a better example of Socialism, won't he?"

"Or give her playthings better suited to little girls?" said Granny to Aunt Rosamund.
"Oh, Mama," she replied, "I'd have preferred an electric train to those dozens of china dolls that were too delicate to actually be played with."

"Nanny must never have mentioned how many squabbles broke out in the nursery because Rosamund refused to share my tin soldiers." Papa stepped around Mary to mount the stairs. "All right then. Let's have a look at this train that everybody keeps talking about."

When Mary started after him, Granny called out, "Mary dear? Aren't you going to tell us what Murray had to say?"

Pausing to glance back over her shoulder, Mary said, "And not witness Papa's first visit to a nursery? Anyway I dare say you can fill Aunt Rosamund in, as you know all about it."

"I've no intention of missing this momentous occasion, either," said Rosamund. "Ought someone to alert the press?"

If only she realised how near she was to the mark.

The removal of Sybbie from the nursery had not decreased the volume within, though as they approached the cracked door at the end of the first floor hall there was no denying that the mood had changed to a pleasant one, and George's babble and squeals of delight were underscored by the even melody of his grandmothers' conversation. Until Mama broke off mid-sentence as Papa pushed the door all the way open, gawping at him from a rocking chair near to where George played on the floor.

"This is a surprise," said Isobel, never one to shrink from stating her true thoughts.

"Yes," Papa said absently as he looked about the nursery.

"Honestly," said Aunt Rosamund over Mary's shoulder. "It's a room for human children, not a fantastical setting from a Jules Verne novel."

Mary did not pass comment on the fact that Rosamund had not actually set foot inside the room herself, but lingered just outside the door, stepping further back when Tom returned with Sybbie.

"Is something the matter, Robert?" asked Mama.

"Apart from this toy train coming between our grandchildren?" he answered, and the stunned expression faded into a smile as Mama watched him bend to have a better look at the miniature which chugged around its track.

"Mine!" shrieked Sybbie; she lunged, breaking free of the grasp of her father's hand, and seemed unperturbed by crashing onto the carpet, scuttling on hands and knees toward the track.

"Your envy is quite understandable." Papa drew the toddler to sit on his knee as he crouched beside the train. "Let's watch the train go around and around the track, shall we?"

"Wound and wound," Sybbie parroted, swinging her little stockinged legs.

After a moment Papa chuckled, and when he glanced up at Mary she was pleased to see the weariness he had carried with him from Downton seemed to have fallen away from his face and shoulders, his eyes bright as the children's. "It really is rather marvellous. I wish these had been around when I was a boy."

"Matthew had one," Isobel said to no one in particular. "He had other toys, but the train was the
"Whatever made you think to give an electric train to an infant?" Mama asked.

Before Mary could think of an answer, Isobel blurted out, "Sir Richard said his nephews liked the one he gave them."

Every eye in the room snapped to Mary.

"Sir Richard!" cried Mama. "You can't have been talking to him?"

"He sent the train to George," Isobel replied, and Mary cringed.

Like a jack knife Papa stood to full height, oblivious to Sybbie's protests as he lifted her with him. "He sent George a present? Has he been here to call, as well?"

"Yes," Isobel said, sounding less certain than before, darting a glance at Mary; but, seeing as Mary could not find a voice to answer, she went on: "Several times. He heard we were in town...Of course he'd read Matthew's...the obituary..." She blinked rapidly and, collected, forged ahead, "And he kindly came to offer his condolences. We had him to dinner...He took us all to the zoo. Mary and George and I. And Rosamund..." Isobel's eyes widened, imploring the latter for help, but she would find none from that stone-faced quarter. "Didn't Mary mention it in her letters?"

"Not a word," Mama choked out.

"Mary...Why?"

Isobel regarded her with the same confusion as her parents did. Her mother, anyway; Papa's expression could be more aptly described as consternated, his eyes very round in his red face, not seeming at all aware that Sybbie fussed and strained in his arms to reach for the ground and the train to which her little cousin had ignored with the distraction of his grandfather's blast of temper.

"Yes, Mary, why?" Papa demanded. "Why have you let that blackmailing, bullying...blackguard set foot in my house, and make presents to my grandson-to Matthew's son-?"

"Heavens," said Granny, appearing breathlessly in the doorway, the hand not gripping her stick supporting her against the moulding. "Has everyone degenerated into bickering over this train? It sounds exactly as my father's descriptions of the railway coming to York. Complete with alliteration."

"Blackmailing!" cried Isobel. "Whatever do you mean?"

He wheeled on her, Tom and Mama both converging to take Sybbie, who had flown into a proper tantrum, from him, while George, apparently feeling left out, wailed from the carpet. "You mean you don't know by what unsavoury means Carlisle secured her engagement?"

"Papa-"

"The reason why she wouldn't throw him over even though she was in love with Matthew?"

Isobel gave her head a slight jerk. "No," came her hoarse reply.

"Oh, are we to hear the whole of the story at last?" asked Rosamund.

The number of speakers against the wails of the children was dizzying, and the train, going around and around on its track, hypnotised Mary. It was that dream again, that stupid dream about the train perennial favourite."
and Haxby and the crash-

"No," Mama's voice cut in, but Mary's relief was ephemeral as she added, "Not right now. Not here." Her eyes flashed accusingly at Papa. "You've upset the children. We'll discuss this later."

Though the hall clock had only just chimed noon, every lamp had been switched on to keep the dark paneled study from being plunged into the premature darkness of an autumn evening as the July thunderstorm brewed. The frequent cracks of lightning brightened things, too, but also threatened to knock out the electricity. With every flash, Mama's gaze bounced from the windows to the ceiling, no doubt worried for the babies in their nursery, but Mary gazed steadily at the rectangle of light cast by the desk lamp.

Strong and Sharp.

The engraved pen Richard had given Mary for her birthday lay where she last used it, an incriminating piece of evidence in the case launched against her, though of course Papa knew nothing of its significance. Perhaps when it came down to it, there was no significance: she certainly did not feel in possession of either as she sat, unmoving and mute behind the desk, while the members of her family filled in the gaps in each other's narratives of the crimes Richard Carlisle had committed against them. For what could she say or do? He had waved Reggie Swire's debts on the condition that Lavinia steal the Marconi files for him; he had threatened to expose Mary's own terrible secret if she dared to break their engagement. These were facts, and she could not refute them.

She might have argued that, in the end, Richard's threat had been only talk, he'd taken no revenge as he was no doubt accustomed to when contracts were broken. Or she might have pointed out that no one had been harmed by the Marconi scandal—indeed, government corruption had been exposed, Lavinia's father, free of his debt, had been able to re-amass his fortune and ultimately save Downton. She might have done…but she did not. Could not. It was the weight of Kemal's lifeless body, the fixed stare of his unseeing eyes, holding her to the mattress like a butterfly pinned in a display case, in the disbelief and disapproval she read on her family's faces. They would not be moved; she lacked the fortitude to move them.

When a flash of lightning illuminated Isobel's profile against the wing-backed chair by the fireplace, casting into sharp relief the tight set of her chin and the tendons of her neck tense on either side of the hollow of her throat, Mary knew this time she must not succumb to a state of paralysis. She'd promised Matthew to look after his mother, and she hadn't yet made things right since Isobel confronted her after she stayed the night with Richard. I always apologise when I'm in the wrong. It's a habit of mine.

Still, it was easier said than done, and she waited until the others had filed from the study—Granny and Aunt Rosamund with their heads together, murmuring about how much sense it all made now, Mama wringing her hands and muttering to no one in particular that she was going to check on the babies, and Papa mentioning to Tom that it was time for luncheon—before she finally curled her fingers around the arms of her chair, knuckles whitening, and pushed to her feet. She ran her fingertips along the edge of the desk as she stepped around it. The golden tip of the pen glinted in her periphery; on impulse she picked it up, and as she slid the pad of her thumb over the smooth ebonite, her tongue loosened.

"I'm so terribly sorry. I never intended for you to find out this way."

Isobel did not appear to move a muscle, except for her lips as she replied, "Let's have no more partial truths. You never intended me to find out any way."
Bowing her head, Mary held the pen and both hands, twisting it until the etched gold letters came into view against the marbled green. Strong and Sharp. Though sharpness had rather made it all worse, last time.

"Matthew and I agreed it wouldn't be productive to dwell any longer on a subject which had already kept us apart for too long. And he didn't want me to be humiliated again."

"He was a man of the utmost integrity."

Mary looked up and was relieved to see that a slight smile, though sad, had softened Isobel's features and voice. Their mutual appreciation of Matthew's virtues would, surely, diffuse some of the tension between them.

A crack of lightning jolted her out of this fleeting delusion.

"Which is why I cannot fathom how you could for one moment consider rebuilding your life with a man as morally bankrupt as Sir Richard Carlisle!"

You always make everything so black and white! Mary's frustrated words to Matthew resounded so clearly in her memory that she might have thought she'd actually shouted them again now, at his mother if not for the expectant look on Isobel's face, awaiting a response.

Drawing a deep breath, Mary mustered the most even tone she could manage even her heart hammered as though she were standing before Fraulein Kelder, inadequately prepared to recite her German lesson.

"Richard's virtues may not be as readily apparent as Matthew's, but that doesn't make him immoral--"

"No," Isobel cut her off, rising from her chair. "I won't sit here and listen to you make excuses for him."

"I won't stand here and make any," Mary retorted as Isobel staggered toward the door. "I know Richard behaved very badly toward me. He knows it." She flung her hands apart, the left still clutching the her pen. "Isn't that the aim of your work? To give people fresh starts?"

She watched the sharp angle of Isobel's shoulders beneath her black blouse as she paused with the door cracked, one hand claw-like around the knob. That had either given her food for thought, or offended her, Mary couldn't tell which when her mother-in-law shut the door again and faced her, chin and eyebrows high.

"Be that as it may, the truth remains that Sir Richard threatened to punish you for your past mistakes, but Matthew spared you further shame. Sir Richard bound you with threats when it was clear you didn't love him, while Matthew released you because he wouldn't settle for anything less than love."

The lamps flickered, for which Mary was grateful as she blinked against the hot sting of tears, and the rattle of the windowpanes with the rumble of thunder gave her an excuse not to respond. Not that Isobel gave her much chance, speaking again as soon as the thunder receded, leaving the study quiet except for a low buzz from a light bulb:

"It makes me positively ill to think that I welcomed that man into your father's house. Accepted his gifts and his invitations. Came to terms with the idea that he might be the man George called Papa--"

Her voice broke, and her cheeks shone beneath reddened eyes. She took a handkerchief from the pocket of her skirt, but it hardly seemed necessary for her to wipe her tears away, as her gaze hardened on Mary.
"And all the while you knew what sort of person he really was! You deceived me, Mary, wilfully. And you deceived your own mother and father because you knew they would disapprove. Worse," she went on, twisting the handkerchief in her hands as she paced the rug, "you exposed Matthew's son to the very last man on earth he would wish to feature in George's life. If that isn't proof enough of Sir Richard's corruptive influence."

"I'm sorry, Isobel. Truly, I am."

As Isobel halted before her, Mary searched her face for some sign of forgiveness, or even the mere acceptance of her apology, but all that the brown eyes contained was tears.

"I know you possess great strength of character," said Isobel. "Matthew knew it too. He believed in you long before I did. I trust you will make this right. For George."

The parcel of Matthew's old office things, which Mary had all but forgotten in the drama, waited for her on the bench at the foot of the bed when she returned to her room, having forgone luncheon. In swift strides she crossed the room to sit with it in her lap, realising as she reached for it that she'd carried Richard's pen up. She placed it beside her on the cushion, raking her eyes over the etching once more before she lifted the lid from the black box emblazoned with Harvell and Carter. Its contents were neither surprising nor inspiring: a few books, his degree, family photographs, including their wedding portraits which she already had copies of, along with the impersonal items that could be found in anybody's desk-writing implements, tablets of paper, handkerchiefs...his cards. She did clasp her hand over her mouth when she saw at the bottom the little stuffed dog she'd sent him off to War with. My lucky charm. If only he'd carried it in his car.

Having emptied the box, Mary got up from the bench and retrieved her handbag from the wardrobe where she knew Anna would have put it away. She took out the letter and began to read where she stood, but the opening line, My darling Mary, in his familiar tidy script that could not have changed since he was a schoolboy, made her sit down at the edge of the bed, clutching the stuffed dog as she read on:

We are off to Duneagle in the morning, and I have suddenly realised that I've never made a will, or anything like one, which seems pretty feeble for a lawyer, and your being pregnant makes it even more irresponsible. I'll do it properly when I get back and tear this up before you ever see it, but I'll feel easier that I've recorded it on paper that I wish you to be my sole heiress.

I cannot know if our baby is a boy or a girl, but I do know that it will be a baby if anything happens to me before I have drawn up a will, and so you must take charge.

And now I shall sign this and get off home for dinner with you. What a lovely, lovely thought.

Matthew

Papa had been right about Matthew's voice; Mary heard it in the letter as clearly as if he'd read it aloud to her, his playful humour and gushing happiness audible in the run-on sentences. She lay back and read it over again, needing his voice to speak over the voices of her mother and father, her grandmother and aunt, and his mother, all raised against her and the choices she had made. Matthew trusted her, Matthew believed in her. A roll of thunder shook the house. A storm braver, if ever there was one.

Strong and sharp.

But the thought which should have comforted her had the opposite effect: for the storm of which
Matthew spoke was the one that might have been caused by Richard. *The very last man on earth Matthew would wish to feature in his son's life.* The last time Matthew had seen Richard Carlisle, he had given him a black eye in defence of her honour.

Mary clutched the letter to her breast and wept.

"Now if you'll excuse me, gentlemen, I'm afraid that will have to be all for today," Richard's authoritative tones sounded within his office as Miss Fields strode out, having interrupted his meeting to let him know Mary had come to see him. Through the open door he caught her eye as he rose from his desk, the two men in business suits across from him doing the same, and he beckoned for her to enter. "As you can see, I have a prior engagement."

Mary didn't miss the slight emphasis he placed on the word, giving it a double meaning. The open affection in his gaze, in the appearance of his dimples which had been a rare sight of late, as she did as he bid her brought warmth to her cheeks and tied her stomach sickeningly. She was too well-bred not to look and sound pleased to shake hands with his associates, but the brush of his fingers at the small of her back, the pleasure and pride in his voice as he introduced *Lady Mary Crawley, eldest daughter of the Earl of Grantham*—she was too distracted to catch who they were—tightened the knot. Yet when he moved away from her to usher them out, instructing them that Miss Fields would see the paperwork was explained thoroughly to them, and not to hesitate to telephone if they had any questions, conflicting emotions warred within her: momentary relief from the weight of the errand that brought her here, and immediately longing for him to touch her again. At this moment, he might be the only person in the world who approved of her, liked her, loved her…

He'd scarcely shut the door behind the businessmen before he took her in his arms. Mary placed her hands on his chest, tilting her face up for a kiss, but Richard held back so that she only felt the warmth of his breath against her lips as he spoke:

"I've got to confess, I'm rather surprised to see you today. I was sure the rain would keep you away. Of course I'm very pleased it didn't."

"How pleased?"

Though Richard leaned in to kiss her, it was Mary who first touched her lips to his, her tongue that coaxed them to open to her. His forearm flexed around her waist, encircling her completely; her fingers slid beneath his lapels, pulling him toward her as though to eliminate even the smallest fraction of space between them. She didn't realise she'd arched onto the balls of her feet until Richard's hands on her hips gently pushed her back down onto her heels.

His lips left hers, and she peered hazily into his blue eyes. "You're trembling," he said, a lilt of question amidst the huskiness.

"I'm cold," she answered, ashamed of her neediness.

His hands left her waist to rub her arms, his callused skin warm, yet raising goose flesh between her elbow sleeves and her short summer gloves.

"Yes, I suppose the weather is rather unseasonable for your dress." He raked his eyes downward, to the hem which skimmed just the middle of her calves. "I daresay it made a bold statement at your meeting with the lawyer."

"Oh." The comfort she'd felt in his arms and under his admiring gaze came to an abrupt end. "That was just this morning, wasn't it?"
Richard's brow creased as he released her, his curiosity evident, though he mercifully did not press her straight away. He asked whether she wanted to go up to the flat, the undertone of meaning in his deepening tones when he told her he could take the rest of the day off if he pleased tempting her to throw all caution to the wind. But that was what had led her to this moment to begin with, so she declined with the excuse that she hadn't much time. Perhaps out of guilt she did accept his offer of tea, though she hardly knew how she would swallow for the lump in her throat.

Soon she was seated in one of the green upholstered chairs in front of his desk, while he faced her, the misty dome of St Paul's and the rooftops of London his backdrop. It gave her a sense of *déjà vu*, or made her wonder whether it wasn't a dream, a tableau from her life replaying with subtle differences that left her in no doubt that this could not be the case: he leaned back against the edge of the desk, facing her, the familiarity of his posture speaking to their newfound intimacy; a plate of roast beef sandwiches was beside him.

"How *was* the lawyer?" he asked, reaching for one. "No additional trouble for Downton, I hope."

"No, in fact…I own half of it."

Richard stopped chewing, the sharp lines of his brow peaking.

"There was..." Mary hesitated; when she decided she must not waste another moment of Richard's time and give him an answer at once, against Papa's protests that the weather was too inclement, and that a letter would serve, she had not imagined beginning here. "A letter was found," she said, and told him briefly what Murray had told her about the ersatz will.

He seemed to chew on this as he finished his sandwich, washing it down with a drink of tea. At length he said, "A letter was found." The corner of his mouth pulled upward, and he shook his head slightly. "You people do seem to have leapt straight off the pages of a Dickens novel."

When she did not react to this-How *could* she react to a discussion with Richard Carlisle of a letter from her husband from beyond the grave? It did not, somehow, seem entirely appropriate—he slid off the edge of the desk.

"My apologies…I didn't mean to offend. You have to admit it's rather…" He bent to take one of her hands, which had been balled into a fist on her lap. "I'm happy for you, truly. To at last attain your birthright must—What is it?"

"Oh, Richard."

She tried to pull her hand from his grasp, but his long fingers closed tighter around it. Ironically it gave her the strength to say what she had come to say: that her parents knew he was courting her again, that Isobel knew every sordid detail of their past, that, needless to say, none of them approved.

"Honestly, Mary, what did you think was going to happen?" Richard asked when she finished her narrative, his even tones surprising her for a moment before she remembered how calmly he'd taken the story of Kemal Pamuk dying in her bed. "That Lord Grantham would shake my hand and say, *Let's let bygones be bygones, shall we old chap?* That your mother would welcome me to tea with a kiss?"

Mary rolled her eyes. "For heaven's sake, of course not. But I thought…they came around to Tom. Perhaps…in time…."

"Time," Richard echoed, his tone darkening. "I thought you wanted time to make up your own mind, not everyone else's. When I saw you the other day, you led me to believe you were quite decided."
"I was…" Mary wanted to look away, but his stare commanded her to meet his gaze as surely as his thumb pressed to her wrist bone kept hold of her hand. "I am…"

"Then what's the problem?"

"My decision isn't only for myself. George-

Richard's fingers uncurled from around her hand as though burnt. "You don't believe I'll give him a good life?" Before she could form a retort, he went on, striding around the corner of the desk to pace behind it. *This* was more familiar. "What kind of life will *you* give him, a mother who can't even make up her own damn mind, but does whatever her father and grandmother tell her to do?"

"But I should do what you tell me to do, is that it?" Mary flung back, finding her voice, and her feet as he wheeled around to face her across the expanse of his desk.

"I'm not telling you do anything."

"Aren't you? Because it feels exactly like you're making me choose between my family and you."

"How can it be a choice when I know you'll pick them every bloody time?"

The flash of his eyes was so bright against the dark backdrop of the stormy sky, and he spoke so low and rumbling that Mary half-expected this line to be underscored by a clap of lightning. It was not, however; as his words hung in the ensuing silence, the only thunder she heard was that of her pulse in her ears, the only lightning the snap of realisation in her own mind that he was right: the only choice that had been laid before her was the one she put there herself.

And she did not wish to make it, after all.

She took a lurching step toward him. "Richard, I-

It was too late. Richard turned his back to her, shoulders slumping as he shove one hand into the pocket of his trousers, the other scuffing over his jaw.

"George was right. I told him he was wrong, but…I ought to have known better. If I couldn't compete Matthew Crawley in the flesh, I never stood a chance against Matthew Crawley's ghost."

As Mary had appetite for neither food nor dinner conversation, Carson's interruption came as an almost welcome interruption—until she heard what he said to her father in low tones that did not manage to hide his disapproval:

"I beg your pardon, my lord, but a Mr George Carlisle is in the hall, and he insists on being allowed to speak to Lady Mary."

"For Pete's sake," said Papa, throwing his napkin down on the table and a hard look at her across it. "Do you know anything about this?"

"I'll see what he wants." Mary swivelled in her chair to get up, but Papa was already heading for the door.

"I'll deal with him."

"He asked to see me," Mary protested, recalling with a flush Richard's accusation that she obeyed her father's commands without question. "This is all my fault."
George Carlisle's Edinburgh brogue filled her ears as she hurried after her father; nearing them, she could tell his accent was even thicker than usual, warning her of a temper that had surpassed the boiling point.

"Forgive me for barging in like this, Lord Grantham," he was saying to Papa when she reached the foyer, the twist at the corner of his mouth anything but one of a penitent begging pardon, "especially as we've never been properly introduced. Then again I may have got my etiquette all mixed up. I thought we ought to have met when Mary was last engaged to my brother."

His eyes glinted behind his spectacles as they caught Mary's over her father's shoulder. She opened her mouth to address him, but before she could Papa retorted, chest puffing beneath his black waistcoat, "As is turning up in the middle of dinner uninvited and unannounced."

"Perhaps Mary will condescend to speak to me between courses?"

"Lady Mary," Papa corrected him, "and no. I'm afraid I must ask you to leave my house at once."

"Like you asked Richie to leave? Will your son-in-law punch me in the face?"

Mary hadn't noticed that Tom had come out of the dining room until she heard his clipped accent join the chorus of male voices: "I wouldn't test an Irishman."

"Ah, the former chauffeur lives up to the his countrymen's legendary fighting spirit," George sneered. "Don't you have a civil war to fight?"

Tom's face went so red, his hands balling at his sides as he took a step toward George, that Mary feared for a moment this really would dissolve into fisticuffs.

George opened his palms wide. "Come at me, then-but if you do, I warn you: I'm not as forgiving as my brother. I won't hesitate to press charges for assault-and I'll see to it that this time your family won't be spared the indignities of the gossip pages. It's the very least you deserve, for humiliating Richard. He should've exposed you all for what you really are years ago-"

"That will do, sir!" Papa bellowed. "Leave now, or I might do the honours myself. No one would condemn me for coming to the defence of my daughter against a bullying-"

"From where I stand, the bully in this situation is you. Richard dodged a bullet, bringing children into this family, and God help me if I ever treat my daughter like you do yours. Can't you see Mary isn't a blushing debutante anymore, but an grown woman, a widow with a child? She's not under your protection anymore, not under the law, whatever outdated patriarchal notions you might cling to."

Mary struggled to retain her cool as she clasped her perspiring hands in front of her skirt. "What have you come to say, George?"

The scornful line around his mouth hardened as he side-stepped Papa to approach her. "Our father is dying."

Oh dear God. Mary pressed her fingers to her lips.

"Right now. At Richard's house. He has been all summer."

"Why didn't he tell me?"

"Why the hell didn't you notice?" George shot back. "He's dropped more clues than a bloody Sherlock Holmes mystery. I've been gallivanting up and down the country for months-though I
suppose you wouldn't bat an eye at a man leaving his wife and four children, not to mention their livelihood, to play rooftop golf at posh department stores and sit in the royal box at the Queen's Club?" 

The back of Mary's neck prickled, heavy fingers of heat making it difficult to continue holding her head up in the face of George's accusations which, in fact, were not the worst: she had noticed, and asked, and Richard had wanted to tell her when there was time. A thought which had not once crossed her mind when she went to his office today to break it off. She had not thought about anything at all.

"Yet you lords and ladies claim the moral high ground as though a part of your birthright," George went on, eyes darting from her to Papa to Tom, even to Carson. "I'd ask you to explain to me what's moral about making a fool of a man not once but twice, but as I said, I've a dying father to get back to. Enjoy your meat course."

"Oh, we're on to salad now," said Granny, unhelpfully, leaning on her stick in the shadows outside the dining room.

Mary raised her eyes heavenward; honestly, must her entire family always insinuate themselves into every conversation?

"No wonder you can't make a decision," George replied, not to Granny but to Mary, his gaze on her pitying. "You haven't a thought to call your own in a family like this—and you never will, so long as you allow them to meddle in your affairs. I'd hoped to have a conversation with you, but I see that was as foolish as Richie hoping things would be different with you this time."

"We can talk," Mary said.

"I've said my piece," George retorted. "I've had more than my fill of taking the stage in the Crawley family's drama. Goodbye."

She watched George storm out the front door before Carson could spring to get it for him—although she did observe how that in all her life she'd never seen the butler look so willing to let a person look after himself.

It was this last that injustice that prompted Mary out of her stupor and into action. Ignoring Papa calling her back, she followed George out into the twilight. Thankfully the rain had stopped, though she could smell it, heavy with the scents of damp grass and trees tainted by petrol from the cars in the street.

"George, wait!" She was surprised he stopped on the pavement in front of Richard's Rolls Royce, which the absence of a chauffeur in the front seat indicated he'd driven himself.

"I know it didn't sound like it back there, but I am so sorry about Mr Carlisle. We all are."

"We don't need your sympathy, any more than we want your pity."

"What can I do?"

"The only thing your lot are born to do: nothing."
Nothing Doing

Chapter Summary

George Carlisle meant to knock the Crawleys down, but in true Mary fashion, she rises to the challenge.

Chapter Notes

As hoped, one last chapter before NaNo begins, to hopefully let you all relax a bit after the evil ending of chapter 19. I'll miss SWH and all of you next month while I'm on hiatus. Don't forget about the story in the meantime…And who knows, I may manage to squeeze in an update. ;) Oh, and can you spot the character cameo from another show? He's going by a pseudonym here, but you may recognize his physical description…and attitude. ;)

The morning light that poured through the dining room windows gave no hint of last night's raging storm, though the expressions of her father and brother-in-law looking up from their newspapers at Mary's entrance were all too indicative of the family drama.

"I didn't expect to see you at breakfast," said Papa, and as he smiled slightly the drawn lines of his face relaxed.

Because he thought she would be too angry to look at him? wondered Mary, who did not look his way as she circled the breakfast table en route to the sideboard. Or because at Downton she'd continued to take her tray in bed after Matthew's death as she did before? That had been Anna's presumption when she arrived, Mary having forgotten to mention it had been her habit to breakfast with Isobel at Grantham House.

*Breakfast in bed*-George Carlisle might have had a point about her lot doing nothing.

"Where did you expect me to be?" she asked, indicating to Carson that she'd like toast. "If you're going to insist on treating me as a child, receiving my callers for me, and then refusing to allow them to speak to me, then I might as well make things simple for you and occupy a child's place at the table."

"Now that is childish," Papa retorted as she took her time serving the rest of her breakfast-bacon and tomatoes. "You can't mean you wanted to speak to that…that…"

"I can think of a lot of words for George Carlisle," Tom muttered, "none of which are suitable for the company of ladies."

Mary stood still at the buffet, except for her thumb which twitched against the edge of the spoon. "*You* would have no quarrel with him at all, if you hadn't pushed in."

She turned her head so that she could just see the two men at the breakfast table in her periphery. Her
stomach churned, anger replacing the hunger she'd woken with after hardly eating anything at all the previous day.

"I'm surprised at you, Tom. Papa would miss the point about patronising women, but once upon a time you gave Sybil feminist leaflets. What would she think?"

Low, she knew, but Tom had left the high road far behind when he came out of the dining room last night.

"I'll thank you to keep her out of this!" he shot back, his lips white.

"She would have," Mary countered.

"What would she think of you siding with a man who belittles my nationality and my countrymen's political struggle?"

Mary could not argue with that—although Richard had voiced enough of his countrymen's views on Irish fanaticism that she imagined he and George could, ad nauseam.

Making her way to the empty chair at the table, she said, "Sybil always had the ability to see arguments from all sides. I believe she'd appreciate the righteous anger of a man whose brother was thrown over twice by the same woman." She unfurled her serviette and spread it over her lap. "If only our family ever stood up for other like that."

"By barging into men's homes and insulting them and every member of their families?" said Papa.

"Insult?" Mary looked up sharply from buttering her toast. Was that all her father had come away with from last night's confrontation? "You ought to feel ashamed. We all ought to. At the very least, because we added insult to the Sir Richard and his brother's injury of losing their father. Or do you imagine them to be entirely without feeling?"

"My conscience doesn't trouble me with the feelings of a man who once tried to blackmail my daughter into marrying him, no," he answered, sawing through his ham. He speared a bite on his fork, but did not bring it to his mouth as his eyes held hers across the table from beneath a furrowed brow. "That yours does troubles me. In your fragile state, you've misplaced your trust and fallen victim once again to his machinations."

Fragile. "That's exactly why I couldn't stay at Downton, you know," said Mary, fingers curling around the linen in her lap to stop the trembling of her hands. "You handled me with kid gloves, and didn't trust me to bear my grief."

"Whereas you found it somehow respectful that Sir Richard thought you were capable of shouldering your burden, is that it?"

That was it, exactly, and Mary flushed at his mockery. Drawing back her shoulders, she relaxed her fingers into a gentle arc in her lap. "Believe it or not, our relationship was based on mutual respect, at the start."

We'd do well together. We could make a good team. How different that was to crumbling in front of Matthew days before their wedding about sides. With one hand she lifted the lid from the sugar bowl, while the other grasped a lump of with the silver tongs and dropped it in her teacup as Tom poured from the silver pot.

"And you may have forgotten, but I did agree to marry him before I told him about..." Her eyes dropped to the dark liquid she swirled around her cup with her teaspoon, the heat rising in her cheeks
as she relived last night's shame of having the Pamuk story trotted out for Isobel, Rosamund, and Tom's enlightenment. "…my past."

"It doesn't matter when Sir Richard found out," said Papa. "The point is that he used it against you at all. I'm actually ill to hear you make excuses for him."

Mary's spoon clinked as she set it down too hard on her saucer. First Isobel, now Papa. "You must be suffering indigestion, then, because I haven't made any. Richard behaved very badly, there's no question about that. He ought to have let me go when he knew I was in love with Matthew. But the only person's actions I can control are my own, and I ought never to have accepted one man's proposal when I was in love with another."

"No one can fault you for trying to move on," Papa said, in a gentler tone, but it still grated on Mary. "I didn't try with Richard. That's the whole point. I don't excuse the way he chose to express his frustration, but I do understand that he felt it."

He glanced away, and despite his talk of being ill, speared a bite of ham and ate vigorously—presumably to extract himself from further discourse. Before Mary could feel anything like victory at rendering him speechless, if not ceding her argument, he swallowed and said, "We can both agree, though, that Richard Carlisle is the very last man on earth Matthew would like to influence his son."

It was an unsettling thought, to be sure, and Mary picked up her teacup, wrapping both hands around it to draw its warmth into them. "That's not likely to be of any concern now, is it?"

Breakfast went on for some moments in silence, until Tom broke it.

"Your mother and I were talking of the zoo, on the first nice day." He jerked his chin in the direction of the windows. "Seems it's arrived."

"I suppose that means you'll want the car," Mary said. "I've an errand, but no matter. I'll phone for a cab."

"Don't be absurd," said Papa.

"I'm not. I'm quite serious."

"No. I won't hear of it. Bennett can drop you on the way. If it is on the way. Where are you going?"

"That's my business," said Mary, and bit into her toast.

Papa retreated behind his Times, and over the crunch, she heard him mutter something about making up her mind whether she wanted to be treated as an adult or a child.

"Cadogan Square, m'lady," said the driver as the cab slowed to a stop at the end of the row of red brick Knightsbridge houses.

Mary had been so sure when she got up that her day's course should lead her here, but as she grasped the cabbie's hand perhaps a little harder than was necessary to disembark the vehicle, then fumbled with the coins in her purse, before finally ascending the steps, she hesitated, heart pounding in her chest rather than her hand against the door. After George Carlisle's parting words she could not very well sit at home, indolent. Still, ought she to have delayed this call a little later in the day? She'd left home at ten, based on Richard's preference for being in the office prior to nine o'clock meetings, but what if he'd gone to work later than usual? Or not at all? She'd braced for another confrontation with
George, but was not at all prepared to see Richard.

A glance over her shoulder revealed the rear of the cab to be rounding the corner, out of sight. No turning back now. She rapped the knocker against the oak door.

There was more she was not prepared for than the possibility facing Richard: the startled expression on the butler's face when she gave him her name was another, along with the accompanying realisation that the staff of Grantham House were not the only people below stairs in London privy to the intimate details of her life. Not that anyone employed by Richard was likely to gossip. How had she never before considered what an illusion privacy was? No wonder Richard kept his flat in the Capital Herald building.

"Neither Sir Richard nor Mr George is at home," the butler informed her, though her relief at hat was short-lived when the only response he made to her request to see Mark Carlisle, if he was able to receive her, was to look unsure.

At least he didn't ask her to wait on the doorstep, but saw her through the foyer to the most generic drawing room she'd ever set foot in. It was no less fashionable than Grantham House—indeed, more so, for Mama had not redecorate it since before the War, while Richard's seemed fresh from the late 10s. That was precisely what was the matter: it didn't looked lived in, had no personal touches like the family photographs she'd seen in his flat, or even a personal style.

_I mean to do things properly_, he'd told her all those years ago in the woods at Downton, but like the ill-suited tweed, this was not real, not right. Was this house one of the things he'd expected her to help him with? Her heart gave a little twinge; how foolish she'd been to think he only wanted her to smooth out his rough edges for society, when he clearly had asked for a woman's touch.

"Doctor says your ladyship may come up," the butler's voice startled her from the doorway, and Mary was only too glad to exit the unsettling drawing room. She followed him upstairs, past bedrooms no one slept in, except apparently for his brother and father. As they approached the end of the hall, her nostrils pricked to the antiseptic smell of a sick room that she hadn't thought of since the last camp bed had been folded up and carried out of Downton. She put her gloved hand to her nose, inhaling her own perfume to mask the odour; of course it wouldn't have set the appropriate romantic mood after the opera, and she understood how difficult it must be for Richard to stay her. Nevertheless, guilt gnawed at her stomach as she thought how Richard had sacrificed much of what little time remained to him with his father to be with her.

Which brought her back to the question: why hadn't he told her?

The last door stood open and with a word indicating she should enter the butler left her. Mary stood mute just outside the room, observing a uniformed nurse across the bed take the pulse of the patient whose face was blocked by the physician on the opposite side, back to her as he listened to Mr Carlisle's lungs with his stethoscope. Mary took a moment to observe her surroundings, taking in the irony that the room in Richard's house designated for a dying man was in fact the one that displayed the most life. Newspapers were strewn about the foot of the bed, a small drop-leaf table containing a chess board with most of its pieces intact seemed to have been pushed aside mid-game, and amongst the medicine bottles and other nursing paraphernalia that littered the bedside tables and shelves stood yellowed photographs in simple frames from which grinned the faces she'd familiarised herself with in Richard's flat.

As the physician straightened up, removing the stethoscope from his ears, Mary recognised him as the man Richard had left her to speak with at the opera. She didn't dwell on this, however, for sweeping her gaze over the man the nurse was easing back against the pillows, searching the wasted face for traces of the dapper man she remembered from the photographs.
That he was dying was evident in the hollows beneath the too-prominent cheekbones and the bluish
tinge of his skin, but the blue eyes that looked at Mary crackled with life. "Lady Mary Craw-"

A coughing fit interrupted him, a rattling cough that made his skeletal frame curling in on itself as
though a pair of hands grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. The nurse pivoted from the
bedside table, procuring a cloth which she held to his mouth, though not before Mary glimpsed
bloody sputum spatter over the white sheets folded down across his lap. She looked away, grateful
for the approach of the man from the opera who, unshaven and uncombed and wearing a loosely
knotted necktie which he made no attempt to straighten for her, looked no tidier first thing in the
morning than he had after three hours of *The Barber of Seville*.

"I'm Dr Holmes," he said, over the coughs; one hand clutched his cane, but he did not offer the other
for her to shake. "You may not be aware that he's suffering from an advanced pulmonary disease. It's
difficult enough for him to breathe without the added distress of your melodrama."

Mary coloured. Was this man merely the family physician, or was he a closer acquaintance of
Richard's? In either case he knew something of her acquaintance with Richard, told to him by
Richard—or George—or overheard. How much did Mr Carlisle know?

"I'm already dyin', doc," wheezed the man in the bed. "Do you mean to deprive my final days of
beauty by driving away my lovely callers?"

A smirk flickered across Dr Holmes' face, the first hint of humour she had seen on the rugged
features which seemed naturally to scowl, only to vanish again as his eyes narrowed to slits,
considering his patient's request. No-considering her. "No more than a quarter of an hour," he said.
"I presume you'll want to be out of here before Mr Carlisle's son returns."

Her breath caught—Richard, or George? She thought she saw the doctor smirk again as he limped
around her, his cane nearly coming down on her toe, pausing just in the hall to summon the nurse.

"He means George," said Mr Carlisle, his voice as thin as the face that peered at her from the
voluminous pillow. "I sent him to the bakery to find me something decent to eat." From the hall, the
nurse spluttered a protest about uneaten porridge, and the doctor shushed her. "Richard's at the
office."

She let out a breath. How strange that it was the dying man who was giving her the relief.

"Now, let's try this again, shall we, Lady Mary?" Bent at the elbow, his forearm stretched over the
edge of the bed, palm open: a large, long-fingered hand, gnarled now with age and callused from a
lifetime of labour-his fingernails bulged in a peculiar fashion, too—but she could nevertheless see as
she crept closer to the bed and placed hers in it that it was from his father that Richard's inherited
their shape. "To what do I owe—"

His fingers curled around her hand as another paroxysm of coughs wracked his body, though his
grasp was weak and Mary's slipped effortlessly from it as she turned to the bedside table and filled
the glass from the pitcher of water she seemed to have instinctively known had stood there. This was
not, after all, the first time she'd set foot in a sick room.

"Not the pleasure, surely?" she joked, lamely, when Mr Carlisle had drunk and his coughs subsided
enough for her to be heard.

"Well. I won't deny I'd looked forward to meeting you as the one who almost got away rather than
the one who got away twice. But that's hardly what one says, is it?"
Coughing again, Mr Carlisle flicked his fingers as he brought them to his mouth, indicating a cane-backed chair next to the nightstand. Mary dragged it to the beside seated herself, hands folded over her handbag in her lap.

"It's all right. I'm accustomed to Carlisle men eschewing insincere pleasantries to get right to the point. I confess it's refreshing. At times."

"They get that from their mother. I hope your ladyship will indulge me and accept my very belated congratulations on the birth of your son. George is a fine name."

"Thank you."

"And my condolences for the deaths of your sister and husband," he rasped. "I read about them in the papers, of course."

The thanks she uttered this time was lower, as if weighted down, and some effort was required for her to drag her gaze back up to meet his after it faltered. "Not so belated as my paying you this call. For which I hope you will accept my apologies."

He lay still beneath the bedclothes, eyes fixed on the ceiling, a crackle emitting through his pursed lips. "What kind of Christian would I be if I didn't?" The linens rustled as he turned his head on the pillow. "But I hope you'll answer one question."

Without hesitation, Mary nodded. Somehow Mark Carlisle wielded as much authority in his deathbed as Richard did from behind his desk in his office.

"Why? To unburden your conscience to a dying man?"

"Because I was wrong."

"Do you always apologise when you're in the wrong?"

Her gaze bent again, noting her clothes: a grey skirt, her lilac blouse, a strand of pearls. It came to her suddenly, a snatch of a dream she'd had in one of the brief interludes of sleep she'd had the last fitful night, of running, running through the white attic corridor at Downton, the Duke of Crowborough's footsteps pounding at her heels, the floor bare and ten years long, leading to a bedroom in a nondescript townhouse.

"Yes." How many apologies lay between then and now? "And...It was the least I could do for Richard."

"Why not do the most?"

The admonition did not go unfelt; even so, a slight smile pulled at the corner of Mary's mouth. "You're a difficult lot to please. Although I suppose being criticised for not doing enough is preferable to being accused of doing nothing."

Mr Carlisle puffed a sound that might have been a chuckle, or a cough. Whichever it was, Mary took it as her cue to loop her handbag over her wrist and stand.

"Talking of George, I ought to go. Before he gets back."

"Aye," Mr Carlisle gave a short cough. "Richard told me his brother went out for a walk last night. Did he find himself at your house, by any chance?"
Mary hesitated; Richard and George had no doubt made a conscious effort at shielding their father from—how had the doctor put it?—the distress of her melodrama? Her silence seemed confirmation enough for him.

"Those boys," he said, closing his eyes. "They can be each other's worst enemies—until someone else is the enemy. Then they're each other's most steadfast champions. Or stupidest."

"Perhaps someday my sister Edith and I will master the last part." She twitched her lips into a tremulous smile. "It was a pleasure to have met you, Mr Carlisle."

"I hope you'll call me Mark, next time," he said as she turned to go.

Mary looked back, unable to hide her surprise—though as his eyes were still closed, it hardly mattered. He must hear it in her voice, though, as she asked, "You want me to call again?"

"George is headed back to Morningside tomorrow, and Richard will no doubt go to work." The blue eyes opened, less bright, peering at her from behind heavy lids. "Not many people admit when they're in the wrong, Lady Mary."

"I'll try."

Papa had tolerated her refusal to tell him her whereabouts for today, but would he tomorrow? She could only imagine the row that would ensue her telling him she was paying calls on Richard's dying father; Isobel would no doubt chime in about her neglect of Georgiee. *You're an adult woman with a child of your own, Mary.* She saw Richard's exasperated scowl in the furrow of Mr Carlisle's—Mark's—brow. And George's. She drew up her shoulders. She'd done considerably more than nothing today, hadn't she?

"I'll come first thing tomorrow morning."
Men and Myths

Chapter Summary

Mary decides that honesty is the best policy. Will she stop at telling truth, or will she accept a few harsh realities about her story in return?

The gentleman who tipped his hat to Mary and Edith as he passed was not the first to have done so since their walk from the latter's Bloomsbury flat brought them to the Gray's Inn Gardens, where men were never in short supply here, especially so near the noon hour, when barristers emerged from their rooms for a bite of luncheon at the local pubs, but he was the first Edith remarked on.

"You know, a hundred years ago, we'd have been physically dragged off if we were caught on these hallowed grounds." *Hallowed,* she of course pronounced in tones of sarcasm. "Simply for being women."

Mary nodded--Matthew had liked to walk here, if London business took them in the neighbourhood, and the first time they came, before their honeymoon to France, he'd told her about the brief period in history during which some miserable soul ordered the gardeners to bar women and children in the Walks.

"Yet here we are," she replied with a slight smile as he seemed suddenly present with her; she almost felt as though she could tuck her hand into the crook of his arm, glance up and meet the affectionate glow of his gaze. "Strolling around Gray's Inn--with bobbed hair and showing our ankles, no less."

"How scandalous."

"To be fair, that was just an unfortunate flash in an otherwise fashionable history," Mary said. "Pepys didn't come here to admire the plane trees."

At the end of the tree lined avenue, ivied brownstones formed a backdrop to the statue of Sir Francis Bacon in his seventeenth century ruff. *Hard to believe that was once the height of fashion, isn't it?* Matthew had said. *You'd never have got me into one.* Which gave Mary no choice but to threaten him with the prospect of throwing a fancy dress party at Downton in such costume.

"Have you ever wished you were a man?" Edith asked, gazing up at Bacon. "You could go to university. Read law--or any degree you liked. Have a profession. Keep rooms in Gray's Inn. Be someone important."

"Inherit a title and an estate," Mary deadpanned.

Though she meant only to empathise with her sister's frustration with the inequality of the sexes, this remark caused Edith to scowl and open her handbag.

"Well you've inherited half of one, so I'm not sure what you're complaining about." She fished out her cigarette case, which flashed in the midday light, as did her hazel eyes when they fixed on Mary again. "Or does that make it difficult for you to make up your mind about Sir Richard's proposal?"

How many such barbs had Mary shrugged off in the twenty-eight years since Edith had been born? Today she winced, the reminder of what had occurred in the past twenty-four hours with Richard
acute, which seemed strange given the reminiscence of Matthew in which she'd happily indulged. What sort of a woman was she, at once missing her husband and regretting that her prospects with another man had come to nothing? She would have to tell Edith about Richard, though the snick of the lighter, the sizzle of the cigarette, the hiss of exhaled smoke orchestrated a hostility which did not invite confidence. Perhaps the time had come to finally do something about this fractured relationship—ironically, by holding her tongue and allowing her sister to say her piece.

After a moment's smouldering, Edith sighed and walked on, tapping out ash onto the gravel as she dangled her cigarette at her side.

"That isn't what I meant," she said as Mary fell into step with her. "Imagine the freedom of having something, of being something, independent of anybody else." She smoked again, folding one arm across her body as though giving herself half an embrace. "I ended it with Michael."

Now was as good a time as any. "And I ended it with Richard."

Gravel crunched beneath Edith's heels as she wheeled on her. "Damn you, Mary, you didn't!

"I didn't mean to!" Mary flung her hands out at her sides.

"How do you unintentionally throw a man over?"

"Isobel spilled the beans. You can imagine how that went over with Mama and Papa. When I told Richard about the row, he accused me of choosing my family over him."

"Of course he sees it that way," Edith said. "Isn't that what you did?"

"Of course you'd take his side," Mary shot back, having reached the limit of her patience. "You chose a man over your family. How jolly well it worked out!"

"I didn't break with Michael to run go back home to mummy and daddy. As if they would let me," she muttered, bringing the cigarette to her lips.

"Downton's half mine, so I'd have a say, too. Anyway, they probably would let you go home, if you want. You've seen the error of your ways, while I betrayed the family by sleeping with the enemy."

Clearly in no mood for jokes of any kind, Edith puffed on her cigarette, then flicked it onto the ground and crunched it into the gravel with her heel. "Damn you, Mary. Damn you to hell."

Strong language, but uttered without any real strength of conviction. Her glare became a glimmer of emotion, and she quickly tucked her weak chin to hide it, though Mary saw the wobble—as she had so very many times since the earliest days of their childhood that she could recall.

"I was counting on that job with Sir Richard," Edith said. "I'll never be able to afford the rent on my flat without it. It's paid up through the end of the month."

"Weren't you just imagining being independent of anybody else?"

Unable to decide whether it was good or bad that this elicited no response at all, Mary approached her sister hesitantly, laying a hand on the shoulder covered by a coral silk blouse; unexpectedly, Edith did not flinch away, though she didn't look up at her, either—but at least she wasn't glaring. Progress?

"You're a published journalist, with your own column. There are dozens of ladies' newspapers and magazines. I dare say your finding work isn't dependent on Richard Carlisle's benevolence."
Heaven help anybody who was…

Edith looked up, blinking red-rimmed eyes. "Thank you."

It might have been the first time either of them had uttered those words to each other, Mary thought as they resumed their walk. She knew it was a step in the right direction, but it nevertheless put her off-balance.

"Thankfully Mr Gregson doesn't seem the vengeful type," she said. "If it was Richard you'd broken with, then you might find all doors closed to you."

"Though it would seem he isn't as vengeful as he'd like everyone to believe."

Edith darted a sideways glance up at Mary. Despite having come as close to a truce as they ever had been, Mary had no desire to confide in her.

"How did it go with Mama when she dropped by your office?" she asked instead.

"When you dropped her by. You might have warned me."

With this flare of temper, Mary felt all was normal between them again. What had Mark Carlisle said that morning of Richard and his brother? *They can be each other's worst enemies—until someone else is the enemy. Then they're each other's most steadfast champions.*

"She wanted to know all about the job, so I showed her around," Edith went on, in more civil tones after she lit another cigarette. "She wanted back issues of my column, since Papa stopped taking the *Sketch* out of protest."

"I did see her attempting to read them discreetly— you know what that means with Mama."

That wasn't entirely fair, Mary thought, the back of her neck prickling. Mama could be—*had been*—very discreet, indeed, when the situation called for it.

"Would you like to see her again?" she asked.

After a moment's hesitation, Edith nodded. Mary promised to arrange it, resisting the impulse to remark, *So much for independence."

She proposed it as soon as she got home, finding Mama in the relative privacy of the nursery, playing quietly with George who apparently had refused to go down for his nap. In her cot, Sybbie slept, oblivious, thumb in her mouth and bottom in the air, even through her cousin's screeching protests when Mama pounced on the idea—quite literally, her skirt knocking a tower of blocks onto his train tracks, derailing the engine, as she stood.

"I'm free tomorrow, Mary. We could tell your father we're having brunch at the Ritz— it wouldn't even be a lie, really, I talked about doing something like that for your birthday!"

"Didn't you already take me out for my birthday?" Mary stooped set George's train to rights, not without a twinge at the thought of how spectacularly Richard's act of kindness had backfired. "Never mind. I can't tomorrow morning."

"Oh." Not to be dissuaded, Mama suggested, eyes open too round and smile showing too many teeth, "The morning after, then?"

"I'll check with Edith."
Mary's relief at having got off the hook with regard to providing explanations proved premature when Mama asked, belatedly, "What are you doing tomorrow morning?"

For a second she considered lying for her own convenience, then she answered, "Paying a call on Mark Carlisle."

Mama's eyes remained round, but now her smile slowly faded as she blinked. "Sir Richard's father?"

"I dropped in on him this morning. He asked me to come again tomorrow."

"But...why?"

"Because I was engaged to his son, Mama." Twice. "A dying man wants some closure with regard to the woman who profoundly affected his family without ever meeting them."

"You mustn't let them guilt you into anything," her mother protested. "There was a war on. We suspended a lot of social customs in those days."

"Perhaps we oughtn't to have done."

~*~

Mark Carlisle was sitting up in an armchair when Mary arrived, not wearing pyjamas as he had been the previous day, but dressed in suit and tie. His wispy hair was combed and moustache trimmed, the sharp jawline which he had bestowed on both sons smooth shaven. He looked quite proper for receiving a caller, and if they had not been in a bedroom, she might have forgotten altogether that she was calling on a dying man.

The paroxysm of coughs which followed her greeting--"You look very well today, Mr Carlisle. Very smart in your suit--"was a harsh reminder.

The nurse stood by, anxious to help, but Mr Carlisle waved her away with the handkerchief clutched his hand.

"Richie had his tailor do it for me," he choked out between coughs, as if there had been no interruption, though his voice was still pinched and there was a wheeze in his breath. "Finest suit I ever owned." He looked down at it, cheekbones rounding with a pleased smile, and swept an errant thread from the lapel. "Thank you for giving me occasion to wear it--besides my funeral."

Mary's smile faltered and her fingers flexed around the handle of the basket she held; what could she say to that?

Thankfully, Mr Carlisle did not expect her to say anything. "Nurse--" He glanced over his shoulder. "Would you get this lovely bouquet Lady Mary's brought into water? I'm sure my son has a vase somewhere, even if it is a priceless work of art and purely decorative."

His eyes twinkled at Mary as the nurse took the flowers from her and strode from the room--but not before he called her back to let him take one for his buttonhole; the click of her heels was muted by the carpet yet still conveyed disgruntlement at being given maid's orders by her patient. Noticing that his clubbed fingers seemed to struggle with the bud, Mary stepped forward, setting her basket on the tilt-top table beside his chair, to assist him.

"Richard's got me the best medical care money can buy," he said, "but it's the feminine touches I've
missed."

Since Mrs Carlisle died? Or since Richard brought him to London, away from George and his wife? Ellen? Aileen.

"Well I'm not sure how feminine a touch sausage rolls are," Mary said, straightening up and turning to unpack her basket, "but I've brought some of those, as well. Along with the new Agatha Christie, in case you haven't read it."

He tilted his head up to read the title embossed on the cover. "The Secret Adversary. I haven't had the pleasure--I did think her first one was a good read. But how did you know I like detective fiction?"

"I noticed the Edgar Wallace yesterday." She indicated The Crimson Circle on the bedside table. "And...I suppose I must also have remembered Richard saying once that he enjoyed Sherlock Holmes. Though truth be told I never saw him read anything but a newspaper." A smile tugged gently at her lips as a scene she hadn't thought of in sometime materialised at the forefront of her mind. "Since the first moment I met him, actually."

Mr Carlisle had taken a bite of sausage roll, though the lift of his eyebrows begged her to continue. She perched at the edge of the bed, smoothed her skirt, and folded her hands on her lap.

"We were at Cliveden," she began, "the Astors' home."

She paused, and he nodded, indicating that he knew who the Astors were--and was not greatly impressed by Richard's acquaintance with these members of high society.

"I found house parties...difficult...during the war," she went on. "It wasn't like in the old days. There were so few young men in attendance, for one." She meant to say it with the hint of a joke, but the slightest quaver shook her otherwise steady voice; like his son, Mr Carlisle did not miss a detail.

"Including your Mr Crawley."

"Yes," Mary acknowledged, drew a breath, and continued: "It was our first night, and I couldn't face meaningless small-talk in the drawing room before dinner, so I slipped into the library. I found Richard there--hidden behind a newspaper."

For some reason she hadn't simply slipped back out, unnoticed, as she likely could have done, given how absorbed he was. Instead, she'd said, "The Evening Herald? My. However did the reader of a notorious Liberal paper get invited to Lord Astor's party?"

Without so much as a ruffle of his paper, Richard said from behind it, "Perhaps because he owns the Evening Herald."

Thankfully Mary had schooled her flush into submission before he lowered the broadsheet, eyebrows raised, seated in the wing-backed chair as though it were a throne. He hadn't managed to hold the imperious expression for long, however, before his lips twitched and the dimples deepened beneath his cheekbones and she caught her breath at how handsome he was. Of course she didn't share that part with Richard's father, though Mr Carlisle did chuckle softly at the conversation as he related it.

The laugh was choked off by the cough, which left him leaning his head against the high back of the chair, looking worn out. Ought she to cut the visit short?
But he rasped, "If only that were simply an amusing story, and not a sad commentary on how short Richie's sold himself on life. He used to be an avid reader, you know--even if it was primarily a competition between him and George to see who could read more novels during their summer holidays."

Coughing again, he hooked his clubbed index finger over his collar and tugged at his necktie to loosen the knot. His gaze wandered out the window.

"You know I quite liked like the idea of Richie in the country. Twelve thousand acres was a wee bit excessive..."

"For what it's worth, I completely agree."

"But I hoped he'd fill a library full of novels and remember there's more to read than newspapers."

Richard had asked her to do that--visit bookshops in York and London for rare and first editions of classics and modern works to fill the empty shelves at Haxby--until he grew tired of her never getting around to it. She'd been too busy counting it as a victory won--two victories, actually: that she'd thwarted the errand he invented to get her out of the house, away from Matthew, and that she'd refused to indulge his ego with purchases made only to flaunt his wealth--to consider that what he'd really been pushing for was to make Haxby her home. Their home. Where he might settle down and enjoy the very life his father now wished for him.

"He wrote home about you," Mr Carlisle's husky brogue interrupted her musing. "He never did, about other women--there were women, of course, just not the marrying kind..."

Like the jazz singer, Josephine Earle?

"...and he knew that was the only kind his ma cared to know about. He'd just got back to the office after that Cliveden party-said it was the first country party he'd attended without counting down the minutes till he could get back to town. Because of a young lady he'd met, who was...let's see, how did he put it? Ah, yes: capable of handling him with aplomb."

Though Mr Carlisle smiled as he spoke, Mary thought his eyes looked sad; perhaps because she felt sad herself. She noticed one hand rested on the bedpost, her thumb nail picking at an imperfection in the wood grain, and withdrew it into her lap.

"When he proposed he said we'd do well together. Make a good team." If you'll let us. "I ought never to have let him propose. I wasn't free to accept. It was only ever Matthew's proposal I wanted." From the moment he withdrew it and walked away from her in 1914, to the moment he reappeared at Downton in 1916. "I entertained Richard to save face. Couldn't bear anything so humiliating as to have anyone think I was pining, when Matthew had moved on. It was terribly unfair, and selfish, to make Richard a player in our drama."

What was it Granny told her Richard said at Christmas? His life was not a game in which he would be made to appear ridiculous.

"If you'd indulge a dying man," said Mr Carlisle, "why didn't you break it off with Richie after Miss Swire passed away? Mr Crawley was free."

Quite to her own surprise, instead of answering Because Richard threatened me with ruin if I broke our engagement, Mary heard herself reply, "Because Matthew believed Lavinia died of a broken heart."

"I wasn't aware that condition presented like Spanish flu," Mr Carlisle replied.
"Our love killed her, and therefore we were cursed."

"Melodramatic tosh." Mr Carlisle scrutinised her for a moment. "Don't tell me you believed him."

Mary watched one thumb scuff over the other. If there was a curse, she'd thought it had been broken when Matthew twirled her in the snow. *Everything seems so golden one minute, then turns to ashes the next.*

"Not really. But it was certainly easier to cast Richard as the villain who kept us apart than to believe the man I loved was…" Maxims about speaking ill of the dead made her hesitate, but she forged ahead. "…a noble idiot who wouldn't fight for me. I did so want us to be Andromeda and Perseus."

Mr Carlisle's lips pressed together tight beneath his moustache, his sharp brow forming a heavy frown. What a horrid thing, to tell a man you'd compared his son to a sea monster.

"At least you see now Richard wasn't really Cetus," he said.

"But I'm still not free." *I understand what it is to be happy. It's just that I know I won't be.*

"From whom?"

"From whom?" Mary echoed. "Matthew, of course. I still love him."

Even Richard acknowledged this. *I ought to have known better. If I couldn't compete with Matthew Crawley in the flesh, I never stood a chance against Matthew Crawley's ghost.*

"Of course you do. And so you always shall." Mr Carlisle coughed into his handkerchief, then folded it deliberately with his swollen fingers. "But clearly you were learning to live with his ghost when you allowed Richard to court you again. When you considered his proposal."

Heat prickled at the back of Mary's neck and across her cheekbones as she recalled that rather disastrous turn things had taken the morning at Richard flat, when she'd found her old ring and he proposed to her on a whim.

Mr Carlisle cleared his throat. "No, my dear--I don't believe it's your husband you're not free of. It's your family."

"I've got to live with them, too, and they're very much alive!" Mary retorted. "I have a son, and Downton is half mine."

"Will they refuse to see you again if you marry Richard?"

Mama wouldn't--longsuffering Mama, she thought with a small rueful smile. And Papa--well, it couldn't be for nothing that she was his favourite. Still... "I don't love the idea of my family hating my husband. Or my first husband hating him. As far as they're all concerned, Richard *is* the sea monster."

"Mr Crawley doesn't get a say, of course. Nor do any of them, really," Mr Carlisle added, hoarsely. He took a drink from the glass on his table, the tremor of his hand causing him to slosh a bit onto his lapel. "And it's no skin off Richie's nose whether Lord and Lady Grantham love him or hate him. Why is it off yours? It's you he wants to marry."

Mary sighed. "Not any more, I'm afraid."
"Are you hoping I'll put in a good word for you, Mary? Is that why you've brought me sausage rolls and mystery novels?"

"No," she said with a single shake of her head, the most confidently she'd answered a question in God only knew how long, and she met his eye again. "Like Andromeda and Perseus, Matthew and I had rather a lot of influence, for better and for worse, from our parents. But Richard said he and I could build something worth having. If there's anything left to have. I'll have to fight for myself this time."

"Richie said you were as clever as you were beautiful."

She blushed at that; he looked so like Richard as he said it, the dimples appearing in the sunken hollows of his cheeks.

"Although there is someone who could do with a good word, if you wouldn't mind," she said, a sudden thought occurring.

"Who?"

"My sister, Edith. She's written something, about the war. She was hoping Richard might have a job for her."

A rasping half-chuckle, half-cough barked from Mr Carlisle's mouth. "The war, eh? Lady Edith might find Richie's views on that subject a greater obstacle to her employment than your break with him."

Mary grinned at that. "Indeed."

"Talking of books," he said, picking up the Agatha Christie Mary had brought from the table, "perhaps if you're not in a hurry to get back home, you might read a bit of this to me? The nurse seems to think it beneath her dignity."

"Well it's certainly not beneath mine," Mary said with a laugh, and reached for the book. "Unless of course you expect me to do the voices?"

"Absolutely."

"Then I shall do my utmost not to disappoint."
Facing Up

Chapter Summary

Confrontations can no longer be avoided—and not only by Mary. Some are not as unpleasant as feared, while others are worse than imagined.

*Im getting to be as regular a caller as the postman or the butcher's boy,* Mary prepared to quip to Richard's butler as she mounted the front steps of number fifty-nine, Cadogan Square for the fourth morning running. However, it was not Jameson who answered her knock, and every witticism flew from her head, leaving her to gawp idiotically at the man who did instead.

Richard blinked—at the daylight's valiant struggle against the mounting storm clouds, it seemed at first-then his bleary eyes focused on her, narrowing in the hollows between the heavy brow and sharp cheekbones. Never before had she seen him look so haggard: not only did the angles and planes of his face appear etched in sharper relief, but grey patches mottled a day or more's unshaven golden red beard; she noticed more grey in his hair, too, uncombed and untamed by the usual meticulous application of pomade and sticking out here and there-no doubt the result of the familiar anxious gesture of clutching it between his long fingers. Which, at the moment, curled around the door handle, the tendons below the rolled-up shirtsleeves flexing like ropes pulled tight beneath his pale skin.

"What the hell are you doing here?" his hoarse voice at last broke the silence.

"I've been reading to Mark…" Mr Carlisle had invited her to call him by his Christian name. "*The Secret Adversary*…Agatha Christie…We might finish today."

It was, perhaps, a more rambling and detailed answer than he wanted, but his harshness-in both speech and appearance-startled her into such a confession that a child might make to an adult, subordinate to an imposing superior.

What she could not tell from his lined face was whether he was surprised or not that she had been visiting his father. On the one hand it didn't seem like Mark to keep anything from his son, especially when so little time remained to them. He didn't fear Richard. Although perhaps in this case he recognised his son had the authority to give orders about was and was not permitted to take place beneath his own roof.

"No," Richard replied. "You can't."

He moved as though to close the door, but in the instant of hesitation as his gaze strayed over her shoulder to the street, contracting further as though he were searching for something, she stepped toward him, positioning herself so that it was impossible for him to shut her out.

"Good heavens, he hasn't-'" Mary didn't like to speak the word aloud, to Richard who had not yet said it to her. "-taken a turn for the worse?"

With a shake of his head he replied, "I expect George any minute. He took the last train from Edinburgh last night. There was a delay outside Darlington."
Mary could not be entirely relieved; Mark Carlisle was not dead, but he was much nearer to it than she had allowed herself to believe. "Oh Richard…I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

His gaze swung back to her face, then dropped; she followed his sight line and saw, to her surprise, that her hand covered his at it rested on the doorknob. She gave it a squeeze, lifting her eyes again to watch his reaction. Beneath his cheekbone the muscle flickered, and his chest rose and fell with a hitch and an exhalation of breath.

He drew his hand away, squared his shoulders and set his jaw, his frame filling the angles of the doorway. She pictured him striding away from her, from Downton, tall and proud and not looking back.

"Only leave, thank you. Or don't you agree you've meddled quite enough in my family's affairs?"

"Meddled?" Mary's fingers curled into a fist as her hand fell to her side. Colour bloomed hot on her cheeks. "You wanted me to marry you—to be on your team. How could I be, when you'd keep something so important from me? Why in God's name didn't you tell me?"

Especially after all the things she'd said to him about Matthew and the troubles caused by their failure to communicate.

"Would it have changed anything if I had?"

The words and the resentment which tinged them echoed their all too recent conversation about why he'd kept his love from her years ago. Was that all they were then? An echo, a vicious circle, a history doomed to repeat past mistakes?

Richard's hands slipped into his trouser pockets; as he did so, to Mary's fascination, the anger went out of him almost visibly, as if it had been the thing that had held his now sloping shoulders erect.

"It felt like giving up," he said. "You might have noticed it's not one of my strengths, admitting defeat."

The corners of his mouth twisted upward in an expression more like a grimace than a smile.

"As long as I never said the word…he might not…"

Richard's Adam's apple bobbed between the open collar of his shirt as he swallowed.

"Well," he went on, hoarsely, "it would appear that I am admitting it now. My father is dying. At any moment, Doctor says."

This was not news, but it struck Mary hard even though she'd already heard it from George, seen it with her own eyes when she visited Mark. The younger Carlisle had accepted his father's impending death, made his peace with it, even, but there was nothing of either in the admission for Richard. And Mary had not the slightest idea what to say or to do to help him be reconciled.

The roar of a car engine made them both turn to see a Silver Ghost come around the corner. They watched it turn about in the street to pull up behind the Renault where Mary's driver waited for her. Richard's car had scarcely stopped alongside the curb when the rear door opened and George sprang out.

"Is he gone?" he panted, taking the front stairs two at a time, seemingly not noticing Mary as she stepped back against the wrought iron railing between Richard's front steps and the neighbour's.
"Still hanging on." Richard clasped George on the shoulder, the most demonstrative affection Mary had ever witnessed between them.

"Thank God." George muffled his own words as he rubbed a hand over his own scruffy cheek. The action seemed to wipe some of the troubled lines away; Mary thought Richard, too, looked a little less careworn with his brother's arrival.

Her heart gave a little twinge that she had not had that effect on him.

And then George's eyes caught hers, and his expression hardened. "What's she doing here?"

"I was just going." Mary struggled to keep her rising emotion in check and speak to Richard in a steady voice. "Please-tell your father he's in my prayers."

She hoped as she descended the steps, the chauffeur getting out of the Renault to open the door for, that his voice would rasp, Thank you, or even I will, to acknowledge her. But the only sound that followed her was the lonely click of the door behind the Carlisle brothers as they went inside the house nobody lived in to sit at their father's deathbed.

Though Mary was practiced enough at controlling her emotions not to make a spectacle of herself weeping openly during the drive from Knightsbridge to Hanover Square, her mask was not so opaque that Carson's bushy eyebrows didn't knit together when he admitted her to Grantham House. Her eyes were rimmed red and her complexion ghastly pale, the hall mirror revealed when she paused to take off her hat. She remarked on the humidity in the hope that he might believe frizzy hair was utmost among her concerns.

Carson had witnessed George Carlisle's outburst in almost this exact spot, and though Mary wasn't certain whether he had any idea of the precise nature of her recent errands, she had not a doubt in her mind that if he did know she'd been to see Richard's father, he would lay all blame on that family for these current signs of injury. Her throat constricted as she considered that Richard was likely less redeemable in Carson's eyes than he was in Papa's. You mean you'd be uncomfortable, working for a spymaster?

Worse than his disapproval of her suitor was the accompanying notion that if their first engagement was a sore subject for Carson, the wounds Mary had personally dealt him might be re-opened. How disappointing of you. And I always thought you were fond of me...Butlers will be two a penny now they're all back from the war.

But if Carson remembered she had once said any of these things to him, he only said now, "I'm glad your ladyship has returned to the shelter of home before the storm comes."

"Let's hope it holds till luncheon." They expected Granny, Aunt Rosamund, and Cousin Rose. "You know how my grandmother will never cancel an engagement, yet if she gets rained on, it's all we'll hear about: how Mama forced her to go out in a storm."

The corners of Carson's mouth and eyes drooped downward in his proper butler's expression that never belied the slightest hint of mockery toward his betters, but he spoke with a lilt of amusement: "Let us also hope the rain doesn't prevent Miss Sybbie and Master George taking their morning air. Nanny Phillips has already complained of being bitten this morning by one restless charge."

Mary continued her efforts at smoothing her hair. "Not by my son, surely."

"Master George is the model of nursery decorum-but it seems your ladyship's niece takes after her aunt."
A glimmer in the reflection of Carson in the mirror made Mary turn to face him; there was no mistaking the fond twinkle she knew to be reserved especially for her-no matter how old she got or what choices she made. Resisting the urge to throw her arms around him and kiss his cheek, which would embarrass him, she gave him one of her coy smiles beneath raised brows.

"Of course you must mean Aunt Edith."

With a request to send Anna to help her refresh her toilette before luncheon, Mary left him, intent on escaping to the bathroom to wash her face. She ought to have known better than to expect any such thing in a house as full as this, her ascent slowing as she arrived at the first landing just in time to meet Isobel coming down. Not for the first time, she thought with some longing for the private, modern flat Richard kept above the Herald offices. She had more or less successfully avoided Matthew's mother since the truth had come out about her engagement to Richard, in no small part due to Isobel's having thrown herself into her charity work. In fact, she was dressed to go out now.

"Be sure to take an umbrella," Mary said, as she couldn't get away with nothing and hoped such a remark would suffice to keep them both on their way.

But Isobel's jaw was set and her eyes fixed on Mary with intention as she stopped two steps up.

"How is Mr Carlisle? Cora told me you've paid him several visits."

So Isobel had been more at home than Mary realised. She pressed the pads of her fingers hard against the smooth wood of the banister as she pictured them together, whispering urgently over the head of their grandson about his mother's crisis.

"He doesn't have much longer."

Why, he might have died since she left Knightsbridge, and how would she know? Neither Richard nor his brother had reason to phone and tell her now.

"How sad," Isobel said. "I'll never forget how kind and compassionate you were at Matthew's bedside. I'm sure Mr Carlisle's last days have been a comfort, with you for company."

"Yes," Mary snorted. "The woman who might have made his son happy, yet made him very unhappy. Twice. I can't imagine a dying man preferring to pass his final hours with anybody else."

She started to step around her mother-in-law to continue upstairs, only to be arrested by her words:

"I love you, Mary. Not merely because you are-were-my son's wife, and my grandson's mother, but because you are exactly the sort of woman I'd be proud to call my own daughter. In fact I do consider you to be such. Which is why I'm so terribly sorry this matter has come between us."

It was so like something Matthew would have said that Mary had to reach out for the support of the wall as a heaviness in her chest bowed her shoulders. Arguments with him had always seemed impassable, when he insisted he only thought or acted the way he did because he loved her. The hell of it was that while she knew that to be true, she couldn't stop herself wondering: if he truly loved her as deeply as he professed, then how could he misunderstand her so utterly?

"I do wish to understand your position," Isobel went on. "I'm trying very hard to do so. I ask only that you do me the courtesy of trying to understand mine."

At the brush of her mother-in-law's fingertips against her own, Mary looked at her. "I understand it. But I wonder if it can change. You don't seem to believe Richard can."
When she finally made it to her room, Anna was already there, heating the curling iron. Silently Mary seated herself at her dressing table. Her eyes were even redder now, meeting Anna's in the mirror as she took her place behind. She saw that same damned concern that had followed her all over the house since she returned from Richard's, and it was suddenly too much.

"Even a tough press baron deserves sympathy when faced with losing his father," she snapped.

Honestly, Anna might extend some benefit of the doubt to a man who'd protected her husband's reputation from the scrutiny of the press—even, to some degree, protected him from the full reach of the law.

Not that Richard, at this moment, cared for any benefits that came from the Crawley family or their servants.

"Indeed, Lady Mary," said Anna. "Everybody has someone they love—and vice versa. It's always good to bear that in mind."

Richard Carlisle loved his father, and Mary loved him.

Too late.

With a sigh, she leaned onto her elbows on her dressing table. "I was sharp with you, Anna. Forgive me."

"There's nothing to forgive."

Of course there was, but Mary nevertheless appreciated Anna's good grace, and the understanding it implied. She tried, not with great success, to smile.

"I know you never cared for Sir Richard, and with good reason. You must think I'm a fool to involve myself with him again."

There it was, the single fear that had governed so many courses of action: if I am not to be an object of ridicule and pity…The great irony was that Richard understood this fear, for he shared it, though Mary discovered that night as Papa embraced her and bestowed his full and free forgiveness that made it seem no great hardship to her to go to America and wait out the storm, that it was only the denizens of Downton Abbey—her parents and sisters, Matthew and his mother, Anna and Carson, to whom she did not wish to be an object of ridicule and pity. The rest of the world could go hang.

"Never a fool, m'lady. I daresay there were a good many people who thought I was one to stand by Mr Bates. But I knew I wasn't. My opinion was the only one that counted."

Mary hoped her face did not betray the thought that there were times when she, hearing the evidence presented against Bates at his trial, which he had not refuted, wondered how Anna could be so confident that he was no longer the man his past painted him to be.

"You know Sir Richard better than I do," said Anna. "He may have said and done things I didn't think very highly of, but we all make mistakes, don't we? The worst of all is not to follow our hearts."

Gingerly, she fluffed the curling ends of Mary's hair, and gave a small smile in the mirror which, this time, Mary was able to return.

"Dear Anna. Lord knows you're almost the only person on earth who believes I've got one of those."
"The world would be a much better place if more people had the heart your ladyship does."

Mary was inclined to agree with Anna's assessment of hearts when she entered the drawing room before luncheon to hear Papa grouse to Mama:

"I thought we were having proper company."

"If I'd known that was how you viewed us," Aunt Rosamund huffed, "I'd have accepted an invitation from a proper host."

Papa rolled his eyes. "Oh, don't take insult where none is intended. I only mean people I don't dine with every day."

"That's all very well in Mama's case," Rosamund persisted, "but you don't dine with me every day."

"Let this be a lesson to you, Mary dear," said Granny, seated in her customary armchair with her hands clasped on the end of her stick. Her sour expression was for her squabbling son and daughter. "Always employ governesses who instil their charges with a sense of gratitude for their mothers."

Neither Rosamund nor Papa appreciated this aside, and if the former was determined to be offended by her brother, the latter was to be dissatisfied with the noon meal arrangements.

"Branksome wanted me to meet him at the club," he implored Mama.

She blinked at him. " Didn't you tell me once the Viscount was the dullest man of your acquaintance? That he can't talk about anything but horses?"

"Olympia's coming up, though," Mary interjected. "The one time of year when Papa finds Lord Branksome a riveting conversationalist."

Irresistible as it was to poke at Papa, the mention of the upcoming International Horse Show in relation to Evelyn Napier's father produced a twinge for her old friend, whom the horrors of war had deprived of this one thing they had once shared.

They were all of them disappointing their parents, it seemed, in some form or fashion: Evelyn, Edith, herself, even Rose, sat bored to pieces on the settee, admiring her varnished fingernails, whose own parents hadn't taken her to India with them.

"That reminds me," Mama murmured, "I need to write Evelyn and invite him along with us. Or perhaps I can just have Edith ask him. You young people aren't so much for formalities anymore, are you?"

The words young people drew Cousin Rose's attention from her manicure. "Auntie Cora, I do believe you're the one middle-aged person in Britain who understands today's youth!"

"Thank you?" Mama regarded her askance, while Granny hooted in the background.

"Middle age can't be a revelation, can it, Cora? You are, after all, a grandmamma twice-over."

Mama caught Mary's eye. "Remind me darling, if I forget. Mention the horse show to Edith."

As Mary nodded, her mother's attention drifted out the window, and understanding dawned even before Mama mumbled that it had begun to sprinkle, that she hoped Edith wouldn't get held up, they ought to have sent a car instead of making her take a cab.
"Cora," said Papa. "Am I to understand we are waiting for Edith to join us for luncheon?"

"You are." Mama wheeled to face him. "I know you’ve forbidden it…” The pitch of her voice rose over his protest, and made through tight lips in a reddening face, his chest puffed imperiously. "…but I'm her parent, too. Her mother, if you care to contemplate what that entails."

"Must we, before luncheon?" said Granny under her breath.

"I won't shut her out of my life any longer, Robert," Mama went on. "Not a day goes by that I don't regret not attending Sybil's wedding-"

Tears shimmered on her cheeks as she looked at Tom, who sat sad and silent beside Rose.

"My dear, you'd had Spanish flu," Papa said, quietly, approaching with an outstretched hand to comfort her. "You weren't fit to travel."

Mama recoiled. "You know very well that was only the excuse we gave our friends!"

With a heavy sigh that made his chest sag, Papa let his hand fall to his side.

"We've lost one daughter," Mama said. "You may willingly give up another, but I won't. I can't. No matter what choices Edith makes for her life. No matter what it means for us socially. I'm past caring what some people think."

"Hear hear!" cried Rose, with a little clap of her hands.

"Have we wandered into a session of Parliament?" Aunt Rosamund wondered to Granny.

"The House of Commons, apparently."

Throughout this scene, Mary's eyes had been fixed on her mother. The speech was fraught with emotion, of course, but the sentiment so matched the train her own thoughts had taken over the course of the morning that she couldn't help getting carried away by it herself.

"How is it you can forgive me, but not Edith?"

She watched her father's face blanch, and Mama lifted an eyebrow, as though this hadn't occurred to her before, but now it had, she very much would like an answer.

"It isn't the same at all," he said. "Edith is wilfully, repeatedly-"

"True, there wasn't much chance for repetition in my case," Mary said, lifting her chin, a feeling of exhilaration sweeping over her as she stood up to Papa, which she saw mirrored in her mother's expression. She couldn't stop now, even if she wanted to. Which, of course, she did not. "But let me assure you, I was no less wilful. Can you really blame Edith for taking for love and acceptance where she can get it after she was jilted at the altar, and feels she's always played second fiddle to Sybil and me?"

"You can't be accusing me of basing my forgiveness on favouritism," he spluttered.

"I'm not accusing you of anything," Mary replied with a shrug, though he had not precisely denied that he did, indeed, have favourites among his daughters. "Only asking why. Is it because my marriage to Matthew washed me clean? Or because my secret never got out to stain our family’s reputation in the first place?"

If the latter was the case, then it was an unintended effect of Richard's blackmail that cast him as the
villain of her story, deflecting any blame from her.

Of course there was that other thing Papa said, which she only recalled now, as he stood silent, steadfastly avoiding eye contact with everyone. *You wouldn't be the first Crawley to make a mistake.* What in heaven's name had he meant? She didn't ask; it was neither here nor there.

"I'm not ashamed of Edith," she said. "We've had our differences, and I'm sure we always shall, but Mama's right. I don't want to be without another sister. Edith will always be welcome at Downton, whenever she should wish."

She thought of what Richard's father had said about his sons being the worst of enemies and also each other's champions. Perhaps she was helping herself as well—though it was more likely, given their history and their luck, that the good deed would not go unpunished.

"I realise, of course, that as co-owner you have a right to refuse her. In that instance, I suppose we'll just have to paint a line down the middle of Downton. I'll be sure your half includes the smoking room. And Isis."

"Really, Mary, I believe your point can be made without sarcasm."

"Oh, did you detect sarcasm?" said Granny, as the rain at last spattered the windowpanes. "I was going to suggest that she take care the paint colour doesn't clash with the wallpaper."
“But why should I come?” Mary said into the telephone in the Grantham House study. "I shan't know any of your guests. I'll just be a wallflower. Or is that the point?"

Static crackled in the earpiece with Edith's sigh. "Honestly, Mary—you're even self-centred when talking about not being the centre of attention. It's your fault I have to have a going away party."

"Doesn't that mean you're making me the centre of attention?"

"You'll know Evelyn," Edith said crossly.

Mary smiled to herself, pleased as always to frustrate her sister into abandoning an argument; she did not needle her further by pointing out what a risky plan that was, inviting her to keep Evelyn company when he'd once wanted to marry her. Nothing would make their parents happier than for her to abandon the notion of Richard, revert to old habits, and encourage Evelyn, even if Edith did have designs on him. Which Mary had no proof that she did. After all, Edith had admitted to being dissatisfied with Gregson in large part because she wanted children, while Evelyn confessed to not feeling up to fatherhood. Or had that changed?

So much had, she observed a few nights later from her vantage point tucked behind the baby grand piano, where one of Edith's friends tinkled out jazz tunes while different ones blared over the phonograph. Her opinion of the genre wasn't one of them, and Evelyn still dangled a cigarette between his fingers. However, he no longer brooded in dark corners, instead mingled with the partygoers while she drank alone.

He was far too gallant to let her remain so all night, she knew; every now and again he glanced her way, a slight smile of acknowledgment and apology on his lips. Dear old Evelyn, who'd been her constant friend even when all the others had happily traded friendship for a morsel of gossip. But he wasn't the one who'd pulled her out and put her at ease in so many unfamiliar settings since she'd come to London.

Mary's lips touched the rim of her cocktail glass, though she didn't drink. Had she grown so dependent upon Richard?

The thought chafed, as did the pad of her thumb over the glass, smudging it. Being dependent upon Matthew had left her reeling not only from the loss of him but of the person she'd believed herself to be when she was with him. Richard, on the other hand, brought with him the reminder that she needn't be soft to be loved, that her sharpness could be, and was, necessary. However grateful she was for his help becoming reacquainted with herself, dependence still carried with it an unpleasant connotation with regard to Richard and their past which she would rather not be reminded of.

Attachment—that might be a more accurate, as well as a more palatable, term for what Richard's absence at this moment evoked in her. What was that line from Jane Eyre, which suddenly stirred from the depths of her memory? Something about a string, tightly and inextricably knotted between them, which would snap when they were apart, leaving each to bleed inwardly. Mary felt an upward tug at the corner of her mouth at the thought of what Richard would say at this flight of gothic romanticism; he would of course deny any resemblance at all to the brooding mercurial Brontë hero, but she didn't think even he would besmirch a comparison between her fortitude and the heroine's. He hadn't asked her to be a spectator, after all, but a part of his team, a player who brought her own unique set of skills to the court.
That did not, of course, preclude her taking a drink of liquid courage before she rose from her seat and picked a path through the crowded living room to Evelyn, who was locked in what appeared to be rather earnest conversation with a stout bespectacled man in his forties to whom Edith introduced her earlier—a fellow journalist, an editor of some political paper or other, whose name she'd already forgotten.

Thankfully, Evelyn—whose mouth curved in a small grin she knew to be conspiratorial—helped her to avoid an awkward re-introduction. "Ah, Lady Mary. You've met Mr MacCarthy?"

"Briefly. But I haven't yet had the pleasure of conversation."

"If you're now," Mr MacCarthy replied, "I must insist you call me Desmond, as the Honorable Mr Napier here can't seem to bring himself to do."

"Perhaps I shall, if you won't refer to me as the Honorable."

"Deal."

Did all newspaper men converse in terms of business deals?

Desmond filled her in on the conversation he and Evelyn had been having about Edith's book—he was a literary critic for New Statesman who had, it seemed, critiqued some of Edith's work as a personal favour—and inquired about Mary's own experiences living in a country house turned convalescent home.

"Heavens, I hope she hasn't based a character on me," she said, with less dismay in her tone than she truly felt at the prospect; she lifted an eyebrow at Evelyn in question, but he looked sheepish as he bit into an hors d'oeuvre.

"I don't know you well enough to say, of course," Desmond replied, "but if you are anything like the heroine, you're a most engaging woman."

He seemed to find her so as she spoke of the most superficial aspects of turning their home into a hospital—of dinner conversation being underscored by the din from the great hall-turned-servant's mess; of errant table tennis balls disrupting the earl's newspaper reading, of walks about the grounds becoming more strenuous than the ladies of the house were accustomed to as one was inevitably enlisted to push a wheelchair—though in fact Mary's full attention was not on Desmond, nor even on reminiscing about Downton during the war years. Perhaps it was the man's occupation, or a familiar tune played by jazz horns on the phonograph, or the modern honeyed oak furniture and the sparkling fashions of the guests, which turned her thoughts to Richard's beautiful flat above the newspaper offices. Vividly she saw herself entertaining his friends there in intimate evening parties, felt the span of his assuring hand at the small of her back and his admiring gaze on her face…

Her breath hitched, and Desmond begged forgiveness if the recollections brought her pain. "Molly—my wife," he said, removing his spectacles to buff the lenses with his handkerchief, "always chides my bad habit of mixing business and pleasure—because my business is my pleasure, I suppose."

He wouldn't be the only journalist she knew with that habit.

"There's no need," she said.

It had not been the recollections that brought her pain. Only her own treacherous imagination conjuring the future that would have been theirs had she and Richard not undermined themselves. Even now, as her gaze was drawn to the door swinging open, she thought she heard the low rasp of his voice in the foyer. Inwardly she chided herself for being maudlin, but hers was not the only
interest piqued by the newly arrived guest. Desmond's words, whatever he was saying, trailed off and he stepped backward to peer around the jut of the living room wall and the pot plant that blocked her view.

"I say! If Edith weren't breaking it off with Gregson this party would be a Who's Who in Newspapers. Reckon Beaverbrook will turn up next?"

"Who's turned up now?" Mary tried not to sound as if her heart had plummeted to the soles of her feet, even though that was precisely what she felt it had done.

"Sir Richard Carlisle!" Before Mary could react further than to gawp at Evelyn, Desmond's gaze swung back to her. "Weren't you set to marry him at one time?"

"Two times." Mary gulped her drink. "If I may beg your pardon, Desmond, I seem to require another cocktail."

Thankfully, perhaps in keeping with the feminist views embraced by this set, or because they pitied the position she'd found herself in, neither Desmond nor Evelyn made any such chivalrous offer as to fetch her another, instead stepping aside with polite nods. Mary strode past foyer without so much as a sideways glance at Richard, though she knew he must have seen her go by-her cheeks flushed as she imagined she felt his gaze on her, Edith's words about self-centredness ringing in her ears.

She passed through the dining room, where guests crowded around the table which served as a buffet, then pushed through the swinging door to the kitchen. Edith was there, back to her as she stooped to take something out of the oven.

"Richard's here," Mary said, breathless, the door having scarcely shut behind her.

Edith looked as though she might drop the baking sheet in surprise as she wheeled around, wobbling on the heels of her fashionable green satin t-straps which juxtaposed comically with her thick quilted oven gloves. Or would have, if Mary had been a laughing mood.

Of course Edith had no cook or servant to do the kitchen drudgery during her own party. Mary might have pitied her for it, as well as for the catered refreshments, if any of the guests had seemed for a moment to care, or Edith's literary friends proved less adept at mixing their own drinks. It made her think of Richard concocting White Ladies for her at his own sideboard.

"He came?" Edith said.

"You invited him?" Blinking off her disbelief—for why would Richard come to Edith's if he had not been invited?-Mary advanced on her sister, fingers curling into fists so that her nails dug into her palms. "You really will stoop to the lowest levels to get what you want, won't you? His father is on his deathbed, and all you can think of is your damn career—"

"You don't think Richard would attend a small party at my flat if his father's death were imminent?" asked Edith with more calm than Mary ever would have thought her in possession of. She placed the baking sheet, which contained stuffed mushrooms, on the work surface, beside a platter of salmon mousse on toast, and slipped off the oven gloves. "It must be a good sign, mustn't it?"

Much as Mary wanted to believe it, she couldn't bring herself to express any such hope aloud. She uttered a silent prayer that it would be so.

"And…" Edith went on, half-shy, looking away as she began to transfer the mushrooms onto a serving platter which didn't match the other. "I invited you, too. When did a man ever give me the time of day when you were in the same room? Clearly I wasn't acting in my own interests."
Mary raised an eyebrow at her, and Edith amended, with a slight smile, "Not only in my own interests." Her expression became serious as she unnecessarily rearranged the contents of the platter. "Rose told me what you said to Papa the other afternoon. Before I got there."

Now it was Mary's turn to glance away, aware of just how bygone their bygones were, if Edith had come to a point when she'd forgiven her for chasing off a suitor enough to help her get back a man of her own.

"Little good it did."

Papa had sulked through luncheon, only speaking stiffly to Edith when he couldn't avoid it-although she supposed that was an improvement over his having refused to see, or to allow anyone else to see her since last autumn. And everyone else acted as though Edith had done nothing more sinister than strike out on her own and pursue a career. Even Granny admitted that she wouldn't look forward to receiving the Sketch quite so much as she had knowing her friends would praise her granddaughter's latest column. It was me who inspired her to write, you know, she'd grown fond of telling them.

"Aunt Rosamund said I may stay with her until I have a new job. I think Papa will come around to that."

"Until you start working for Richard."

"He'll mind that less than you marrying him."

Mary gave her head a little tilt of acknowledgment that this was a point she could not dispute. "Papa won't have to worry about either if we hole up in the kitchen and ignore Richard all night."

"Wouldn't he have the worry of how on earth an earl's daughters ended up in the kitchen at all?"

"Thankfully Sybil blazed that trail for us."

They went out together, each carrying a tray which they deposited on the dining table to be immediately fallen upon by guests who'd had rather a lot to drink. Mary got another drink herself, sipping it as they continued through to the living room. Edith stepped ahead of her to greet the most recent arrival to the party, who hadn't got much further inside than the foyer before Desmond MacCarthy engaged him. She stretched out her hand to shake his, greeting Richard in the manner of a gracious hostess which would have made their mother's face light with a blinding grin and which Mary wouldn't have thought Edith capable of.

This was lost on Richard, whose gaze found Mary's the instant she came into view. As if he'd been watching the door for her, not giving his full attention to the conversation he was a part of.

"I'm so pleased you were able to come," Edith was saying, and Mary hung back further when she heard her sister inquire after Mark Carlisle.

Evelyn sidled up to her, and she shot him a grateful smile. Richard did not answer at once, but waited until she'd drawn close enough that his response might have been to her question and not Edith's.

"It would appear that Lady Mary's prayers have been answered."

"Thank God," she breathed, though even in her relief it did not escape her attention that Richard spoke of prayers without a shred of mockery. From him, such was tantamount to an apology, and she felt disposed to extend an olive branch in return.
With a slight smile and a lift of her eyebrow, she said, "Or that refusing to accept defeat is a Carlisle family trait."

He did look defeated, though, as he stood there before her, the din of the party receding into white noise around them. His strong features, which had been so sharp, harsh with anger the last time they met, had softened. The lines were still there, etched on his forehead, tugging at the corners of his eyes, almost a physical pull that sloped his ordinarily proudly erect shoulders as well. The fight had gone out of him, leaving only sadness and resignation in its wake. She almost wished he were still angry; she knew what to do with an angry Richard, but had no idea how to handle him like this. It recalled the unsettled feeling he'd left her with the day he departed Downton.

She wanted to close the gap between them, to trail her fingers lightly over the lines of his brow, to brush them over the soft greying hair at his temples. She wanted to cradle his head to her breast and knead the tension from his shoulders…

No sooner had her eyes touched his shoulders than he squared them with intention, the lines of his jaw and cheekbones tightening as he lifted his chin. "But not a Crawley one?"

Mary inhaled sharply, an instinctive retort forming on the tip of her tongue to what was certainly meant to be a jab at her…or at Matthew. So much for their agreement.

He turned to her sister.

"You've given up on your flat, Lady Edith? Before I've had the chance to give you an interview?"

The defensive words died on Mary's tongue as Edith spluttered, red-faced. "I wouldn't dare to presume the wages I've been accustomed to."

"Don't you feel your work merits them?" Richard went on. "Your unpublished work, I mean, not your Sketch columns."

Edith goggled, and Mary raised her glass to her lips to stifle her smirk. The newspaper world was a tough one, Richard had often said, and Edith, mystified by his brusque demeanour, clearly hadn't experienced that side of things. Would she still be keen to continue with this career out from the cosy confines of the boss' bed?

Most unexpectedly, however, rather than the chin quiver to which Mary was accustomed to in a verbally bested Edith, her little sister tilted it upward in the coolly defiant expression that had been her trademark. Would Richard be saying cold and careful Lady Edith Crawley?

"If that's your way of telling me you're prepared to offer a substantial advance, I'm all ears," she said. "My landlord will be, too. He hasn't let the flat to a new tenant."

"Obviously it's your landlord I aim to benefit."

Richard started to go on, more seriously, but at the same moment someone cranked up the volume on the phonograph, bellowing Keep it down! to the piano player who only pounded the keys with greater gusto. Shooting a look of mild exasperation at both, he remarked about the pitfalls of mixing business and pleasure, which amused Desmond, then asked Edith if they could step out of the flat to speak—he needed to be on his way again soon anyway.

They went out in the hall, and Desmond drifted off elsewhere, leaving Mary with Evelyn. This ought to have been a welcome change in company, but as he struck up a conversation about a new job he was to begin at the Home Office—something about a study the government was conducting—she was glad for the loud music to excuse her inattention, which he surely must notice drifting to the front
door. Poor old Evelyn: always side-lined by everybody else's personal drama. Especially hers.

"Carlisle hasn't sold his place yet, has he?"

_That_ pricked Mary's ears. "I don't believe so. We haven't spoken…He's preoccupied with his father…"

"Of course." Evelyn eyed her as he reached into his pocket for a cigarette, which he held between his lips to light as he went on around it, "Beastly business, the illness of a parent. He's lucky to have you to get him through it."

Edith burst back into the flat, grinning as she hadn't since the preparations for her ill-fated wedding.

"Was the going away party premature?" Mary asked, grateful for the interruption which allowed her to push back the rush of emotion Evelyn unintentionally stirred and prevented her blurting out, _But he hasn't got me_.

"He doesn't have a position for me yet," Edith replied. "But he wants to look over my manuscript!"

She pushed through her party guests to the small desk tucked between the windows and pulled a sheaf of paper from one drawer, hugging it to her chest as she scurried back with it. Mary stopped her with a hand around her wrist.

"I'll give it to him."

For moment Edith hesitated, clutching her typed pages tighter against herself. Then, with a nod, she relinquished them to Mary.

"Well," she heard Evelyn say behind her as she stepped out into the hall, "it's lucky you're throwing a party tonight, because this seems like cause for celebration."

"He hasn't made me an offer, but-"

The door closed on the rest of Edith's reply, though it seemed hardly to mute the musical cacophony.

Richard leaned against the railing, peering down the three flights of stairs in the converted row house. He didn't turn; he expected her.

Joining him at the railing, Mary rested the manuscript on the scuffed wood, rubbing her fingers over the title page as she observed the couple below in the foyer, who might have been guests of Edith's, who stood in the circle of each other's arms.

"Actually I'm not sure I ought to hand this over to you," she said. "Your friend Desmond tells me I'm in it."

"Who better than me to determine whether she's depicted you accurately?"

"Exactly. The last thing I need is Edith's fictional version of me falling into the hands of a publisher who can make it popular."

"I didn't tell her I'd publish anything. Only that I was interested in seeing what she was capable of."

Richard turned to her, but scarcely met her eye than the flash faded from his. He shoved his hands into his trouser pockets.

"I was harsh with you, the other day. Regrettably so."
"You're not the only one."

His gaze raked over her face, as if to verify every detail of every feature, finally settling on her lips, which parted with the breath that was caught in her chest. He wanted her, and she wanted him, yet neither moved toward the other because of the invisible barrier between them. A feeling with which she was well acquainted, though not with regard to Richard.

Her heart gave a twinge at the thought that for Richard, it was far from the first time he'd felt it with regard to her.

Looking up at him, she could no longer resist the earlier urge to raise her left hand to stroke a loose strand of hair back into place, to let her thumb scuff over his cheekbone as she did so. She felt his intake of breath, the tickle of his lashes against the edge of her index finger as his eyes fluttered closed.

"I didn't intend for this to end." Her voice came out hoarsely, just above a whisper. "Truly."

His long fingers clamped around her hand, pressing her wedding ring hard into her fourth finger. "Don't. You make me hope… I can't afford that now. Not when I've barely managed to accept that there is no hope for Dad."

It was she who closed her eyes now, blinking back the tears that stung as she nodded. But in contrast to his words he kept hold of her hand for a moment longer, his thumb scuffing over her knuckles; when she leaned into him, he tilted his head, nuzzling her hair with his jaw.

Then he stepped back from her and cleared his throat. "I ought to get back to him."

"Of course."

Mary relinquished the manuscript to him; still Richard lingered, flipping the corners of the pages idly through his fingers.

"He made me promise to ask you to come again," he said. "Says he won't go any further in that Agatha Christie without you. In fact I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if that's behind this rally."

"You're home earlier than I would have expected," Mama said by way of greeting when Mary entered the drawing room after the party.

She and Isobel were alone, playing cards, neither wearing evening dress, but Granny's voice in Mary's head filled the pause before she replied: From Edith's? I should have expected Mary home much earlier than this. Then again, I shouldn't have expected her to go at all.

Slightly disconcerted at how readily her brain supplied her grandmother's responses even in her absence, Mary settled on a more glib reply of her own. "You know that business about coaches and pumpkins and the stroke of midnight."

Well before midnight, she thought with a glance at the mantel clock. After Richard left, she'd soon followed, and Edith hadn't protested.

"Did Evelyn bring you home?" Mama asked.

She rolled her eyes at her mother's transparency, though Isobel's reaction as her gaze swept that way captured Mary's interest: one hand hovered over the card table, hesitating to lay down a card. Could
it be she was almost as ill-at-ease with the idea of anyone courting Mary as she was with Richard? When Mary replied that Evelyn stayed at the party while she caught a cab home, Isobel breathed again and resumed play.

"He said to tell you he's looking forward to seeing you at Olympia," Mary said.

This seemed to satisfy Mama, or else she was distracted by the game. Before she could pursue the subject of Evelyn, Mary asked, "Papa hasn't gone to bed already, has he?"

"He took Tom to the club." Mama frowned at the cards fanned out in her hand. "To play poker."

Papa? Poker?

"Is that wise? After the railroad investments, gambling doesn't seem to be his forte."

"It certainly doesn't seem like the best use of money when we almost lost Downton," Mama agreed. "Thank goodness he has his estate manager with him."

"I might have to retire after this hand." Now it was Isobel who was being transparent; she yawned behind her cards. "Or sooner, if you'd like to take over for me, Mary."

"Actually I was on my way up to look in on George."

He, more than Richard, had been the reason for her early departure from the party. The discussion had been a sobering reminder that though he didn't know it yet, George, from birth, had borne the same loss Richard faced. Though she had not been able to embrace Richard, she could hold her son.

On impulse, she leaned over her mother's shoulder to kiss her cheek, then made a hasty retreat from the watery glow of her gaze.

Carson hadn't quite shut the drawing room door behind her when she heard Mama say, "Thank heaven she's finally warmed to motherhood."

Mary caught the door, holding it just ajar against the look Carson gave her from beneath his heavy brows. _No good can come of eavesdropping, m'lady_, it clearly stated; she recalled a time in her childhood when he'd caught her doing precisely that while her parents took tea, taken her in hand and led her downstairs to his pantry for secret ginger biscuits. He probably would have done just that now, if she'd been willing, but it seemed impossible to heed his wisdom.

"So am I," Isobel's agreement drifted out to her. "Of course I'm entirely sympathetic to how extraordinarily difficult it must have been for her to bond with George under the circumstances. I'm sure she felt in some way that she'd been forced to exchange her husband for a son."

"But I never thought of Mary as naturally maternal," said Mama. "That was one of the many attractions Matthew held for me. Somehow he knew just how to draw out a soft side of her I never even knew was there. Maybe it's American of me, but I was sure he'd be a wonderful example of affectionate parenting."

"Not American, Cora," Isobel said, a teasing lilt coming into her voice. "Only middle-class."

"Lady Mary…" Carson beseeched in a stage whisper as the two women laughed softly, but Mary shook her head, leaning in closer to the crack of the door as her mother spoke again, so low she had to strain to hear.

"I'm sure being with you helped her tremendously. I wish I could have, but I'm so thankful she had
you.

Unable to hold back any longer, Mary opened the door wide and stepped through.

"It wasn't Isobel at all," she said. "It was Richard."

Mother and mother-in-law gawped at her, and Mary stared back at them, breathless from the quick beat of her heart as it was seized by the same rebellion that compelled her to stand up to her father on Edith's behalf.

"I wrote to you about taking George for an elephant ride," she went on. "But I didn't tell you that Richard was with us. Isobel can confirm it."

"He was," Isobel said, weakly, "but-"

"I suppose it was rather middle-class to walk around the zoo eating hamburgers and ice cream, but his nephew was visiting. Even I can't fault a man for doting on a child."

Even if she had turned up her nose at a hamburger herself. She pictured him, stretched out in the grass in the sun with young Mark. Happier and more comfortable than he'd ever looked at any meal at Downton.

More himself.

"The restraint with which he conducted himself during our courtship I mistook for coldness," she said, "when in actuality he proved demonstrative with his affection for his family."

And for hers. He was always gentle with George, when he might have been—understandably—indifferent.

"I appreciated the opportunity to see softer side of him I never even knew was there."

As she said this she intended to give her mother a pointed look, but a mirror on the opposite red papered wall caught her eye and instead she stared into the reflection of her own face above a towering arrangement of roses. The lines of her cheekbones and the angles of her eyebrows, exaggerated by the paleness of her skin. Yet it was her body in which he'd sought solace—and found it.

"His father was dying, and he came to me," she said, as if, like Richard believed, the idea could only be made real if she uttered it allowed. "I didn't know at the time, of course. Only that something in him was different. And that somehow—*in the midst of death*—he brought me back to life, when I'd felt sure anything soft in me had gone to the grave with Matthew, dried up and brittle."

Her gaze swung back to Isobel, whose mouth still hung slightly agape in the argument Mary had interrupted.

"*But,*" Mary said, "how could I tarnish Matthew's memory with a man like *that*?"

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Much later, as the clock downstairs tolled its muted chime at midnight, Mary emerged from the nursery, where she'd dosed off with George warm on her chest in the rocking chair while Nanny snored softly unawares. Carson was performing his final rounds, flicking off light switches, which meant Papa had come home and gone to bed or had spent the night in his rooms at the club. She froze, hands splayed at her sides, feeling every bit the errant child caught out of bed when and where she ought not to be.
"Lady Mary," said Carson as he crept toward her, the dark seeming to follow him as though drawn by the sonorous tones of his voice despite his attempt to speak softly. "Forgive me if I speak out of turn-"

"Oh Carson-wouldn't I be the most dreadful hypocrite if I didn't forgive you that tonight?"

"I eavesdropped, as well."

Mary twitched her thumbs against her forefingers but the corner of her mouth twitched at his hangdog expression.

"Have you? Dear me. About which part to you wish to speak out of turn?"

"On the subject of Sir Richard, I will say nothing."

He made a gesture with his hand which, though suppliant, did not seem spontaneous; her smile stretched as she pictured him moving down the halls thus, eyes downcast, rehearsing what he wished to say to her ladyship, his past on the stage never so far behind him as he liked to think.

"I believe you know already how I feel, but it is not my feelings that matter. But on the subject of you...

He lifted his eyes, then, rich beneath the heavy brows as they reflected the light at the end of the hall beyond the nursery.

"Don't sell yourself short. That soft side of you-iut was always plain to see, by those you chose to reveal it to."

Mary's heart filled her throat. "By you?"

Carson gave her the smile he had on her wedding day. "Long before any of us knew of the existence of Mr Matthew Crawley."
Over the Hurdle

Chapter Summary

As Evelyn confronts the barriers to his future, while Mary struggles with unexpected obstacles in her path to happiness.

Nine thousand spectators assembled in the enclosed arena at Olympia, dressed in their afternoon best, for the gala event of the Royal International horse Show. The King George the V Gold Cup was, of course, named for the monarch who presently stood on the balcony of the Royal Box with Queen Mary as the trumpet's final echoing peal of "God Save the King" dissolved into the applause of the crowd. In the row in front of her, Lady Mary Crawley watched her father's chest puff beneath his dove grey waistcoat and cravat, and it almost seemed impossible that Mama had grown up singing American words to the same tune as she held Papa's arm, beatific in periwinkle lace and a matching flower-trimmed hat as the afternoon light beamed down through the arched glass roof.

For her part, Mary was not immune to a swell of patriotism a few rounds in when the first British competitor rode out in a smart blue uniform—though love of country was not strictly the emotion behind her appreciative remark to Cousin Rose on Major Stewart's form as he leaned low over his horse's neck and rose slightly off the saddle with the momentum of the first jump. She admired also for the ripple of muscles beneath the glossy black coat of his mount, My Dear Watson, too.

But neither was she ignorant of what feelings might stir in the breast of the man seated beside her.

As Major Stewart and My Dear Watson approached a ditch, her fingers curled over the iron arms of her seat as images flashed in her mind of the battlefield scenes Evelyn Napier described whilst chain smoking that spring night at Edith's flat. Of course no scream of equine agony shattered the decorum of Olympia, only the ripple of applause when the crowd saw them in the clear, and Mary released her chair arms to join in the clapping.

As for Evelyn, he was tense—but no more so than Papa, hunched as if he sat astride the horse, steering him through the course, or his own father, who sat next to Papa watching through a pair of field glasses. Evelyn did not require a cigarette now, nor did Mary detect the tremor of anxiety in his hand, although it was rather difficult to tell when every now and again he curled his fingers into a fist and gave it a little shake at a successful jump. It occurred to her that perhaps she was the more preoccupied of the two with whether he would be all right.

"I say!" Papa turned in his seat to look back at them when My Dear Watson completed his run. "What a good start!"

"What a good start!"

"One might even call it elementary," Mary quipped. She would have to tell Richard and his father the horse's name when she went over afterward for supper; at least she could count on amusing Mark with the reference to Holmes, if the rest of the visit proved strained and awkward.

Evelyn regarded her with his wry crooked grin. "All in all a pretty clean jump," he agreed, "though not flawless. One deduction here, another there...those seemingly insignificant errors can make all the difference in an event like this."

Papa opened his mouth in reply, but before he could utter a syllable, Lord Branksome said, not
lowering his field glasses as the next team trotted out into the arena, "What a relief to know my son hasn't lost all interest in this sort of thing."

Glancing at Evelyn, Mary saw his brow draw, the tendons on the back of his hand as it tensed on his knee. She remembered how he'd spoken of being unable to live up to his father's expectations for him, after his return from the war.

"Indeed," she said. "Or else you'd have nothing at all to talk about."

Rose tried to smother a laugh behind her hand, which resulted in a snort.

"Mary!" Mama chided through her teeth as she grinned broadly to indicate her daughter hadn't meant to give offense.

But Mary knew-as did Evelyn, who shot her a grateful look-that it would never occur to his father be offended by the suggestion that he was single-minded.

"Quite," Lord Branksome said, sliding to the edge of his seat, as if the field glasses did not give him a near enough view of the course as a French cavalryman rode out. "Do you know, Grantham, this is the first event I've got him to at the RI? They've got him chained to a desk in the Home Office."

"I tried to get Edith to come, but it's the same for her," Mama chimed in, helpfully. "It's so odd to think of her clacking away on a typewriter. I didn't even know she could type!"

Lord Branksome had nothing to say to that, not so much as a hmm, but he didn't have anything to say about anything else, either, apart from remarks to Papa about what was happening down on the jump course.

Evelyn was quiet, too, even more than usual. As the contest went on, Mary observed that his reactions were delayed, as though he were responding more to the crowd than to the competitors. He fidgeted, changing positions in his seat frequently, doffing his hat to mop his brow, folding and refolding his handkerchief afterward. To his credit, not once did he reach into his jacket pocket for his cigarette case and lighter, as he'd done every time an uncomfortable subject arose a few months before, though the occasional twitch of his forefinger against the third made her wonder whether he didn't wish for one rather badly.

At the end of the qualifying round, the mostly British crowd leapt to their feet to cheer the two teams to represent them in the jump-off: Major Stewart and My Dear Watson, and Colonel Nicholls, under whom Evelyn had served, on his horse Trickster God.

"Our cavalrymen continue to do Britain proud," said Papa, clapping heartily as they led their horses off the field so the crew could break down the course and rearrange it for the final round.

Beside him, the viscount lowered his field glasses, letting them dangle by the strap around his neck as he polished the lenses with his handkerchief. "Evelyn was a splendid jumper."

Papa sobered and looked back at Evelyn. "It was a knee injury, wasn't it?"

"Bally bad luck." He sought Mary's gaze, as if to validate what he'd told her in confidence about the true reasons he'd given up riding.

"He's back in the saddle, though." She smiled up at him in a way that she hoped communicated how much progress she'd seen him make since they met again. "Even if it is a swivel chair."

The familiar grin slanted across his face as he clasped his hands together behind his back. "Indeed. If
we were all jumping for England, there'd be no one to write those dull reports for the government, would there?"

"What sort of reports?" asked Papa. "Unless it's top secret?"

Mary could have kissed him for it; since Edith's party, she'd been wracking her brain for a way to find out what Evelyn's new position in the Home Office entailed without revealing she'd been inattentive to him.

"Not at all—although I warn you," Evelyn's smile became even more crooked as he teased, "I failed to captivate Mary other night."

She flushed, but nevertheless laughed at his good-natured ribbing, though as her father chuckled, too, looking back and forth from her to him, she was sure he was getting the wrong idea about the nature of their friendship. Wishful thinking, like Mama. Glancing away, she caught Lord Branksome's eye, his look plainly saying, *You and me both.*

"We're conducting a study of Britain's country estates," Evelyn explained to Papa. "How well they're adapting to the post-war economy. Whether they can adapt enough to survive."

"No wonder you wanted to speak to Sir Richard," said Mary, glancing sideways at Papa. "That sounds exactly like the sort of thing he'd be interested in. Not just because of Haxby."

Evelyn nodded. "All jokes aside, it might be of interest to you, as well, as co-owner of Downton."

Papa had frowned at the reference to Richard; at this last part it deepened into a scowl. His chest puffed again, national pride giving way to a more personal emotion. "Is Downton to be included in this report?"

"No..." Evelyn's smile became sheepish. "In fact I was going to ask if my boss, Mr Charles Blake, and I can set up base camp there while we look at a few places up north. It would be rather a conflict of interests if I were to report on people from whose hospitality I benefitted, wouldn't it?"

"Meaning no disrespect, but I should think the job itself would be," said Papa, in that tight-lipped way Mary heard so often when he and Matthew discussed the future of Downton, "Considering you're heir to Branksome Park?"

"You and Father have that view in common. But whether we like it or not, the world's changed. I've my own future to consider, haven't I?"

Something shifted in Evelyn's face. Something subtle...a deepening of the creases at the corners of his eyes, perhaps a tightening in the line of his jaw as he looked down at Lord Branksome, who appeared not to be paying attention to the conversation. Whatever it was, it suggested to Mary that he wasn't speaking merely in abstractions.

"We all have," she said.

Before he or Papa could say anything to prolong the conversation, she suggested they stretch their legs during the interval; Evelyn readily agreed, declaring it high time for a smoke. But as they stepped out into the aisle, Mama caught her elbow.

"Look, Robert, it's Lord Gillingham!"

"I thought he died?"
Mama pressed her lips together in exasperation, then said, "His son-Tony."

Mary adjusted the strap of her black patent leather handbag over her arm as she looked up into the stands, scanning the masculine faces beneath the brims of top hats for the familiar olive-complected one of her childhood friend-or, alternatively, for the hawkish nose of his sister Amelia. Thankfully it was the former who caught her eye, doffing his hat and giving it a little wave like a dancer in a show. There was a lady at his side, taking his arm for balance as they negotiated the narrow steps, but there was nothing remarkable about her nose.

"And the future Lady Gillingham, it would seem," Mary said, seeing to quell any thoughts her mother might have had of promoting Tony as a suitor.

"Doesn't Miss Lane Fox look scrumptious in that outfit?" asked Rose, suddenly at Mary's side, bouncing up on the balls of her feet to see over the crush of people whose path on the stairs she was oblivious to blocking.

Mary took in the dress, a confection of buttery crepe georgette that brought out the golden highlights in the auburn bob that peeked out from the wide brim of her straw hat.

"I suppose as your guardian I ought to be relieved you're not saying that about the glamorous pirate," said Papa.

Rose laughed over her shoulder at him. "Believe me, Cousin Robert, I think Lord Gillingham's rather a dish, too."

Though Papa muttered something to Viscount Branksome about young people's slang, when Tony and his fiancée reached them he spoke in similar terms, though he was more than ten years her senior.

"What a treat, Mary!" he said, extending his hand. "I was so sorry to miss you at the opera. Amelia told me you looked splendid, and she was right."

His fingers clasped hers; his skin was soft, and his dark eyes, too, as they swept her with his gaze, seeming not to miss a thread of her pale grey and ivory ensemble from the hem of her skirt to the striped ribbon around her black hat. Quite the opposite of his fiancée's as she regarded Mary over his shoulder, maintaining her hold on his upper arm.

"Likewise," Mary replied, drawing her hand from his lingering grasp, "but my escort was ready to leave."

Though Tony maintained his smile, his eyes seemed to darken almost to black, the warmth going out of them as they touched Evelyn; clearly, he thought he had been Mary's opera escort.

"You know Evelyn Napier, of course?"

"We were at school together," Evelyn said.

"Played polo," Tony said and gave Evelyn's outstretched hand a single shake before turning to greet Mary's mother and to meet her cousin.

"And am I correct to assume I have the pleasure of making the acquaintance of the Honourable Miss Mabel Lane Fox?"

"You are, and forgive me, Mabel," said Tony, looking a little flustered as he turned back to her, reaching for her hand to draw her into the group almost as an afterthought.
Miss Lane Fox pressed the tips of Mary's fingers, turning her hand so that the engagement ring
glimmered in the lights overhead. Once upon a time Mary would have taken it as a point of pride that
other women feared their fiancés weren't safe in her company, but now it was all she could do not to
roll her eyes. A sure sign of her age?

Mama was congratulating them, and asked whether they'd set a date for their wedding. When Tony
replied that they had not, his voice was tinged with a meaning Mary knew all too well: he was as
enthusiastic about Miss Fox as she had been about Richard.

"We'd like to know where we'll set up housekeeping first," he said. "Since the Abbey's now a girls'
school."

This was news to Mary, and she couldn't help glancing sideways at Papa to see whether it was to
him, as well. Had he lost his estate before or after he'd lost his father? Chances were good it had been
after, thanks to the death taxes. For the first time since Matthew's death, it occurred to her that though
Downton had an heir, George was not assured of having an estate to inherit. _We all have our futures
to consider_, she'd glibly agreed with Evelyn. She looked up at him now, and found him watching her
with his head tilted in a look of mingled concern and mutual desire to extricate themselves from the
conversation.

But Miss Lane Fox's trill of laughter drew her back. "Housekeeping! Tony's always so droll. He
makes it sound as if I'll be scrubbing floors and scrambling eggs. Part of the country charm, I'm
sure."

"You ought to have a look at Haxby Park," said Mama. "You remember it, Tony, surely? The
Russells' old place?"

"How could I forget Billy's birthday parties?" Tony said with a smile, though lines appeared about
his eyes, and he looked down at his hat in his hands. "Poor chap."

"It's just standing empty," Mama went on, "even though it's all been redone. We could be
neighbours, wouldn't that be fun?"

"Oh, but if there are young people nearby," said Cousin Rose in tones of mock dismay, "how will I
convince Cousin Robert to keep letting me come to London?"

The smile Miss Lane Fox bestowed on Rose was the most genuine one Mary had seen from the
heiress; Rose did have such a disarming way about her.

"There are some very young people in the neighbourhood now," said Mama. "Sybil's little one. And
Mary's son, when they return from London. Hopefully at the end of the season." Her eyes misted.
"Children at Haxby and Downton, just like when our girls played with the Russell boys."

"The good old days," said Papa, but his nostalgia was cut off by an edge that came into his tone,
"when Haxby's twelve thousand acres weren't growing hops for a beer company."

Tony winced, apparently sympathetic to Papa, but Miss Lane Fox placed a graceful hand on his
chest and declared, "But that's perfect! We haven't any interest in farming so long as the house and
lands are suitable for proper country parties. Isn't that so, Tony?"

His only reply was a pained attempt at an acquiescing smile as Mama continued to extol the virtues
of Haxby.

"The house has been completely modernised: _en suite_ bathrooms, central heating-"
"If Miss Fox is the housekeeper," Mary interrupted, "then Mama's the estate agent."

Mama looked at her with round-eyed surprise; Mary was a little surprised at herself—or, more accurately, at the vehemence of her indignation. Why should it bother her to hear Haxby spoken of by others when she'd discussed these very things with Richard recently? Perhaps it was the realisation that she had done so in relation to the sale with much more interest than she ever had with regard to its purchase. Or perhaps it was the hypocrisy of Mama speaking of central heating and en suite baths as assets when once she'd allowed Papa and Granny, even Mary, to sneer at them out of Richard's hearing.

As though he sensed her discomfort, or perhaps merely uncomfortable himself, Tony thanked her mother and said if their search for a house did find them in the neighbourhood they'd be sure to call at Downton. When they returned to their seats, Mary and Evelyn continued on their way out of the arena.

"I say, Mary, are you all right?" he asked. "Only you looked rather knocked for six by that talk of Haxby."

She waited to reply until they found an out of the way alcove in the entry hall, which muted some of the echoing din from the crowds milling about or queued up at numerous concessions stands in the cavernous space.

"It's only…" She fiddled with her pearls. "I've suddenly come to appreciate something Granny once said, about dancing on the grave of a fallen family."

If Evelyn understood her meaning, his expression was shrouded by smoke as he lit a cigarette.

"What about you?" she quickly turned the conversation from herself. "Are you holding up as well as you appear to be?"

"Do I appear to be? I fear I've had my moments."

"But you've got past them."

"Over them, rather. I keep telling myself, it's just like those jumps. One at a time. Leaving them behind in the dust and looking ahead."

"What are you looking ahead to?" she asked him. "What future are you thinking of?"

Evelyn drew from his cigarette, then exhaled the smoke, long and slow, waiting until it had dissipated into the air before he replied.

"I'd like to ask Edith to marry me. Not right away-she's only just come out of this thing with Gregson, and I don't want to be mixed up in that, or to interfere with her career, however it unfolds. Her work is very important to her, and I have my own to keep me out of London for a while. But when we're together…I think we do well together."

"You make a good team?" Mary heard herself say.

Evelyn nodded, of course not understanding her reference. Nevertheless she found it reassuring that his view of marriage so closely resembled Richard's, and she liked his analogy of the past a like a series of jumps. She hadn't made an entirely clean one over Haxby, but she had got over it.

If only, she thought as they returned to their seats for the jump-off, she could be as confident that she would have a repeat performance with the bigger hurdle that awaited her afterward.
"Sir Richard and the Misters Carlisle await your ladyship in the drawing room," said Webb the butler as he ushered Mary into the foyer of the Knightsbridge townhouse.

"All of them?" She turned back from the hall mirror where she'd paused to check that she still looked presentable after her afternoon at the show jumping. "Even Sir Richard's father?"

"Yes, m'lady. All of them."

"Mr Carlisle's condition must be greatly improved, then. Thank heaven."

Mary looked at her reflection once more, adjusting her hat and the hang of her strand of pearls. Her skirt and blouse, though chic and quite modern with blocks of contrasting shades, wasn't at all proper dinner attire, but Richard had assured her it would only be the most informal of family suppers. She hadn't expected that Mark would join them for it at all. Satisfied with her appearance, she followed Webb to the drawing room.

As they approached, an operatic voice fluted through the open French doors, covering the butler's announcement that Lady Mary Crawley had arrived. At first, only Mark saw her as he sipped broth with the assistance of George, whose back was to her as he sat at the edge of the settee beside his father. Across the room, Richard made informal seem an understatement, lounging in an armchair with his feet propped up on an ottoman, wearing a light summer suit without the jacket, the waistcoat unbuttoned over a striped shirt with rolled-up sleeves. One hand held a book while the fingers of the other tugged at the hair that curled over his collar. He badly needed a trim.

"Mary," Mark wheezed.

His sons looked up at her, then, only for their attention to snap back to Mark as he doubled over, seized by a deep cough. He bumped the bowl, the spoon clattering against the china; hastily George removed the bowl to a tray, while Richard leapt from his chair to help Mark sit up so he could breathe a little easier.

For a moment Mary stood there, at a complete loss as to what to do besides fiddle with the strap of her handbag. Then, noticing the gleaming puddle of broth on the tray, she removed her black gloves, tucked them into her purse, and dabbed up the spilt broth with a serviette. As she bent, Mark's eyes, the colour rich with exertion, caught hers again. Somehow, his bluish-tinged lips cracked into a smile around the coughs which, thankfully, had begun to subside.

When they stopped entirely, she became startlingly aware that an aria still played in the background. Stranger still, her Italian lessons came more readily back to her than they had at The Barber of Seville.

*Love, give me some remedy*

*For my sorrow, for my sighs!*

*Give me back my darling,*

*Or let me die."

"Dame Nellie Melba," Mark said hoarsely as Richard eased his frail and trembling frame back against the pile of supporting cushions. "We wanted to enjoy a bit of the feminine before you arrived, my dear. But Richie can turn it off if now that you're here."

"Try not to talk so much, Dad," Richard admonished him quietly, with a gentle pat on the shoulder.
He straightened up and took a step toward the phonograph.

"Leave it on if you like," Mary said. "I'm not averse to an aria. And it reminds me of a lovely evening at the opera."

Richard stopped and watched her from across the room, a smile appearing faintly at the corners of his mouth beneath the weary lines.

"That was from The Marriage of Figaro," he said.

She wanted to go to him, but Mark stretched out his hand to her. She accepted it, along with the straight-back chair George drew alongside the sofa for her. The fleeting hope she'd had on her arrival that Mark's being downstairs signified an improvement in his condition seemed childishly naïve now, when faced with how much worse for the wear he was than when she saw him not quite a week ago.

For a woman who'd scarcely left the place of her birth, she'd seen an alarming number of people die. Though Mark's prolonged death was different to Lavinia, Sybil, certainly to Kemal Pamuk, there was no denying that he was a dying man. A vein bulged in the side of his neck above the unbuttoned collar of his blue pyjamas-her heart twinged against her ribcage when she recalled how pleased he'd been to don his good suit the last time she called on him-and though he'd lost weight his chest appeared swollen, the thin cotton almost strained by it as it rose and fell, the latter slowly, as though exhalation was even more laborious than breathing in.

"Tell me," he said, "who won the Gold Cup?"

The distress of the past several minutes in Richard's drawing room had all but made her forget she'd just come from the Royal International Horse Show. She made the necessary mental adjustment and mustered a light tone.

"The results won't appear till the morning editions, will they? Does this mean I've got a scoop?"

Her gaze drifted over Mark's head and the lamp on the side table behind him, to Richard; he'd done up the buttons of his waistcoat and was in the act of smoothing his hair. The dimples appeared in his cheeks.

"I'll ring my sport editor and have him put your name in the by-line."

Mark's chuckle threatened to set off another coughing fit, but George put a glass of water to his lips and a small sip staved it off.

"You certainly look the part of a newswoman in that outfit," the senior Carlisle said. "Doesn't she look smart, Richard?"

She couldn't help turning to Richard, pleased when his bloodshot eyes swept her from top to toe as appreciatively as Tony Foyle's had. "If I saw her on Fleet Street, I'd think her a force to be reckoned with."

"Northcliffe's not long for this world, I hear," said George, leaning against the foot of the sofa. "Perhaps Lady Mary can take over his position."

His perpetual sarcasm and the sardonic twist at the corner of his mouth made it difficult for Mary to gauge whether he was mocking her or simply making a joke. Given his reaction to her the other day-What's she doing here?-she doubted he welcomed her this evening. More likely he merely tolerated her, for the sake of his father and brother. Although she knew from experience with Edith that tolerance was something.
"After this report, I'll leave the journalism to my sister." Mary returned her attention to Mark. "There was a horse called My Dear Watson, who I hoped would win for you. Alas, victory belonged to Conte Giacomo Antonelli of Italy, who rode a horse called Bluff. Although now I think of it..." Her eyes darted again to the armchair. "That's a name Richard might appreciate."

"A count," muttered George. "Typical. And why do you lot give horses such bloody stupid names?"

"What would you name a horse, if you had one?" Mary asked.

"George is just like Mother," Richard said. "Names from the Bible or the Carlisle family tree only."

"Dick," George replied. "I'd name a horse Dick."

"Lads..." Mark chided.

Heat prickled across Mary's cheekbones at this banter which she could only assume was inappropriate and pertained to men, but she folded her hands in her lap and did her best to appear unruffled.

"Is this what I have to look forward to if I ever have another son?" she asked Mark.

"Aye. It's a bit different to JM Barrie's version of the boy who never grew up, isn't it? Talking of boys, how is your wee one?"

"Not so very wee," Mary replied. "He's had a growth spurt, and all that baby pudge has turned into legs."

"The newborn colt look?"

Mary nodded. "And he's working up the courage to walk on his own."

"I'd surely like to meet him. Bring him along next time?"

Mary could only nod, her throat constricting with emotion at the casual way he made plans; how she hoped there would be a next time. He must miss his grandchildren dreadfully, if the collection of homemade cards and crayon drawings she suddenly noticed arranged on the coffee and side tables near him was any indication.

Webb returned to the drawing room with a maid, each carrying a serving tray which they placed on a table between the windows for a buffet supper. When Mary got up to serve herself a plate, she paused to admire the children's artwork more closely. This pleased Mark, though she felt a bittersweet pang when she opened one card and a souvenir photograph of the elephant ride at the London Zoo fell out. Nevertheless, she made herself smile and remark that it had been another lovely day spent with Richard.

"So lovely that the other three think it's terribly unfair their brother got to ride an elephant without them," said George. He took a piece of toast with something heaped on it from one of the trays and, eschewing a plate, bit into it. Around a bite he said, "Richie doesn't know how tempted I've been to put them all on the train to London to spare myself and Aileen the whinging."

"There's a fine zoo in Edinburgh if you'd ever set foot outside that shop," Richard said, opening his book again.

"Says the man who rarely leaves his newspaper office."
"I prefer to think of it more as a lair," said Mary as she joined George at the buffet.

He rewarded her with a quick smirk before he went on, "Anyway, I do leave leave the store."

"To go to the pub," said Richard, missing George's scowl as he returned to his book.

On her way back to her chair with a plate of asparagus salad and tuna a la king, the illustration on the dust jacket of Richard's book caught her eye. His hand blocked the title, but she recognised the suit-wearing bear removing a mask of a human face with a man's hand.

Arching an eyebrow in her best imperious expression, she asked, "Did you steal *The Secret Adversary* from your father?"

"More like he stole Edith's manuscript from me and won't let me look at it till I've caught up to him in the Christie so I can read it to him."

Mary turned to Mark now, feigning shock. "Why, Mr Carlisle! That sounds rather alarmingly like blackmail."

"It is blackmail, my dear, I don't deny it."

"At least I see Richard comes by his dubious business ethics honestly."

To reassure him she meant no malice, she touched Richard's shoulder; as neither his father nor brother were watching, she gave in to the urge to slip her fingers behind his neck to stroke the curling ends of his hair. At once the tension that pulled the muscles of his neck and shoulders taut relaxed, and he leaned his head back against the chair, raising his eyes to look at her.

"I'm nearly caught up to where you left off with Dad. Give me a few minutes and we can finish it together."

It sounded so domestic, even a little old-fashioned, passing an evening reading aloud together. Not two words she would have used to describe Richard, but she liked that he could surprise her.

"What about George?" she asked

"Read it the week it came out, with Aileen," he answered around another mouthful; at least now he had a plate in hand. "If no one minds, I'm going to phone her before she goes to bed."

"Give her my love," Mark rasped.

The raw sentiment in his voice gave Mary a moment's guilty pause that it was she who was with him in what were surely his final days, and not his daughter-in-law. She felt for George, too, despite how difficult his personality made it to elicit sympathy. When she lost her sister she'd been so grateful to have Matthew to bear her up in her grief; it was little wonder George was surly when he must lie in a strange bed without his wife at the end of these long days watching his father waste away.

She looked down at Richard, and her stomach twisted with regret that the ring she twisted around her finger was not his—though of course this was completely irrational. *I can't afford to hope,* he'd said—though Mark seemed to believe the contrary. Or else would he have asked her to be here with them?

With George out of the room and Richard reading, it fell to Mary to sit with Mark and make conversation, though whenever he blinked his eyes remained shut for long moments, and she wondered whether she oughtn't let him sleep.
Instead, she asked, "Are you withholding Edith's manuscript to force Richard to read for pleasure?"

The rattle in Mark's chest sounded like a cough, though she was sure it was a chuckle. "It's always been an ambition of mine to discover a brilliant new author before I die. I'm cutting it a bit, but-
"

His words choked off. She set her plate aside and helped him sit up a little so he could drink.

"You think she's a brilliant author?" Mary heard the disbelief in her own voice.

"I think she could be, if not for the cloying sentimentality that creeps in. Nothing a good editor can't do for her, though."

"I'm not sure Edith's sentiment can cope with an editor. She lived her whole life with me without developing a thick skin."

Mark did not respond to that, and his eyelids had not so much as twitched since his last cough. Mary's heart missed a beat in her breast with the fear that his had ceased to do so, but she breathed again she saw the rise and fall of his chest, and heard the accompanying whistling sound when Dame Nellie's record went silent on the phonograph. He'd only dozed off.

Virtually alone with Richard, she turned in her chair, spearing a piece of asparagus with her fork but not bringing it to her mouth.

"At risk of destroying the illusion you have of me, I had a rather sentimental moment myself today. One might even call it cloying."

"I have no illusions about you," said Richard, not looking up from The Secret Adversary.

Mary ate her asparagus, chewing slowly. At length, she swallowed and said, "It was about Haxby."

That made Richard clap the covers of the book closed and regard her with interest—though gradually his expression became blank, unreadable—as she told him about her mother's attempt to convince Tony and Miss Lane Fox to buy the estate.

"I felt...oddly possessive," she said. "I don't want Haxby for myself, but I couldn't help thinking they were, well, vultures. Descending on the carcass of something that had been meant for me."

Richard's pale eyebrows arched on his forehead. "Now, Mary...I'm willing to indulge a little sentiment, but melodrama I cannot tolerate."

It was on the tip of her tongue to make a retort about how much melodrama he had, indeed, tolerated in their relationship; she bit it back when she saw his forehead furrow as he swung his legs over the ottoman and pushed up from his chair.

"Lest you have any illusions about me," he said, crossing the room to her chair in a few long strides, "let me assure you the improvements I made to Haxby were in equal measure to make the place appeal to any prospective buyer. Not just for your comfort."

Or was it that he didn't want her to have any illusions about herself? Her pulse quickened with indignation as he stood over her chair.

"Mary..."

His hands came into her line of vision, palms up. She set her plate aside and placed hers on them, and his fingers closed around hers, rough and warm, pulling her up from her chair. He drew her to
stand so close that she had to look up at him-still-but having felt the solidness of his body, and his heat, which she'd so missed since they quarrelled, the idea of stepping back from him was more loathsome.

"When I called you strong and sharp…" Her eyes followed the roll of his throat as he swallowed. "Did you somehow get it into your head that those were the only qualities I believed you to be in possession of? Or the only ones I valued in you?" His thumbs stroked her knuckles. "Only you must know that isn't the case."

Over his shoulder, the drapes ruffled in the breeze that kicked up through the open windows. The scent of rain drifted on it, as well as the whisper of a long ago conversation:

*I'm not sure how feminine I am.*

*Very, I'm pleased to say.*

In context, she'd taken it as another assertion of his dominance, a reminder of her dependence on him, her indebtedness. Perhaps it had been that, but she knew now that had not been all there was to it.

He drew her tighter against him, lifting their clasped hands to fit into the valley between her breasts against the silk bodice.

"I only meant to tell you what set you apart to me from every other woman I'd met."

His forehead brushed hers-knocking her hat askew-then his lips, tracing her brow…her temples…her cheekbones with the lightest of kisses and whispered apologies for not making that clearer to her then, for not trusting in her till now. She touched his chin with her fingertips, tilting her face toward his until their mouths met. At once he opened to her, and his arms encircled her waist, clinging to her.

It was over too soon. Mark came awake with a violent cough that brought George bursting into the drawing room. Apparently Mark had been awake longer than they realised; when he'd caught his breath again enough to speak, he apologised—with a gleam in his eye which Mary did not think was entirely due to his illness-for the untimely interruption.

Perhaps it was because she'd been married, and had in fact lived with her husband under the same roof as her parents and been caught by numerous family members in affectionate moments, but she felt no shame as she might once have done at him witnessing her locked in his son's passionate embrace. To Mark, it was leaving the past that had not been behind in a cloud of dust, and leaping into the future that might be, if only he could remain here to see it.

For this reason, Mary did not shrink from perching on the arm of Richard's chair so they could read the final chapters of *The Secret Adversary* together-although she did feel more self-conscious about reading the part of the youthful and vivacious heroine Tuppence in the presence of Richard's gravitas. She couldn't help but think how he'd brooded over his Scotch during Christmas charades.

"*It has been fun, hasn't it, Tommy? I do hope we shall have lots more adventures.*"

"*You're insatiable, Tuppence.*" Richard's gravelly voice didn't quite capture the jocularity of the young Tommy. He rubbed his hand over his cheek in a familiar awkward gesture that put Mary slightly more at ease. "*I've had quite enough adventures for the present.*"

"*Well, shopping is almost as good.*" She affected the Tuppence's dreamy tones as the narrative dictated, throwing in a sigh for good measure. "*Think of buying old furniture, and bright carpets,*
and futurist silk curtains, and a polished dining-table, and a divan with lots of cushions."

"Hold hard. What's all this for?" asked Richard, looking at her through narrowed eyes.

"Possibly a house—but I think a flat. Oh no, Tuppy," Mary broke character. "You can do much better than that."

"I'm not sure old Tommy has the necessary disposable cash to fill up Haxby Park, though I think I like Tuppence's taste in decor." Slipping an arm around Mary's waist, he gave her hip a little squeeze, then read: "Whose flat?"

"You think I mind saying it, but I don't in the least!" Unlike Tuppence, Mary did, a little, but she forged ahead, thinking of Richard's flat for inspiration. "Ours, so there!"

"You darling. I was determined to-"

"You forgot to read it with an exclamation point."

Richard turned his head to look at her from beneath a quirked eyebrow. "I refuse to read you darling with an exclamation point."

She mirrored his expression, the corner of her mouth twitching, his dimples appearing. "That's not who you are?"

"Quite."

"But it's who Tuppence and Tommy are," Mark said from the settee.

The weakness of his voice concerned Mary but did not diminish the light mood that had come over her-and she didn't want to see the smile leave Richard's face, not when beneath it he was still so obviously tired. "Is that his way of telling us to get on with it?"

"You know Dad—he'd tell us to get on with it if that was what he meant."

"It's what I mean," said George, having remained in the room for the reading, despite knowing the ending already.

Mary relaxed into the crook of Richard's arm, enjoying the span of his long fingers over her hip and the rumble of his voice as he read on-still not reading you darling with the intended inflection, but she was satisfied that he felt free to be a little frivolous now, as he had not been with her before.

"I was determined to make you say it. I owe you something for the relentless way you've squashed me whenever I've tried to be sentimental."

"You haven't really proposed now. Not what our grandmothers would call a proposal."

"Let's hope Tuppence's grandmother isn't anything like yours," Richard interjected.

Rolling her eyes, Mary read on: "But after listening to a rotten one like Julius's, I'm inclined to let you off."

"You won't be able to get out of marrying me..."Richard's voice tightened again, and he swallowed. "...so don't you think it."

"What fun it will be," Mary replied with gusto, as much because it was right for Tuppence as to show Richard the novel's unfortunate reference to their own past hadn't stirred up bad feelings for her.
“Marriage is called all sorts of things, a haven, and a refuge, and a crowning glory, and a state of bondage, and lots more. But do you know what I think it is?”

“What?” asked Richard, leaning back to look at her with genuine interest.

“A sport!”

“And a damned good sport too.”

That was the end, and Mary closed the book, running her hand over the unmasked bear on the cover.

“You know, that ending wasn’t entirely what I imagined when I saw the dust jacket.”

“It’s a bit twee, isn’t it?” said George. “Aileen liked it.”

“Like Edith, Mrs Christie could do with an editor to take a red pen to her cloying sentiment,” Richard said. “Don’t you agree, Dad?”

But Mark had fallen asleep.
Mark Carlisle died in the night.

A call from George with the news woke Mary early the next morning. Even over the telephone she could hear that the low rasp of his voice was subdued, containing none of the usual edge of hostility directed at her, which could only fill her with concern for the state Richard must be in.

"I'll come to him at once," she told George, "if you think he needs me."

"He needs someone. God only knows it isn't me."

He rang off, then, but Mary did not depart for Knightsbridge immediately as she intended, nor even hang the earpiece in the cradle. In fact she was still stood beside the hall telephone table, holding the receiver and puzzling over George's parting words, when a rapid succession of footsteps and a jaunty whistled tune drew her eyes to the staircase. The sight of her father made her blink against the sting of tears.

"My darling girl." Gently he prised the telephone from her, replacing it on the marble-topped table before returning to lay his hands on her shoulders. "Whatever is the matter?"

"Papa." Despite having been at odds with him, or perhaps precisely because they had been, Mary leaned into him, tucking her head beneath his chin as he wrapped his arms around her. "Sir Richard's father has…died."

"Oh." Papa's embrace became as stiff as his voice. "How sad. But it can't have come as a shock to you, surely?"

She shook her head, though shocked was precisely how she felt as she disengaged herself from her father's embrace and brushed past him to ascend the stairs. She might have known for weeks that Mark was dying, but expectation had not prepared her any better for its occurrence than she had been to have lover, friend, sister, husband torn from her without warning. The nursery door stood ajar at the end of the hall, and George cried out indignantly as Nanny Philips changed him.

Mark asked see her son.

Mary clapped one hand to her mouth and pushed open her bedroom door with the other, stepping quickly inside and falling back against it as the sob tore from her throat.

Death might not always come unexpectedly, but it was always unfair.

She fought back her tears, not wanting to arrive at Richard's pale and red-eyed, but when Anna came in with tea she encouraged Mary to have her cry-out then and there.

"He'll need your ladyship's firm shoulder to cry on."
Smiling weakly, Mary remarked, "Can you imagine Sir Richard so much as growing misty?"

But Anna was right-Wasn't she always?-and Mary wept for Richard as much as for herself because she knew that he would not.

The train whistle blast echoed through the Sheffield Station's stone archways as George Carlisle settled back into his seat across from Mary in carriage. At the stop halfway through their journey, he'd disembarked to phone his wife and keep her apprised of their progress to Edinburgh, while Mary remained in the compartment with Richard. It felt strange to be in Yorkshire without its being her final destination, especially when her companion read his newspaper as though he were alone. *I'm sure I'll love him dearly,* Aunt Rosamund had once said, *if he'll ever look up from the page.*

"Poor Aileen," George said, his voice underscored by the chuffing of the engine. "The kids have been up since dawn with ants in their pants."

"I wish I'd woken with that kind of energy," Mary replied, at once wishing she had not. Catching the seven o'clock train from London may have been something of a trial for her, but to two working men like the Carlisles, the younger in particular, it was simply morning as usual.

But George only said, "Aye. I'm predicting at least one more trip to the restaurant car for coffee."

"Preceded by a nap."

"Mmm."

He let his head loll back against the seat with the locomotive's forward lurch along the tracks and out of the station. Soon, the buildings of Sheffield blurred as the train picked up speed and precipitation streaked down the windows.

Mary took advantage of George's closed eyes to study the younger Carlisle: the cheekbones, though neither so high nor so chiselled as Richard's, were further obscured by dark bags beneath his eyes, while the lines about his mouth, by contrast, seemed drawn in sharper relief amid patches of rusty stubble missed by his razor. Had he slept at all since the last evening they'd all been together?

She looked to Richard in the seat beside her, the strong profile which marked them as brothers never appearing so distinct to her as now, when he hunched over paperwork he'd brought along, the accumulation of the past several weeks' absence from the office. Apart from the furrow of concentration in his brow beneath his trimmed and immaculately combed hair, his clean-shaven face was smooth of lines, as it had been when she called on him the morning of Mark's death.

If it had been anyone else, she might have read this as relief that his father no longer suffered, the battle against increasingly debilitating chronic illness at last at an end, or at least as resignation that the inevitable had occurred. But this was Richard, who'd hidden Mark's illness from her for months, his love for her for years.

The face he wore now was a mask.

*Cold and careful Sir Richard Carlisle.*

"Aileen tried to channel the kids' energy into chores," George interrupted her musing, the leather of his seat creaking as he shifted to sit upright again, "but after two of the good plates were broken, she banished them outside. They're under strict orders not to come back in the house till teatime."

"My," Mary said. "I hope it isn't raining."
"It's Edinburgh, and they're children aged one to ten. Jumping in puddles and making mud pies are infinitely more fun than scrubbing."

The smirking mouth and quirked gingery eyebrow above the round frames of his eyeglasses made her hope George's shrewd gaze didn't detect her trying to wrap her mind around the sort of household in which children were busied with kitchen chores, or sent out unsupervised in the rain so the mother could perform the tasks herself unimpeded.

"For the sake of everyone involved," she said, "it's fortunate that our train looks to be on time."

"For the moment."

It was almost the longest phrase Richard had uttered to Mary since she met him at King's Cross. He hadn't spoken to George at all, she realised; across the carriage, George gave Richard the same disgruntled look Richard gave the sheaf of papers he rifled through on top of the briefcase which he balanced on his lap as a makeshift desk.

Of the two of them, George had seemed the more pleased to see Mary the previous morning, accepting her condolences with a sad smile and a shimmer in his eyes as he thanked her for being with Mark on his last night. *It eased his passing, he said, made it a good night for him, for us all. As much as it could be under the circumstances.*

Richard, by contrast, pecked her cheek and said that while he appreciated her coming, there was really nothing further for her to do. *I'll have the telephone glued to my ear all day with the arrangements.*

While she'd been a little surprised by his lack of ardour—the kiss was more dispassionate even than any bestowed during their restrained first courtship—she recognised that her own reaction to loss had not been dissimilar. Still, his continued detachment confused her. Particularly in light of how he'd held her and kissed her that last night with Mark...and when she remembered, with a quickening in her chest and a prickling in her cheeks, his need which overcame her that night she'd spent with him in his flat...Was the mend in their fractured relationship too tenuous to withstand the weight of Richard's loss?

"The children must be looking forward to seeing their Uncle Richard," she said. "Mark-" Her throat constricted around the name, uttered in reference to the boy; once again she was grateful she hadn't bowed to Papa's pressure to name George after his father. Clearing her throat, she forged ahead with the lightest tone she could muster. "It was obvious Mark is terribly fond of you."

Though she'd hoped to draw Richard into the conversation with the reminder that in the midst of the difficult summer had been happy days with his nephew, he did not acknowledge her.

"Actually it's you they're excited to see," George said. "It might as well be Queen Mary coming round for tea. Though suppose I ought to warn you..." He removed his spectacles and buffed the lenses on his handkerchief. "They keep calling you Auntie Mary. Haven't quite got their heads around the nature of your relationship with Uncle Richie. Then again," he said, putting his glasses back on the bridge of his nose, "has anyone?"

*There* was the sarcasm which felt more familiar to Mary than their recent camaraderie—though directed more at Richard than at herself.

But George was right. Even she didn't know where she stood with Richard. Before she left him to the funeral arrangements, she told him to be sure to let her know what they were. His reply had been that she needn't feel obligated to attend. She'd gawped up at him on the doorstep—Did he really think...
for a moment she wouldn't go? Or that to do so would be a burden to her?-before she finally said that of course she would.

Later, when her mother asked whether she must go-You aren't married to Sir Richard, after all-she regained her usual self-possession: No, but I might have been. And I might be. As Mark won't have the chance to attend our wedding, I owe it to the family to attend his funeral.

"I hope you don't suffer from hay fever," George said.

"Hay fever?"

"The boys got it into their heads you'd be accustomed to beautiful arrangements at Downton Abbey and took it upon themselves to fill their room with wildflowers for you."

"What gallant little chaps you have." Mary smiled, but she felt an unexpected twinge of missing her own son. Leaving him behind had been her one reservation about accompanying Richard to Edinburgh, which she now feared was fast becoming a decision she must regret. "But why their room?"

"We're a family of six living in a three-bedroom flat with my father. Where'd you think you'd sleep?"

She went red in the face. "I couldn't let them give up their room for me!" It was bad enough to occupy a family room as a houseguest, let alone to displace three children.

"They'd be really confused if you bunked with Richie."

"I told you I could stay in a hotel," she said under her breath to Richard. What she wanted to say was, Why didn't you tell me? She didn't want to heap blame atop the burden he already carried, but part of her was put out that he'd left her alone against George's bullying.

"And I told you Morningside isn't known for suitable accommodations for ladies."

"I'm glad you think our humble abode worthy now," George sneered. Now there was no mistaking the resemblance between the brothers as both men's features sharpened with their animosity, eyes hard beneath heavy brows. Preposterously, it reminded her of a children's staring contest. Who would look away first?

To her surprise, Richard conceded. With a shake of his head, he opened his briefcase, put away his papers, and closed it again, the pop of the latches startlingly loud against the underlying clatter of the train. George's nostrils flared slightly with each inhalation of breath as he watched his brother's every deliberate movement. Still in a feline manner, Richard stood and lifted his briefcase onto the overhead rack. His eyes, steely, flickered down to Mary's.

"Are you ready for lunch?"

Without hesitation she stood. At last, they would be able to talk.

However, when she reached to slip her hand into the crook of Richard's arm, she saw he'd tucked a newspaper under it, which he erected between them at the table in the restaurant car and pored over as she ate, barely touching his own food.

Once, she tried to break the silence. "I'm sure George didn't mean what he said. It's his grief—"

Her heart leapt when he lowered a corner of the paper, but his expression was bland, his voice flat.
"Don't you know by now, Mary? We Carlisles always say what we mean."

"You haven't said anything at all."

"When have I had time to? I've had a funeral to plan, and work's piled up."

A number of arguments sprang to mind: she might have helped with the funeral, or he might have delegated some of the responsibilities to George or the family back in Edinburgh; as for work, the Capital Herald was surely safe in the hands of the efficient Miss Fields and his editors. But Mary pursed her lips, giving voice to none of these thoughts. If being in control and keeping busy helped Richard cope with his loss, who was she to criticise? After all, she her method of skulking the halls of Downton, half a ghost herself, was hardly healthy.

She drained the last of her tea. "I'll leave you to it, then."

As she pushed back from the table Richard's eyes followed her movements, she hoped again that he would change his mind. But he only retreated behind his paper without a word and let her go.

Four small faces, in varying stages of childish roundness and framed with varying shades of blond hair, from Mark's cornsilk to his baby sister's coppery ringlets, pressed against the bay window on the ground floor of number 61, Craiglea Drive. They vanished before the cabbie finished pulling the motor along the curb in front of the four-flat stone house, only to reappear a moment later, tumbling out the door. A cacophony of brogues calling for their father filled Mary's ears as he climbed out of the cab and went to them, ignoring his brother's admonition that he could use a hand with the luggage.

Though Mary felt for Richard, who was left to deal with a driver who wanted the suitcases out of his cab and his payment in his pocket so he could get to the pub, already having been harassed at the station by incompetent porters who mishandled the coffin and a tardy undertaker, she had to pause at the garden gate and watch George greet his family. The past two days' interactions notwithstanding, their acquaintance had given her little reason to like him, or even to be interested to know him better, his cynicism and general disdain for her lot and their ways even more abrasive than Richard's ever had been.

Now, she glimpsed another side of him. A softer side—quite literally, the sardonic twist of his mouth which she'd thought a permanent feature vanishing as he told the three boys, who bickered over who got to hug him first, "And the least shall be first." He scooped up his small daughter, who'd toddled up behind them, and tossed her in the air, catching her overhead with a vigour that had not been restored by the intermittent napping on the train. Undaunted, the boys latched onto his waist and legs as he shifted the baby to one arm and with the other drew his wife in for a lingering kiss.

The rev of the cab's motor and the crunch of gravel beneath the tires as it pulled away drew Mary's gaze back over her shoulder. Richard stood on the curb looking on his brother's reunion with his family with undisguised longing. At the scuff of her shoe on the pavement, the bland mask reappeared and he gripped the handles of the suitcases. She fought to keep her own expression neutral: Why won't he let me in?

Why wouldn't he let anyone in? The garden gate screeched on its hinges as she opened it for him, and the children broke away from George to mob their uncle in a similar fashion. He dropped the suitcases on the ground, his affection for his nephews evident as he tousled hair and squeezed shoulders. Yet so subdued, compared with that day at the zoo.

"Mark—you've grown since June. What's your mother feeding you?"
"The entire store, by the look of it," George said over the two younger boys' simultaneous insistence to their uncle that they'd grown, too. He shot his wife a mock accusatory look as they approached, and gave her hip a playful pinch.

"What was I to do, after he depleted my larder?" Aileen's lilting voice pitched almost girlishly high. George's chuckle rumbled as he tilted his head to kiss her again; she obliged, then moved out of the circle of his arm. "Shoo, you lot," she said to her boys, then added, softer, "Hello, Richie."

"It's good to see you, Aileen."

For a moment Richard and George's wife looked at each other, and Mary watched them. She'd never seen him interact with a female relative, and her heart buckled as for a moment his face belied the depth of his sadness, which was mirrored on Aileen's face. She placed a hand on his shoulder, and he allowed her to draw him in, stooping to press his lips lightly to her cheek.

It was petty of her, she knew, but Mary was a little relieved that he didn't linger any longer in his sister-in-law's embrace than he had in hers, and when he drew back from her his expression had been restored to one of composure. Aileen's brow furrowed as she continued to look up at him; unlike Mary, however, she appeared to recognise exactly what the problem was with Richard, and she let him be.

"And this is the fabled Lady Mary Crawley," he said.

Aileen's already rosy cheeks deepened a shade or pink as she smoothed the front of her skirt, only to bunch it again as she made Mary a little curtsey. "It's a pleasure to finally make your ladyship's acquaintance."

Her voice quavered, and in the effort to keep the awkwardness out of her own so as not to embarrass her hostess over this faux pas, Mary made too stilted a reply as she offered her hand.

"Likewise, Mrs Carlisle. I only wish it were under more agreeable circumstances. My deepest condolences for your loss."

But Aileen's tentative grasp of her hand became surer, a grateful press as she offered a pinched thank you. "It's so kind that you've come. It would've meant the world to Mark."

But did it mean anything to Richard?

"You're certain my staying here isn't an imposition?" Mary asked. "Only I never intended for anybody to give up their room—"

A warning look from Richard as he bent to pick up the bags again silenced her, but not soon enough to spare Aileen embarrassment and the insinuation that her house was too small for guests.

"Nonsense, m'lady, it's no trouble at all."

"Not for us," George added, lifting his chin and raising his eyebrows in a challenging look, first at her, then at Richard as he thrust his brother's suitcase at him.

Glaring at Richard's back, George gave a sweep of his hand which indicated Mary should follow, the gesture an imitation of gallantry while containing none. She did as he bid, not certain for which brother she harboured greater annoyance. Certainly her ten minutes in Morningside had given her a whole new appreciation for the learning curve Richard had for country house etiquette, and for his frustration at her failure to provide him with helpful social cues. He was grieving—but surely that did not blind him to the fact that here she was the fish out of water?
Luckily, the children made it clear what they expected of her; as they filed into the house, Aileen called out that Mary's room was down the hall to the right, across from the bathroom, Mark squeezed alongside her in the narrow corridor. "I'll show her the way, Ma!"

Naturally his younger brothers clamoured to come along and show her the flowers they'd picked for her, heedless of Aileen's admonishments not to overwhelm Lady Mary when she'd spent the entire day on a train. They did have something of a dizzying effect, flitting about whilst she perched at the foot of the bed, one hand resting on the spindled post, presenting her not only porcelain bud vases filled with wildflowers and roses clipped from the bushes she'd noticed in the front garden, but pictures they'd drawn, spelling examinations with high marks, tricks they could do, their most treasured rocks, shells, postcards from abroad, and of course, toys. The phrase Uncle Richie gave it to me recurred frequently.

"Your uncle gave one of those to my little boy, too," she remarked when Andy, the three-year-old, showed her the engine from the infamous electric train set. "Do you enjoy it as much as he does?"

"Will your boy be Uncle Richie's boy?" asked the middle boy, George Jr. "Are you goin' to marry-Ow!" He scowled at Mark, who'd punched him in the arm. "What'd you do that for?"

"You know why," Mark said through his teeth. "Ma said not to say anything about-"

"Boys."

The children's head's jerked-and Mary's-to see Richard looming in the doorway, the top of his head almost touching the moulding.

"I heard your mother call you to lay the table for supper."

"Yes, sir," they mumbled, obeying without delay.

"Good lads," he said in a gentler tone as he stepped out of the doorway, patting Mark's back as he passed. When they had gone he stepped fully into the room, and Mary stood, slowly, feeling somehow even more disoriented alone with him than she had in the midst of the children's whirlwind.

"Richard…" She bent to pick up the locomotive Andy dropped in his surprise, clasping it in both hands as she approached him. "I'm so sorry. If I'd realised my being here-"

"Somehow, I always forget how small this room is." Abruptly his gaze, which had been moving about the bedroom, snapped to meet hers. "Will you be comfortable enough?"

"I'll manage. Mark tells me you and George used to share it?"

"Until our grandmother died. Although it was more a boxing ring than a bedroom."

She could picture it, having just witnessed his nephews' squabble, blond Mark and ginger-haired George Jr miniatures of Richard and his brother. "There was a moment on the train when I feared you'd mistaken our compartment for a boxing ring."

Richard glanced away, his features sharpening in a look of guilt she recognised, though her intent had not been to accuse him. On the contrary, she'd hoped to open him up with humour. She ought to have realised that even with a better joke this tactic was ill-advised. Richard did not often laugh at himself, and this was not one of those rare she wracked her brain for the right words to put her misstep to rights, the child's call from the hallway that supper was ready could not have been better timed.
Dinner passed painlessly enough—if indeed that word could be associated with a grieving family. The three boys, eager to please their uncle, regaled Richard with what they’d been up to over the summer—particularly, odd jobs they’d done around the neighbourhood, how they’d helped out at the store, books they had, or were still planning to, read—for which he praised them, albeit quietly. But he was trying, and that was an improvement, wasn't it? Perhaps he'd be primed to try with her.

It did not escape Mary's notice that George's brow furrowed above the rims of his spectacles throughout these interactions, or that he pierced his beef filets a little more forcefully with his fork than was required, the tines clinking against the plate, yet after the boys finished eating and he excused them to collect their bags to go to their other grandparents' for the night, he peered down the table at his brother with an expression which was not, for once, hostile.

"Say, Richie…"

Though Richard looked up, jaw working as he chewed slowly, George did not at once go on. In the high chair between his place and the one Aileen had vacated to carry the boys' plates to the kitchen, the baby slapped her tray, demanding another bite of mashed potato, and her father turned to oblige her. After a moment, though, he cleared his throat, and Mary took it as her cue to leave the brothers to it.

Whatever it was.

"Why don't you come with me to drop the kids off?" George's rasp followed her into the kitchen. "Aileen's dad always liked you, and afterward we could go down to the pub…Throw darts…"

"That would be good for them," Aileen remarked as the door shut behind Mary.

"So long as they throw the darts at the bulls-eye, and not at each other."

Aileen laughed softly; when the sound receded, neither she nor Mary spoke, both listening. But the men's voices rumbled indistinctly.

"Is there anything I can help with?" Mary offered.

"I was just going to brew up a pot of coffee to go with this rhubarb crumble," Aileen replied, "if you wouldn't mind dishing it up?"

"Of course." Mary thought she could handle scooping; after all, Sybil had baked a cake. She'd laugh to see her now, eyeing a rhubarb crumble warily in a Scottish kitchen. "This looks delicious. But you needn't have gone to so much trouble."

"My sister Cathy baked it. She thought we'd want something special and knew I wouldn't be in much of a baking mood."

"How kind of her. You must give her our thanks."

Beyond the kitchen, the voices grew louder, a few phrases distinct now:

"…sound just like Mother."

Aileen paused in her coffee-making, her head inclined toward the door. Mary, too, listened, her serving spoon hovering over the countertop.

"…meant to be an insult? …picked the wrong son."
"If I remember...didn't approve of Canny Man's...or darts..."

"...here enough to know...did or didn't approve of..."

A blob of sticky rhubarb filling dripped from Mary's spoon onto the counter; she swiped it off with her finger and tasted it.

"Mm. Give your sister my compliments, as well. It's the best crumble I've ever tasted—though I wouldn't dare tell Mrs Patmore."

Aileen did not respond, and Mary silently reproached herself as she filled the dishes for mentioning her privilege to a woman who cooked her family's meals, but then Aileen glanced at her, distractedly, and said, "It's got a wee nip in it."

Mary twitched her lips in the approximation of a smile, but she was more interested in the increasingly loud conversation in the dining room. Laying aside her spoon, heedless of the mess, she crossed the kitchen to lean against the door, just pushing it ajar so that she and Aileen could hear what was being said.

"Look, Georgie..."

Mary recognised the weight in Richard's words, in the pause knew he was drawing a long breath through his nostrils to alleviate the strain of his patience. But when he spoke again the hoarseness around the edges of his taut control was unmistakable.

"Just because you want to be social after a day of travel doesn't mean everyone does."

"Bollocks, Richie. I've seen how you live. It's where you're expected to socialise here, isn't it? Or with whom? The great Sir Dick, too high and mighty for his family and friends in the old neighbourhood pub!"

Mary sucked in her own indignant breath that that, and looked back over her shoulder Aileen: Ought we to do something? But Aileen was too intent on the quarrel to be aware of the silent question.

"The only bollocks is what you're spewing right now." Richard slammed his fist down on the table, rattling the dinner things. "You know I'm not ashamed of—"

"Morningside isn't known for accommodations suitable for a lady," George mimicked. "It wasn't even good enough for you to let Dad die here!"

Chair legs screeched, followed by the clatter of one toppling over, and the baby wailed. Pushing past Mary, Aileen threw open the door to reveal the brothers on their feet, a pair of lions poised to lunge and tear each other to bits, the little girl crying in her high chair. She threw herself into the fray, snatching Jeannie from her high chair and holding her bosom, kissing the strawberry blonde curls between shooting glares at both men.

"Look what you've done, you pair of fools! Hasn't this family enough sorrow to endure?"

The men wore matching expressions of chastisement, hands hanging limp at their sides, but when Richard moved toward them, muttering an apology, George glowered at him and pushed in front. Aileen gave him a shoulder, turning toward Mary with her daughter.

"Would you take Jeannie to our room, Mary, while I have words with these two? The front one."

Mary would have preferred to stay and hear what Richard had to say, but he wouldn't look at her—
she couldn't help but think of his last horrid night at Downton—and it was obvious his sister-in-law had the situation well in hand. The baby's whimpers, the way she hid her face from her father and uncle wrenched her, too; if her child had been subjected to such an outburst, she would want him removed from it, too. Though Jeannie's crying resumed in earnest when her mother handed her off to a stranger's uncertain arms, and as Mary carried her through the dining room her failure to console the child made her heart race as it had in those early days with George when she'd decided he was better off in the care of his nanny.

In the hall, the boys stood just outside the room to which she'd previously been shown, Mark positioned protectively in front of them, thin chest puffed and a small battered suitcase clutched in a white-knuckled hand.

"Here," he said, letting it plop to the floor. "Let me take her."

Mary's relief at relinquishing Jeannie to her big brother, who swept her off to his parents' bedroom, singing softly to her, was short-lived when she felt a tug at her skirt.

"Why were Daddy and Uncle Richie shouting?" asked George Jr.

"Because," Mary answered, "they're very sad about your grandpa." Her gaze drifted to the dining room door. "And sometimes grown-ups find it much easier to be angry than to be sad."

In spite of rising early to catch the train to Edinburgh, sleep eluded Mary. The conditions certainly were ripe for insomnia: the strange bed, the coffee she'd drunk before retiring to it, the sugary rhubarb crumble with a wee nip in it. If only it were any, or all, of those things; but Mary knew that even if none had been present, she would still be wakeful.

She got up, telling herself it was to pay a visit to the water closet directly across the hall from her bedroom. When she saw the slat of light beneath the door beside hers, where Richard was also not sleeping, she abandoned all pretence, rapping lightly on the door.

As she held her breath, her pulse pounded in her ears, deafening her to any sound of his stirring within. The muscles between her shoulder blades knotted as she braced for the door to open at any moment. But the moment never came, and as her heart slowed to its normal rhythm, she debated what to do.

Was he ignoring her?

Had she knocked too quietly?

Ought she to knock again?

She raised her hand to do so, fingers curling into a fist, but as her knuckles grazed the wood she lowered it and grasped the doorknob instead.

And turned it.

Her breath caught again at the sight of him stretched out on the still-made bed in his clothes, a newspaper spread across his lap, asleep. She wasn't sure whether she was disappointed that they would not get to talk after all, or relieved that he was, at last, resting.

He'd nodded off once, on the train, his head lolling onto Mary's shoulder. At least she could give him a shoulder to sleep on, she'd thought, if not one to cry on. But as it happened she couldn't even give him that, for when he jerked awake after only a few moments he muttered apologies and excused
himself to have another cup of coffee.

Loath though she was to embarrass him again—if that was, indeed, the emotion behind his peculiar
reaction—she slipped through the partly open door and padded across the room. On the bedside table
the dregs of whisky at the bottom of a glass gleamed amber in the lamplight. Beside it, a cigarette
smouldered in an age-speckled bronze ashtray. She picked up the butt to snuff it out properly, then,
on impulse, put it to her lips and took a drag from it, remembering how Evelyn offered her one that
night at Murray's Night Club. As then, it failed to relax her, the smoke burning her lungs, and it was
all she could do to smother the cough as she tamped out the embers in the ashtray.

Now came the tricky task of removing the newspaper without the rustle of pages disturbing him.
Dare she attempt it? She lifted it gingerly, and folded it even more carefully, perhaps more pleased
with herself than she ought to have been when she had lain it aside on a the corner of the nightstand
without making him stir.

But when she clicked off the lamp, he groaned.

Mary stood stock still in the dark, listening to the rustle of the bedclothes, the crack of joints, her eyes
straining in the dark to make out the faint outline of his body as he stretched it.

"Mary?"

"Your light was on. There was a cigarette…I had visions of Mr Rochester's bed curtains going up in
flames."

"As I recall that was the mad wife, not Rochester's carelessness." Richard's voice was deeper than
usual from sleep and smoking. "And as there are no wives at present, mad or otherwise…"

"I didn't mean to wake you," said Mary. "I'll go back to bed—"

"Don't." His fingers encircled her wrist. "Come here."

He pulled her back so that her hip bumped against the mattress. For a moment she stood beside the
bed, then his fingers opened, releasing her wrist to take her hand, with another tug indicating that he
wished her to join him in bed. The thought flickered through Mary's mind that she oughtn't, but she
allowed him to draw her down anyway, instinctively rolling onto her side and fitting her body
against him as he lay facing her. He slipped one knee between her legs and his hands inside her silk
dressing gown to wrap his arms around her, and she hooked hers beneath them, hands splayed on his
back. How tight the muscles were, she observed, and began to knead them with her fingers.

Richard's breath shuddered in the curve of her neck, lips grazing her collarbone. "I've been a right
ogre again, haven't I?"

Mary did not deny it—mostly because he'd raised his head to kiss her properly on the mouth—and she
yielded to him, enjoying his warmth and the closeness she'd lately been denied.

His kisses soon became more insistent, however, his tongue coaxing her lips apart as he leaned over
her, pushing her onto her back, the lean hardness of his body hovering above her brought her back to
awareness. He'd said those words before, an admission of fault without going so far as to apologise.
_Holding back._

Pursing her lips together in one final kiss, she pushed lightly against his shoulders.

"I'd be more worried if you weren't."
No. That wasn't what she'd meant to say. His shoulders flexed beneath her palms as he leaned in for another kiss. She pushed more firmly against him, turning her head on the pillow so that his lips met her jaw instead of her mouth.

"As a matter of fact I've wondered if you want me here at all."

Richard hovered over her, releasing his breath in a huff. She imagined the furrow of his heavy brow. "I asked you to stay, didn't I?"

"I don't mean in bed."

Another sigh, and he rolled off her, the bed creaking beneath his weight as he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Her eyes finally having adjusted to the dark, she saw the silhouette of his arm reach out for the lamp, she screwed them shut but not in time to avoid the shock of pain as the bulb flickered on. When she opened them again, Richard was standing, arms raised to smooth his hair.

"What do you mean, then?"

"It's only…" She sat up, too, slowly. "I worry I'm somehow making this more difficult for you. George has made it plain that my being here is an inconvenience. That I don't belong."

"Oh, Mary." His hands fell to his sides as he gave her a thin smile. "Will you ever realise everything isn't about you?"

Mary's temper flared as she got out of bed, the sash of her dressing gown whipping about as she pulled the garment closed around herself. "How can you expect me to know anything when you've barely said six words to me?"

"What do you want me to say?" He opened his palms. "That I'm devastated? That old family tensions have resurfaced? I should think that would be evident. And I should have thought that you of all people would understand. Strong and sharp, remember?"

"But I know you have a heart."

"Yes. And I prefer to keep it in my chest, safe behind my ribs. Not to wear it on my sleeve like Matthew Crawley."
Chapter Summary

The day before a funeral shows Mary glimpses of Carlisle family history. Will they reveal the possibility of a future, or is the past too haunting?

The door to Richard's room stood open when Mary emerged from her own next morning. She looked in to find the coverlet drawn over the bed without a wrinkle, pillows fluffed and erect against the iron headboard, the ashtray emptied and the whisky glass cleared away—as if he'd removed every trace of the dramatic scene that played out there last night, including the man who acted it with her.

His absence came as no surprise; in fact, she expected it. *After last night's exhibition, I had hoped I might escape unobserved.* Nevertheless, she'd hoped as she dressed and arranged her hair as quickly and as quietly as possible, to the creaks of footsteps and the closing of drawers that indicated he was doing the same on the other side of the wall, that she might catch him. She might yet have done, but instead of searching the flat for him, a rush of embarrassment sent her back to her own room to tidy the bed she had, out of habit, left unmade. What would the Carlisles think of her if she created more work for Aileen on the eve of Mark's funeral? After the last camp bed had been removed from Downton, Mary never thought to have occasion to make up a bed again. Thank goodness she'd learnt to do so with hospital precision.

Exiting the bedroom for the second time in as many minutes, a soprano voice drifted down the short narrow hall of the flat. As if led by the pied piper, fingertips skimming over the Glasgow Rose-patterned wallpaper, Mary followed the opera aria to the front of the flat, pausing just outside the parlour where the phonograph played. Aileen stood at an ironing board set up in front of the fireplace, humming quietly along with the record as she pressed a man's white shirt, but neither the sofa nor the armchairs were occupied.

Mary twitched her thumbs against the sides of her forefingers. She wasn't *so* foolish as to have believed Richard's escape would be behind the morning papers. That he would stick around to apologise for what he'd said about Matthew, or even that he owed her an apology at all. He had not, after all, said anything untrue. Only unfair. It would be very unfair of her not to extend a measure of grace to a grieving man, wouldn't it? Especially when she had, so recently, walked in his shoes.

Clasping her hands together in front of her dark skirt, she fixed a smile on her lips—Richard was not the only one who preferred not wear his heart on his sleeve—and stepped slightly into the room.

"Have the menfolk left us to our own devices?"

Aileen's hand flew to her chest and her head snapped up from her ironing.

"Forgive me," Mary hastened to say. "I didn't mean to startle you. I ought to have announced myself."

"It's all right," came the breathless reply, accompanied by a shaky laugh; Aileen's hand left her blouse to brush a fallen lock of hair back into her coif. "I was off in my own world."

"Opera does have that transportive effect."
"Aye." Aileen nodded, her wistful smile fading as her gaze drifted toward the bay windows overlooking the street. "George is looking in at the store."

Mary's eyebrows twitched upward at that. After all the remarks George made about Richard's inability to stop working… Granted, George was a father of four, and not a millionaire. But that didn't mean he wasn't also a hypocrite.

"And Richard went…out," Aileen added.

For a moment she seemed about to say more, but when her brown eyes swung back to Mary the only offer she made was of breakfast. It was Mary's turn for self-consciousness as she noticed the basket of clothes at Aileen's feet, weighing her own inexperience in the kitchen against this chore she realised she'd never actually seen performed.

"You look terribly busy. I'll keep."

Slightly to her surprise, Aileen did not insist on cooking for her right away. "I'll have to make something for Jeannie soon enough. She nursed earlier and fell back asleep." She adjusted the shirt on the ironing board, then dipped her fingers into a bowl of water, flicking droplets over the fabric. "I'm just making sure our clothes are presentable for the funeral."

"A sad task."

Such was the work of ladies' maids and valets, seen to without their mistresses and masters having to redirect a single thought from sorrow to tend these necessities. For the first time Mary considered that anybody—most everybody—must perform them for themselves.

"It's comforting, in a way, though," said Aileen. "Mark and I passed many a quiet morning just like this. Not during summer holidays, of course. On the first day of term, the boys would go off to school, and he'd sit in that chair there with his coffee and a morning pipe and read the papers."

Mary looked where Aileen indicated. A crocheted blanket was folded over the back of the armchair, and she could easily envision it draped across Mark's lap, the golden early light beaming through the lace curtains onto his newspaper.

"Richard's papers?"

"Are there others?"

The women's eyes met, and Mary returned Aileen's small smile as she seated herself on the sofa.

"I'd have done all the mending and ironing the night before, so I'd read, too," the other woman went on. "Or just close my eyes and enjoy the music without the sound of chatter or bickering, for once."

She paused ironing and did so now. Mary listened to the lyrics amid the soprano's trills in duet with a flute:

O thou clear god, and patron of all light,

From whom each lamp and shining star doth borrow

The beauteous influence that makes him bright,

There lives a son that suck'd an earthly mother,

May lend thee light, as thou dost lend to other.
When the song ended, Aileen sighed, the steam puffing as she rubbed the iron over the shirt. "This was Mark's favourite record."

"Dame Nellie Melba?" Mary asked as another aria began. "We listened to her the night before he-"

Realising what she'd been about to say, she stopped—though not, alas, before Aileen's pretty features contorted with sorrow. Mary swallowed, her own throat tight.

"On his last night," she amended, but that was no better; Aileen turned away to hide her tears, though her weeping was unmistakable when she caught up the hem of her apron to dab her eyes. Mary looked down at her lap, where she twisted her wedding rings on her finger.

"Did he tell you how he came to be an opera lover?" Aileen asked after a moment, returning to her ironing board with another, smaller shirt and red-rimmed glassy eyes.

If she was honest, Mary hadn't given the choice of music any great thought. She supposed, given what she knew of Mark's tastes in popular literature, that she might attribute a fondness for opera to Richard's influence. Of course she wasn't about to say so. She tilted her head slightly in a posture of interest, laying her left hand over the right so she wouldn't continue to fidget with her rings.

"Well, it was Mark and Jean's anniversary—their twentieth, I think—and one of the editors heard he'd plans to take Jean to a play and offered a pair of opera tickets he couldn't use, instead..."

Without the expense of the theatre, Mark sent Jean to buy a proper opera dress and so, on the twentieth anniversary of his marriage began a lifelong love of opera. He saved up to go whenever he could; he even took his sons to occasional matinees, to expose them to great music, though George, unsurprisingly, hated it. Once Richard had the means, he sent Mark tickets—to every show, when he was very wealthy.

"And records," Aileen said, glancing at the cabinet on which the phonograph stood. "There probably aren't many people in England who have a collection to equal Mark's. Not even your lot."

"You'd find that among my lot are a great many people who don't fully appreciate the things they're privileged to."

A heated argument—one of many—came to mind of Richard accusing her of precisely that.

*Why did you have to mention Morningside*? she'd asked, pettily, when he'd phoned the morning he ran their engagement announcement in the paper. *Wouldn't Edinburgh have sufficed?*

*I won't whitewash my background*, he'd retorted. *You'll have to get used to the fact that I'm not ashamed of where I come from. Not that it matters, but Dad's profession is highly regarded among the working class. And I daresay he's read enough to put your Eton and Oxbridge dilettantes to shame...*

She'd only half-listened to him, of course, rolling her eyes at his boasts. Only now did she realise what he'd tried to communicate to her about his family.

Sometime during the conversation or her own musings, the record ended. For a long moment there was no sound but the disc rotating under the needle, and the swish of Aileen's iron over the fabric.

"What was the opera?" Mary broke the silence.

Aileen gave her a puzzled look.
"The first one Mark attended. Do you know?"

"Oh! One of the Figaro ones. Barber of Seville, I think."

Mary's gaze fell again to her lap. Richard never said. He never told her any of it, though it must have been on his mind the entire night they spent together at the Royal Opera, and after. Why would he, after all the times she'd accused him of being a show-off, or a snob?

The diamond in her ring winked at her in the light. When Richard came back into her life in the spring, she'd thought they might build something out of the heap of their crumbled past-and they had. The question now was whether they could live in it, or if there were too many ghosts had taken up residence to be driven out.

Little Jeannie Carlisle toddled over to the settee where Mary thumbed through a magazine and chattered something incomprehensible as she proudly showed the guest a wooden animal clutched in one chubby fist.

"You're right, it is a zebra," said Mary, and the baby grinned, babbling nothing that sounded at all like zebra. "What a beautiful Noah's ark set," she remarked to George. He'd returned mid-morning from the store and stretched out on his side on the parlour floor, lining up the animals in front of the boat's gangplank for his small daughter, who seemed intent on keeping the pairs apart. "Is it hand carved?"

"Aye. Our granddad made it, when Ma was expecting Richie. We both played with it, and so've all my brood."

Mary was about to remark on the preciousness of such an heirloom, when George let out a gruff chuckle.

"One of my earliest memories is of playing with it. We must've just been to see the circus, because I made the lions and tigers have a ferocious fight, and Noah and the boys tamed them. Richie was sat right there where you are now, reading a book. He couldn't have been more than ten or eleven, but without even looking up from the page he said, You know what an impossible story Noah's ark is, don't you, Georgie?"

"Because he couldn't believe so many animals could fit on one boat?" Mary said.

George pushed his spectacles up higher on the bridge of his nose, his gaze meeting Mary's behind the lenses. "Because he couldn't believe there were only eight decent people in the entire world. Or that most of them did anything bad enough to deserve being drowned. Wasn't very jolly decent of God to drown all but eight people, was it? he said.

"My. Quite the theologian at such a tender age."

"Ma overheard. Richie wasn't permitted to read anything but the Bible for a whole month. Though of course that only made him want to read more, and he found ways to do it."

"I can imagine."

They lapsed into silence, and Mary half-perused the magazine, half-watched father and daughter play. George quizzed Jeannie on the animals' sounds, which she performed considerably more admirably than her earlier attempt at saying their names. After several minutes, he spoke again.
"I suppose the point of that little story is that Richie's always marched to the beat of his own drum." He placed the little carved Noah on the prow of the ark. "He's never feared to think or do a thing even if it meant he'd be alone. It's admirable, I suppose, in a way, though I've never understood it."

"I'm not sure you really understand Richard, then," Mary said, looking at the animals, going into the ark two-by-two. "He doesn't want to be alone."

*We'd do well together. We'd make a good team.*

"Doesn't he?" George pushed himself to sit upright, knees cracking as he got to his feet, looking like nothing so much as a bespectacled Richard as he peered imperiously down at her. Like Richard, he obviously could not bear to have his opinion contradicted. "Why isn't he here then? Why's he off God knows where, by himself?"

"I haven't been."

At the sound of Richard's deep rumbling voice, Mary and George turned to see him standing in the parlour doorway, hat in hand. How much of their conversation had he overheard? His expression was neutral, his voice even, revealing no indication of what he'd heard or how it made him feel.

Last night Jeannie had been leery of her uncle, but now she approached him without reservation, an animal in her mouth which she gave to him along with a string of drool.

"Didn't this one make it onto the ark, darling?" He placed his trilby atop his niece's strawberry blonde curls, and she laughed.

Mary's heart gave a twinge as she remembered him playing with her George the same way.

"I went to the *Scotsman,*" Richard addressed the adults, coming further into the room to stand behind the armchair Aileen said had been Mark's. "Dad had been after me to see the new linotype machines. And the old faces." *His* face was slightly downcast, focused on his fingers which picked at a worn place in the upholstery. "Of course a lot of his former colleagues are pensioners now."

"*Colleagues* is a bit formal for the warehouse lads, don't you think?" George interrupted.

He plucked the trilby from Jeannie's head as she toddled past and said, *Peek-a-boo!* Jeannie shrieked with laughter, reached for the hat, which her father returned to her, and then plopped down at Mary's feet to pull the hat on and off her head.

"They're printers, not factory drones," said Richard over the game. "Please, show a little respect for the profession, even though it isn't yours. It's become a family business for quite a lot of them."

George's cheekbones blanched beneath the rims of his spectacles, but the jaw muscles beneath them flickered as if he were physically biting his tongue against whatever retort had been at the tip of it. Richard, too, looked as though he thought the better of his own remark, drawing his hands into his trouser pockets.

"John Geddie's having a gathering tonight," Richard said. "You're invited, of course."

"You'll have to give him my regrets. One of Mark's sons should attend family prayer tonight, and seeing as you don't pray…"

"How are you getting on?" Richard abruptly shifted his attention to Mary; she was surprised he even remembered she was in the room, much less that he was concerned about how she was faring in his home.
"Like a house on fire, with Aileen."

"She's a fine woman. One of the best I know."

"That we can agree on," said George.

Richard's gaze was on the magazine in Mary's lap, the dimple flickering in one cheek in the ghost of a smirk. "I'm glad you approve of her, even if she does read Good Housekeeping."

Mary rolled her eyes. If circumstances were not so grim, emotions not so raw, she might have said that Aileen deserved to be heaped with praise for being able to handle the Carlisle brothers, as their strained but civil interaction proved. Instead, she told Richard how they'd had a nice breakfast together and taken Jeannie out in her pram to enjoy the sunshine.

"And we listened to Dame Nellie Melba," she added. "Aileen told me how Mark loved the opera."

"That he did."

Richard turned away from Mary, stooping to retrieve his hat from the floor, where his niece was filling it with the animals from the ark.

"Now don't go getting ideas of hiring a soprano to perform Ave Maria at the service," George said.

"Dad wants-" Richard caught himself. "Dad requested that the choir sing O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go. I won't entertain any other idea."

"Aileen loved those nights out," said George. "I suppose I'll have to overcome my distaste for opera and take her myself, won't I?"

"Opera love does seem to be in your blood," Mary said.

"Ma appreciated it, as a high art. She was too old school Calvinist to fully approve of extravaganzas." For a moment he was quiet, his expression nostalgic. "What's the one with the gypsy?"


"Lord," said George with a snort of laughter. "Ma left at the interval, in a right strop because she thought it was indecent. And even though she disapproved of telephones and especially of using them late at night, she rang Richard in London and gave him an earful about it. And for working late, to boot." He ruffled the back of his hair the way his brother sometimes did. "Remember that, Richie?"

"Our mother, finding fault with me? Rings a bell. Talking of which," he added, "I've got to phone Miss Fields before Reverend Graham comes…"

When he'd exited the parlour, George regarded Mary from beneath raised eyebrows. "Still think he doesn't want to be alone?"

"Why should my opinion have changed?"

"He didn't invite you to his newspaper thing."

"No. He didn't." Mary couldn't make herself believe it was simply because it was a gathering of men, for once upon a time he would have asked her to come regardless, wanting to show her off. She could, however, make George believe the slight did not perturb her. Mirroring his expression, she
"You know that expression about turnabout."

A snatch from last night's quarrel came back to her. *Not here enough to know what Ma approved of.*

"I ought to go see if Aileen needs any help in the kitchen."

"Mary, wait."

She turned back to see George picking up Jeannie, his expression softened.

"I'm being an idiot. As I often am. As you've seen."

Mary did not deny it.

"The truth is that I love Richie a lot."

"I know you do. One of those displays of idiocy was you interrupting dinner to chastise me for hurting Richard."

"I'd apologise for that, except that I'd do it again."

Not for a moment did she doubt it. "Each other's fiercest champions, your father said, when you're not bitter enemies."

George looked down at his daughter's reddish curls.

"Why are you enemies?" Mary asked.

"Why are any siblings?"

He certainly had her there.

But George appeared to turn the question over in his mind. "I suppose because...thirty years ago, Richard left home. And Dad was so proud of him...sometimes it was as if he'd gone away, too. Now he is gone and...I'm not sure where to find Richie. Or if I ever will." His arms tightened around Jeannie. "I hope you have better luck."

Richard did not sit down to supper with them, as he would be dining at Mr Geddie's-whom Mary had since learned was assistant editor and lead writer for the *Scotsman*-but he did step into the kitchen where she was assisting Aileen with the washing up to let them know he was off out.

"It'll be rather a late night, I should imagine," he said with a surprisingly cordial demeanour considering his mood the entire afternoon. He'd spoken little during luncheon except to grumble about not being able to get hold of Miss Fields and, looking haggard after a meeting with the minister to finalise the funeral service, he passed the next several hours shouting into the telephone. Perhaps bullying his employees soothed him.

"The invitation still stands," he told his brother, who sat at the small table beneath the window coaxing Jeannie to eat her supper. "No one would mind if you dropped in after the vigil."

George had been pulling a face at the baby, making her laugh and open wide for the spoon, but every trace of good humour fled when he cut his eyes up at his brother, narrowing as they took in every detail of Richard's appearance, from his slickly groomed hair to his evening attire, the corner of
"Yeah, Richie. I'll just wear black tie and a dinner jacket to church. Drive the T over to Stockbridge and park in the line of Rollses."

Richard's pale eyebrows twitched upward, the soles of his polished shoes scuffing over plank floor as he took a step nearer to the table, emulating the rasp of his voice. "These men thought very highly of Dad. You know none of that matters to them. Not as much as it does to you, at any rate."

Mary recognised that he was at the end of his tether, as George must, too, and it was to Richard's credit that he had not snapped even though his brother was deliberately testing the limits of his tight control, that he reached out—albeit awkwardly. Clutching a pot lid in the flour sack towel with which she'd been drying it, she willed him to meet his brother.

But for all he'd claimed to want to find Richard, George seemed determined to maintain his distance. "I planned to turn in early, anyway. Big day tomorrow."

At the reference to the funeral, Richard's face set into a grim expression. Without another word to anyone, he left, the swinging door thumping shut behind him.

"For God's sake, George," hissed Aileen, pivoting to face her husband, flicking droplets of dish water onto Mary's skirt and the floor as she drew her hands suddenly out of the sink. "I'd rather you went with Richard than to church. It's hypocrisy, plain and simple, to pray for your father's soul to find rest when you refuse to make peace with your brother."

"When I refuse? Why is there no question of Richard's making peace? Why can't he bow his head and close his eyes in respect to our parents' faith for one bloody hour? If Ma were here she'd—"

"—scold you for rowing before we go to prayer," Aileen cut him off, whirling back to the sink. "And for swearing."

For a moment George sat blinking at his wife's back, then he pushed back from the table, stood, and lifted Jeannie from her high chair. "I'll get the baby changed."

"I'm sorry, Lady Mary," said Aileen said over the slop of dishwater as she scrubbed at a copper pot. "What you must think of us, carrying on so..."

Although Mary wanted to reassure her hostess that she didn't think anything ill of her part in the quarrel, she said nothing, sensing in the way Aileen's words had trailed off that she hadn't said her piece. She kept on at the pot with vigour, as if by buffing out every last speck and spot from the copper she could also find clear words for her thoughts. When she'd scrubbed the copper almost to a mirror sheen, handing it off to Mary to dry, the frown remained on her face, brows drawn and chin set so tightly that the poor woman must be giving herself a headache.

"It's just that I've been listening to this same row over and over since George was about twelve," she went on, as if there had been no lapse, reaching into the dishwater for a plate, "when I found him blubbing in the churchyard after Sunday school, and he told me he'd prayed God would do something to stop Richard taking his scholarship to Glasgow."

Mary nearly dropped the pot in her surprise. "Glasgow? I thought Richard attended the University of Edinburgh."

"Aye, but...it wasn't his first choice. Did he not tell you?"

For a man who thought as highly of himself as Richard did, he'd told Mary precious little about his
accomplishments prior to entering the upper echelon of British society. Probably because he knew she'd think precious little of such accomplishments. Certainly it had never occurred to her to be curious about how a printer's son from Morningside afforded a higher education before he became a millionaire. Heat prickled in her cheeks, as much at her own ignorance as at its being on display.

"What prevented his going?"

Aileen had put the plate in the drying rack and stepped around Mary to put the pot in the lower cupboard where it belonged. Still crouching, her hazel eyes appeared large in her pale pretty face, giving her a girlish look as she peered up at Mary through pooling tears.

"Mark took ill."

The fingers of one hand, reddened from the dishwater, grasped the edge of the counter for balance and slowly she pushed herself to stand upright.

"Richard couldn't leave when they didn't know whether his father would live. Even when Mark was out of the woods, he was out of work for months. There were doctors' bills on top of the usual ones-those were the days before the National Insurance- so Richard took over Mark's job at the press, to hold it for him till he was fit to go back."

Aileen fell silent, as if to give this new information time to sink in. As she moved about the kitchen, clearing the detritus of Jeannie's supper off the table, scraping the plate into a waste bin by the back door, Mary pictured a seventeen or eighteen year-old Richard, all chin and cheekbones and a full head of unruly blond curls as she'd seen in the faded photographs throughout the flat, with the weight of supporting a family bearing down on his wiry shoulders.

"Is that why he chose to stay in Edinburgh for university?" she asked, at length. "To be near Mark?"

Glasgow couldn't be more than an hour's journey by train-but then she was thinking again from the privileged position to which she had been born, where things like train fare, even first class, were of little consequence. Whereas Aileen pointed out to her that while Mark encouraged Richard to go if he wanted, it made more financial sense to stay, as he was able to cut expenses, living at home and bicycling to his lectures, rather than paying room and board in Glasgow.

"As it was he had to put off university for another year or two while he saved up the tuition. He had to keep a job the entire time he read for his degree, too."

*You've never had to fight for what you've got.* Mary was beginning to see what he'd meant by that. At least how very hard he'd worked. She knew, too-better than most people-how difficult it was for Richard to let go of a dream. To concede.

"Did Richard know that George didn't want him to go to Glasgow?"

Even if it had only been the innocence of a twelve year old boy who didn't want to lose his big brother, Mary knew that Richard nevertheless would have been deeply hurt to learn that a member of his family was not, in effect, on his team.

"I'm not sure," Aileen answered, carrying the stack of clean dinner plates to the dresser at the end of the kitchen. "Probably. He says what he thinks, which he got from their mother. And she did tell Richard Mark's illness was a sign that he oughtn't leave. That people were born where they were because God wanted them there. That his place was at home, with his family. It was meant to encourage him, but of course it only made Richard angry. He told her it wasn't a sign, only a setback, and he'd get out of Edinburgh as soon as he was able. Further away than Glasgow. And so he did."
"And George never forgave him for it."

"Especially not when Mark and Richard remained close, despite so many miles between them, and months between visits." Aileen shut the dresser door gently, so as not to rattle the glass front or the china within, but she jolted as she turned around and saw the wall clock. "Heavens look at the time! I've got to dress for the service." As she reached around behind to untie her apron, she said, "I know you're not technically family, Mary, but you're more than welcome to pray with us."

Though Mary was deeply touched by the sentiment, and by the unexpected stirring of hope, she politely declined. "I shouldn't like to create any awkwardness for those who are more than technical family members."

Least of all George. He and Richard had enough resentment between them without her presence reminding him of another reason his brother had kept away from home. It was awkward enough to attend the funeral of a man who had almost been her father-in-law, but at least there would be more than just the Carlisle clan in attendance, where she could hopefully make herself inconspicuous. Aileen, bless her, nodded her understanding without Mary's having to voice any of this.

"Thank you for telling me all that," she said. "I've been at a loss as to help Richard, but now I feel a little better equipped."

"Thank you for wanting to help. It's good to know I've an ally. Mark always was."

Mary meant to follow Aileen out of the kitchen, but as she reached to push through the swinging door she found herself swept into the memory of the darkened bedroom where Sybil lay so unnaturally still.

She was the only person living who always thought you and I were such nice people.

Oh, Mary…do you think we might get along a little better in the future?

She'd doubted it at the time, yet the recent months proved otherwise. If she and Edith had learnt to lay their ghosts to rest, perhaps there was hope for the Carlisle brothers yet.

"Miss Fields."

Keeping the surprise from her voice, which echoed in the high-ceilinged, unadorned Presbyterian church as Mary entered it an hour before the funeral and recognised Richard's secretary at the front, was a true test of composure.

"Lady Mary."

Miss Fields turned, her even tone and the glare on her eyeglasses making it difficult for Mary to decipher whether her presence was expected. She did, however, notice that the secretary held a pen and a small notebook.

"How kind of you to come," Mary said. "I thought no one from the officewould."

George had asked if Richard expected any of his employees, and was met with the reply, Not if they want to stay my employees. Apparently Miss Fields was confident in her job security. Her presence here made sense of Richard's inability to reach her the previous day.

"Mr Meagle, the sport editor, and Mr Edwards, the editor-in-chief, agreed that this was as good a time as any for some of the juniors to take the helm for a day."
"It'll mean a great deal to Sir Richard, to see you in the congregation."

"We certainly hope so, your ladyship."

With a nod, Miss Fields turned away once more. She bent to retrieve the card from one of the dozens of bouquets which lined the altar, then scratched in her notebook.

"Oh," said Mary. "Thank you. That's precisely what I came to do."

She'd been desperate to be of some use to the Carlisles, whilst at the same time keeping out of Richard and George's way, so she'd got directions to the church-unable to stop herself goggling when she learned they attended St Matthew's-and walked the half-mile alone.

"I see you've got it well in hand," she said. In shorthand, most probably.

Miss Fields looked at her again, grey eyes flicking up to peer over the rims of her spectacles, which had slipped down to the pointed end of her nose. Her gaze, fixed rather south of Mary's face, made her aware that she'd been fiddling absently with the strap of her handbag. At once she stopped, letting the purse hang from the crook of her arm and clasping her fingers together.

"Your ladyship is a godsend," Miss Fields said. "The church women keep bringing in more bouquets, and I was worried I wouldn't get through them all before the service. No doubt you'll have a better sense than I for how they ought to be arranged."

Though Mary doubted very much that Richard's secretary couldn't collect all the cards and jot down who had sent which flowers in the most efficient of manners, she was grateful for the occupation. She accepted the pen and notebook Miss Fields handed over to her-scarcely able to conceal her smirk on seeing it was, indeed, written in shorthand-before fishing another set of writing implements from her own rather capacious, utilitarian handbag.

They worked from opposite ends of the altar, moving toward the centre. Sure enough, one of the side doors of the chancel creaked open and two women came in, carrying a towering bouquet of white lilies, roses, and gardenias whose perfume tickled Mary's nostrils before they'd even got it to the altar.

"It's from your ladyship's mother," said Miss Fields, handing over the card.

"I might have known," Mary replied, though in fact a hard lump of emotion lodged in her throat at the kind, if not conciliatory, gesture. "It rather typifies what my grandmother describes as Mama's Italian funeral parlour taste in floral arrangements."

The corner of Miss Fields' mouth twitched in an expression that hinted at a sense of humour. "If ever there were a time and a place for such tastes. Sir Richard's lean toward the…grand side."

They certainly did. Looking around the stone and wood interior of the church, Mary had to wonder to what degree the opulence favoured by Richard in his adulthood was reactionary to the austerity of his Presbyterian upbringing. She almost couldn't fault him for choosing Haxby in all its gilded splendour. Squirming to get comfortable on the unupholstered pew near the centre of the church where she sat with Miss Fields and the two editors, she found it difficult to imagine that the same man who'd sauntered through the empty gallery of a country estate as if he owned it already, talking of furnishing and fitting it out with every luxury, had sat here every Sunday of his formative years.

However, when the service began and the processional passed by her, Richard shouldering the front corner of his father's coffin, she could see the mark it had made on him. He never broke stride, but his gaze wavered from the flower-lined altar, meeting hers for an instant. The muscle beneath his cheekbone flickered; his Adam's apple dipped below his high stiff collar. Deliberately, and squaring
his shoulders, he averted his gaze to the front of the chancel, his brow appearing more sharply drawn above his steely eyes as he focused on the task at hand. Emotions were a luxury—the only one, perhaps, which Richard was content to deny. *I could talk about moon and June...* She saw his restraint toward her in a new light.

The funeral itself passed in something of a blur. Perhaps it was simply because she’d attended too many funerals of late to find anything of comfort in the words; perhaps it was because she knew they would be of no comfort to Richard. She sat and stood like an automaton, whenever the congregation around her did so, moved her lips to sing hymns and recite prayers she scarcely heard a word of. She didn’t realise the minister had pronounced the final blessings until Richard, George, and the other members of the Carlisle family who’d carried the coffin in stood as the muted pipes of the organ played the opening bars of the recessional hymn, a contemplative hymn. *O Love that wilt not let me go,* the choir sang, and as the men lifted the coffin onto their shoulders to begin their slow march back out of the church, the congregation joined in the hymn which she remembered Richard said had been Mark’s especial request:

*I rest my weary soul in thee;*

*I give thee back the life I owe,*

*That in thine ocean depths its flow*

*May richer, fuller be.*

The recessional gave Mary opportunity to study George, who on the way in had been obscured from her view by the coffin. Like Richard, he bore his grief with reserve. The difference, however, was that he did not do so alone. As he stood up with the pallbearers, she’d observed that Aileen kept her black gloved fingers firmly around his until the last possible moment, giving his hand a squeeze as she released him; before George took up his corner of the coffin she’d looked to her in their pew, the pain in his eyes ameliorated as they sought, and found, his wife’s, though she dabbed at them with her handkerchief. He even mustered a slight smile for her, which widened as he looked down the row at his children as they sang the hymn.

*O Joy that seekest me through pain,*

*I cannot close my heart to thee;*

*I trace the rainbow through the rain,*

*and feel the promise is not vain,*

*that morn shall tearless be.*

Sweet as the tableaux was, it only served to make Richard appear more solitary by contrast, even isolated, at the graveside. Not only did George have his wife and children at his side as his father’s body was committed to the earth, but he received the condolences of aunts and uncles, cousins, in-laws, nephews and nieces, and friends with whom he’d maintained close relationships through a lifetime of living here, where his roots were. Richard received them all, too, along with Miss Fields and his editors, but their interactions were more formal, almost impersonal. As if the years and his rise had made him a stranger.

When they had all filed away, Richard lingered by the new grave beside the plot where Jean Carlisle was buried. From a short distance away, Mary watched him at the brink, clutching his hat by the brim, his agitation beginning in his restless fingers until his proud shoulders fell and he buried his
face in his hand as the mask crumbled.

Mary went to him, the words of the hymn playing over in her mind. *Joy that seekest me through pain, I cannot close my heart to thee…*

The scene felt strangely familiar, yet also new. She had no idea what she intended to say to him, but when she reached his side the question came without her having to think of it.

"Can I walk you back to the house?"

Richard raised his head, blinking at her against the tears and the sun that had almost reached its zenith. He looked at her as though seeing her for the first time; when he spoke his voice was soft.

"I want you to."

With a deep exhale of breath, he turned from his parents' resting place, and placed his hat erect upon his head. Then he put his hand in Mary's, and let her lead him home.
Chapter Summary

With the funeral behind them, Mary and Richard face the future of their relationship.

George and Aileen Carlisle's bedroom door clicked softly shut, and Richard, continuing with Mary down the darkened hall to their own rooms, caught her hand. He'd scarcely let go of it since they left the graveside; at times his long callused fingers curled so tightly around her own that they started to cramp, yet she dared not pull away. Not when he'd finally reached out to her.

Now he drew her to him delicately, almost as if he were leading her out onto a ballroom floor, releasing her hand to slip his arm around her waist as he angled his head downward for a kiss. Mary's lungs hitched, parting her lips to him, but the touch of his mouth, too, was gentle. Undemanding, where last time he'd kissed her with an almost vampiric insistence to draw life from her. She exhaled, the warmth of her breath mingling with his, and rested both hands on his chest. The fingers of her right hand curled around his where he clutched the long discarded morning jacket over his shoulder, allowing herself to kiss, and to be kissed, in the dim dingy hallway of 61 Craiglea Drive as she had not in the pillared archways of Downton or Haxby.

They must have kissed for a long time, although that might have been an illusion because it was so soft and so slow, for it seemed also to end too soon. Richard did not, thankfully, relinquish his embrace, and Mary realised that at some point he'd disentangled his hand from hers to wrap both arms around her; over his shoulder she saw that his coat had slipped from his hand and lay crumpled on the worn hall runner.

"Thank you," rasped his voice and the day's growth of stubble against her skin with the slight movement of his jaw.

"What for?" Mary lacked the energy to mask her surprise or affect an even tone, but the kiss Richard feathered across her cheek before he leaned back to look her in the eye indicated he'd taken no offense.

"For being magnificent today. The Carlisle clan didn't know what hit them."

His praise brought a faint smile to her lips as she considered the events to which he referred.

After the burial, the inevitable had occurred, her walk with Richard from the cemetery culminating in a flat full of uncles, aunts, and cousins, by blood and by marriage, assembled for luncheon. As she'd feared, conversations lapsed, curious looks were shot her way, a stage-whispered So that's the one that got away, is it? passed from one battle-axe swathed in Victorian crepe to another. At once Mary approached them, making her own introductions to Aunt Jessie, Jean Carlisle's sister, and Richard's cousin Matilda, with a tilt of her chin and a twitch of her eyebrows which she hoped communicated that there were to be no questions as to the present nature of their relationship and her presence at his side. There had not been, but…

"I hope they don't think me rude," she said, her smile faltering.

"Surely your acquaintance with George and me has taught you that our family's definition of rude is
rather different to yours?"

Mary tilted her head in concession to this point, but made no immediate reply. Instead she stroked his hair where the ends started to curl at his nape and watched how his eyelids fluttered shut, the lines easing from his brow and around his eyes.

"I just didn't want to make it any more difficult for you to bear," she said. "I ought to have realised sooner how awkward it would be for you to have me here."

One of Richard's hands left the small of her back to cover hers, pressing her palm against his neck and the sharp edge of his jaw so that she felt the beat of his pulse.

"Please believe me when I say I did want you here-despite my words and actions to the contrary. It was difficult to face…" His gaze flickered away, and this Adam's apple bobbed against the curve of her hand as he swallowed. "…the uncertainty of a future with you," he went on, "whilst being confronted with the permanence of my father's death."

Her own throat ached with a knot of emotion, but when she regained command of her voice, she said, "There is no uncertainty. At least not on my side."

A sharp intake of breath was the only sound Richard made; he seemed quite unable to speak. Nevertheless he expressed himself clearly when he cupped Mary's face in his large hands and kissed her again. The sudden absence of his supporting arms made her take a step backward. She felt the hard press of the wall at her back, but Richard's fingertips skimmed the nape of her neck, tracing the lightest of patterns over her skin as supple lips glided together with hers. As they prolonged their tryst she couldn't help but notice his arousal, yet his hands drifted no further downward than to trace the hollows of her throat and collarbones, maintaining the languor with which it had begun.

Strangely, Mary did not sense that he was holding back from her. His body, which had been so tightly coiled these last months, was perfectly relaxed against hers. When she slid her fingers beneath the edge of his waistcoat she felt through the fine cotton shirt that his heart beat steadily, while her own hammered erratically in her breast, her breaths coming raggedly and at irregular intervals to his even ones as she arched up on the aching balls of her feet to deepen the kiss.

The slow sweep of his tongue with hers, the slight curling of his fingers around the curve of her jaw, made her insides buckle with the memory of his body twined with hers.

A creaking sound from down the hall made her break off abruptly. She turned her head to peer through the darkened corridor toward the front bedroom. Richard's lips grazed her cheek, and his hands which had settled at her waist gave her hips a reassuring squeeze.

"Just a squeaky floorboard. It's done that since I was a boy."

But as he kissed along her cheekbone, Mary continued to gaze over his shoulder, convinced that the sound had been caused by a footstep, that George or Aileen would emerge from their room; after all, the house's only bathroom lay here, at the back of the flat. She shivered as Richard nuzzled at the sensitive joining of her ear and jaw, and gripped his shoulders tightly.

"Still…" He straightened up. "Probably wise to continue this in private. If we are to continue?"

He lifted an eyebrow, not in challenge or flirtation but in honest question as to her desires. In answer, Mary gave him a gentle nudge toward the first open door, intending to follow but first stooping to retrieve his forgotten coat from the floor. As she entered the room he flicked on a lamp. She blinked into the sudden brightness to see him sitting on the edge of the bed, shoulders slumped and eyelids
drooping over a glazed stare.

"Richard?"

Though she took pains to close the door soundlessly behind her, the click of the mechanism nevertheless was audible in the late night stillness of the flat. Richard blinked and gave his head a small shake, drawing one foot up to his knee to reach his shoelace. Mary hung his jacket in the wardrobe, watching in the door mirror as he pulled off his boots and stockings, and when she turned back she saw him fumbling with the knot of his cravat. The fabric of her skirt whispered against his trousers as she came to stand between his knees, brushing his hands out of the way to loosen his cravat herself. One hand found the curve of her waist again as she tugged the length of black silk from his high stiff collar, and she leaned in toward his upturned face.

This time, their lips met with the urgency more like what she thought such a night would bring, and his hand strayed upward to curl over her breast, leaving it only briefly so he could shrug out of his waistcoat and shirt, which she again unfastened for him. But when he tried to return the favour by unbuttoning her dress, he faltered, letting out his breath in a huff.

"It's fiddly work," she reassured him. "Why do you think we have ladies' maids?"

As she performed the task herself, Richard removed his trousers, turned back the bedclothes, and lay on the pillows. Mary's blood thrummed through her; she felt nearly as exhilarated by him watching her take off her clothes as she would have by him taking them off her. However, by the time she lifted her dress over her head, his eyes were closed, and the hand he raised to cover a yawn arrived a little after the fact.

Mary smiled slightly to herself as she climbed into bed in only her slip and bloomers, tucking her body alongside his beneath the counterpane, her fingers stroking the hair that peeked out from the neck of his vest.

"Perhaps tonight we ought to take sleeping together at face value," she said.

He cracked an eye. "Will you mind terribly?"

"After today? Certainly not."

She wasn't sure she managed to completely hide a note of disappointment at the prospect of squelching the feelings he'd stirred up in her, but the heavy fall of his chest beneath her hand told her he hadn't heard.

The lamp still shone when Mary awakened.

When her eyes had adjusted to the artificial yellow glare and she'd rubbed the sleep from them, she was surprised to read the time on the bedside clock: a quarter past seven. Even more surprising was that Richard slept on at such an hour, snoring softly. As she slipped from his embrace and out of bed, he rolled from his back onto his stomach, but did not rouse.

She watched him for a moment, rubbing the stiffness out of her neck from the awkward angle at which it had rested against his shoulder, pleased that he was having a much-deserved lie-in, although she knew sheer exhaustion had forced him to it. Even so, when his eyebrows twitched together, forehead furrowing as though some troubling thought flickered through his mind in sleep, only to ease again with the brush of her fingertips across the line, Mary allowed herself to take a small amount of credit for his current soporific state. She'd removed one weight from his load, at least.
With the movement of her hand, the diamond of her engagement ring glistened in the lamplight. Clasping her left hand against the palm of her right, she contemplated the jewel, memories conflating in her mind: of Matthew slipping it onto her finger a few days after his proposal in the snow; of how it winked almost mockingly at her that other morning, not long past, when she found herself unable to accept Richard for the second time.

Unable to remove this final link to Matthew.

*There is no more uncertainty*, she'd told Richard last night. The pad of her thumb pressed against the diamond, the prongs imprinting her skin. She'd seen the power her words alone held over him. Actions, so they said, spoke louder.

Drawing a deep breath, she slid the engagement ring and wedding band off her fourth finger, surprised at how easily they gave way. She'd never removed them; the swelling near the end of her pregnancy made it impossible to do so even if she had wanted to.

She exhaled.

George, after all, was a far more intimate connection to Matthew than a piece of jewellery. Someday, she would give these rings to him, for his Countess of Grantham, and tell him how steadfast his father's love had been.

*Both of them.*

Curling her fingers into a fist around the rings, she turned her eyes once more to the man she once had not wanted to marry, but now could not face living the rest of her life without.

She made her way on tiptoe over woven rag rugs scattered across the floorboards toward the door, intending to put the rings away in her jewellery case. Just as she touched the knob, however, the shower pipes in the hall bathroom screeched with the sudden rush of water. Mary startled, and behind her the bedclothes rustled as Richard stirred, muttering into the pillows; she picked out the phrase *bloody antique plumbing*.

"Oh dear." A smile formed on Mary's lips as she returned to the bed and saw the ripple of his shoulder muscles beneath fair freckled skin as he pushed up, then rolled into his back. "I suppose it won't have escaped your brother's notice that no one slept in my room last night. Or is there any chance Miss Fields can save my honour once again?"

Richard snorted. "Miss Fields swore to me at the graveside she was taking the evening train to London," he replied, his voice deep and raspy with sleep. "Anyway, as I recall, she didn't succeed in saving you last time. Not that your honour is in question now."

"Yet,*" said Mary, perching at the edge of the bed facing him. "Although that does raise a question. When do you plan to go back?"

She wasn't sure he heard her over his yawn, but didn't repeat the question as he lay rubbing his fingers over his eyes. At length his hand stilled and he blinked up at the ceiling before answering, slowly, "I have no plan."

"How many times has Sir Richard Carlisle uttered those words?"

He raised his head slightly on the pillow to give her a weary grin. "Not many." Laying back again, he scuffed his palm over his growth of new golden-red beard. "I feel I ought to stay a while. Though I can hardly say why."
Beyond the walls, the wrenching sound of the pipes as the water shut off gave Mary a pretty good idea as to why Richard might be hesitant to leave Edinburgh immediately. Or the opposite.

"Do you want me to stay, too?" she asked. "I can, you know. I will."

Pushing up on his elbows, he reached up with one hand to brush an errant lock of hair back from her forehead, and to trace the line of her brow and cheek. "I know. I want you to, very much, but… I couldn't take you away from George-"

He broke off, looking down at her hand, which he'd clasped in his free one as he spoke and she had uncurled to reveal the rings she'd removed but forgotten to put aside. The look on his face as he stared at the golden circles in her palm matched the one he'd worn last night when she told him she was no longer uncertain of their future, deeply touched, to the point speechlessness. As the seconds ticked by, however-literally, and loudly on the brass alarm clock-Mary became aware that eventually one of them must break the silence, and that it would have to be her.

What did one say in such a situation? The past marriage must be acknowledged in order to move on from it, but how did one do so without inviting ghosts?

"I needn't be away from George, at all." She settled for continuing their previous conversation, giving voice to an idea as it formed spontaneously in her mind. "I could ask Mama to bring him."

"There isn't room here," Richard said, "even without the boys. Aileen and George will want them home."

"Of course they will. I wouldn't dream of imposing on their hospitality any longer. But if we could find alternative accommodations, it might be advantageous to have my mother here."

He made no reply. Mary hesitated for a moment to remind him of yesterday's sad events, but forged ahead.

"She sent flowers to the funeral, you know. I think it was her tacit acceptance of my intention to marry you. Or at least her acknowledgment of it."

Richard's nail lightly tickled her palm as he traced the rings with the tip of his index finger, and her heart beat an erratic staccato in her breast so that it was difficult to keep her voice even. Withdrawing her hand from his, she let to place the rings on the bedside table. His arm went around her waist as she moved, and she felt the brush of a kiss on her temple. When she sat back his eyes met hers again at last, though the hopeful gleam in them, the crinkles at the corners of his eyes which matched the gentle curve of his mouth did little to steady her heart. The hair he'd smoothed into place earlier had fallen again, and she tucked it back behind her ear.

"That is…I presume your offer of marriage is still on the table?" Inwardly she cringed at how stilted the words were.

Nor did it go unnoticed by Richard, who glanced away to the table where her rings lay, reflected by the lamplight on the glossy surface. "You make it sound like a business transaction."

"I thought you liked that sort of thing."

"Lately I've come to believe there ought to be some mention of love." His other hand settled at her hip, giving it a light squeeze, and the smile lines deepened as she laughed quietly, her arms circling his neck to allow him to draw her into her lap.

"We're more than moon and June," she said, "but I suppose I could talk about it."
"Do." He leaned in, forehead almost touching hers. "Please."

Mary's fingers trailed across his cheekbone as she peered up into his eyes. I love you was not a phrase she had uttered at all to Richard, or often even to Matthew. I'm too English for it had been her flippant excuse to mask her discomfiture with verbal expressions of emotion. Reserve, more often than not, led to regret-she'd learnt that the hard way.

Although she had determined not to repeat past mistakes, she still did not blurt out the words. Instead, she took her time, watching each subtle shift in his features as her thumb stroked his cheek, her fingertips finding the patches between the scruff of the night's growth of beard on his chin and jaw, the place behind his ear that made him instinctively squirm, ticklish. Had she ever before noticed the softness of his skin? She leaned in to kiss him there, whispering to him before her lips closed around his earlobe.

"I love you."

For an instant it was as though she were suspended, then several things seemed to happen in rapid succession. First she felt the beat of Richard's heart, strong and steady, through the layers of cotton undervest and silk charmeuse slip, and the pulse at his throat as she lingered at his neck. Then he exhaled, her name on his breath, and she raised her head so that he murmured the words back to her against her mouth as she kissed him properly. She could taste them, she was sure, on his lips and tongue. Though she felt the press of his arousal and the corresponding ache in her own secret places to be filled with him, she continued to kiss him with deliberation, determined to savour the sweetness and to know him as she never had.

She slid her hands over his shoulders, his chest, his abdomen, pulling at the hem of his undershirt upward to bare his stomach, too. His hands and mouth left her briefly to pull it off completely, returning with an urgency which was diffused by her gentle exploration of the trail of fair hair that disappeared into the waistband of his shorts. Of course she'd discovered his muscular contours that night at his flat, but then she'd thought only in terms of the hard leanness won by his struggle through the tough world against which she wanted to form calluses. He hadn't changed physically in their time apart, yet Mary's awareness now was of the supple roll of tendons beneath smooth skin, of soft lips bestowing slow kisses.

When he removed her slip and bloomers, large hands cupped her small breasts, caressed her belly, no longer firm as it had been in her youth. Mary remembered how both had swelled with new life within her, and tugged his underpants down past the jut of his hipbones, revealing a tantalising downward-angled vee. They manoeuvred together in a tangle of limbs and bedclothes to divest him of his shorts, and at last Mary took his velvet-soft penis in her hand and guided him into her.

For one heartbeat after their joining…

two…

three…

four…

they remained still, her knees pressed to his sides as she straddled his lap, he sitting against the headboard. They began to move, slowly at first, gently, as they remembered each other-or rediscovered, for it felt in many ways that they were doing this for the first time-but then with increasing speed and fervour as they found a rhythm together, his hands on her hips, hers on his shoulders; she trailed kisses along his brow, he all over her breasts, both made moans of pleasure against each other's skin.
"My God, Mary…"

She would marry Richard. Marry him, and have his children, and he would be father to the son she already had. She had softened him, as he had softened her-impossible as it once seemed for two people as strong and sharp as they. They still were, but life, too, had blunted the edges that once kept them apart so that they fit together now-and in more ways than merely the physical, their bodies entwined. Although that, she thought as she reached her climax and collapsed on his shoulder, aftershocks of pleasure rippling through her as he shuddered inside her, was certainly a benefit.

"At risk of ruining the romantic mood," she said to him afterward, lying in each other's arms amid the sheets and discarded funeral clothing, "I think we do well together. We make a good team."

He smiled at her sleepily. "Your proposal is improving by leaps and bounds. I accept."
Change of Plans

Chapter Summary

A morning in Edinburgh's Old Town gives Mary new glimpses into Richard's past. Will it change how she sees their future, too?

A raspy chuckle greeted Mary as she stepped out the kitchen door into the Carlisles' back garden. "How is it you can manage a publishing empire," George's lilting brogue followed, "but you can't keep a toddler out of a veg patch?"

Peering around the corner of the house, she saw Richard in his shirtsleeves, kneeling by a not insubstantial patch of damp soil, a hand outstretched toward Jeannie, who tramped happily between the rows of greens. He looked backward over his shoulder at his brother, who sat on a wooden bench against the wall with the paper and a pipe, puffing away with an air of utter unconcern that her stockings were no longer white.

"Clearly she takes after Mother," said Richard.

"An alarming prospect." George hunkered back into his paper, a swirl of acrid vanilla tobacco smoke swirling above it.

"I thought you were the favourite?" Mary asked, drawing both men's attention for the first time. Richard's smirk stretched into a pleased smile, but the sun glinted off George's eyeglasses as he tilted his head back to look up at her.

"That doesn't preclude me being terrified of her, does it?"

"She could be fearsome when you refused to eat your turnips and cabbage." Richard's voice lilted in a cadence not unlike his brother's as he teased him.

"Her turnips and cabbage, he means," George said. "Our mother took it as a personal affront, as she grew all our veg."

"That's what I was getting at," said Richard. "Maybe Jeannie will enjoy gardening, like her namesake."

"But Ma didn't enjoy it. She only gardened because she had a grudge against the greengrocer."

"A grudge against a greengrocer." Mary raised her eyebrows. "My."

"Alas," Richard said, "it sounds a much more interesting story than it is. They were at school together. He called her Carrots, and she hated it."

"So she grew them in her back garden?"

Richard smirked, then returned his attention to his niece. "Have you got a green thumb, Jeannie?"

"Tum!" She held up her tiny thumbs.
"Yes, those are your thumbs. Come show them to me."

Jeannie trampled a few stalks en route to him; Richard narrowly avoided having an eye put out as she thrust it into his face, and his brother muttered something about the injustice of the fifty year-old being the one to have perfect eyesight, though Mary was more interested in watching Richard examine his niece's thumb.

"Not green," he said. Jeannie had just time to parrot the words back to him in her piping baby voice before he growled, "That means it's good and ripe!"

The little girl shrieked with delight as he caught her and pretended to gobble up her hands.

"Talking of eating," George asked around his pipe, his voice accompanied by the rustle of newspaper, "is breakfast ready yet?"

"Aileen asked me to tell you." A question flitted through Mary's mind of whether his wife felt put-upon by questions which in her world were reserved for paid employees, but her interest was primarily in Richard.

George folded his newspaper and stood as if to go in, but he lingered beside her, watching his brother with the baby. Richard tickled Jeannie till she was delirious, then let her go, only to have to catch her again as she made a dizzy path back to the vegetable patch and tried to pull up one of the marigolds that lined it.

"We must not pick those, darling. They keep the stray cats and rabbits away--or so Granny Jean said. But you may pick all the buttercups you like." He redirected her to one of the yellow weeds that dotted the grass.

"Shall I take her in, Richie?" George called. "Or have you and Mary had enough private time this morning?"

Mary flushed, though she'd said herself it was unlikely her sleeping in Richard's room would go unnoticed; however, his face remained relaxed, lips curved and eyes softly crinkled as he watched Jeannie flit from dandelion to dandelion, like a little muddy butterfly in her pale yellow dress.

"She's enjoying herself," he said. "Let her stay a while."

It was incredible to Mary that he hadn't risen to the bait; judging from the look on George's face as he puffed at his pipe, he thought the same. *Your son must be such a comfort to you,* so many well-intentioned people said to her after Matthew's death; watching Richard and Jeannie, she understood why they'd believed it was the correct sentiment to express to a grieving widow.

"That's a pretty posey," he said, curling Jeannie's pudgy fingers around the stems. "Let's take it to Lady Mary, shall we?"

If his niece comforted him, he did not look precisely *comfortable;* he had to stoop to hold her hand, and measure his long strides so as not to overtake the short legs which were further hindered by the thick grass. Mary couldn't help but smile at the picture they made, the sweetness of it perhaps responsible for her indulging a little sentimentality.

"I'll be your Auntie Mary when I marry your Uncle Richie. And if all goes to plan, you'll soon meet your future cousin. He's almost your age, my Georgie."

She knelt to take the bunch of buttercups from Jeannie, who clapped as Mary put them to her nose and sniffed them. Richard's long-fingers clasped her free hand, assisting her to stand again. Her heart
quickened in her breast as she saw the unguarded love in his eyes--and longing, too. Was he thinking of their eventual children? When they married, would he want to start a family immediately? Would she be ready?

"Talking of the plan," said Richard, leading her toward the bench George had vacated, "you haven't rung your mother yet, have you?"

He released her hand to sit, but Mary remained standing, looking down at him from beneath an eyebrow arched incredulously.

"My mother? Out of bed before nine? Since the war ended?"

Chuckling, Richard drew Jeannie onto his knee and jiggled her. "Only I'm not sure it's Lady Grantham you ought to invite."

"Oh?"

"Honestly, your mother was never the difficult one to win over."

While this not entirely complimentary observation made Mary roll the stems of Jeannie's buttercups between her thumb and forefinger, she had to concede Richard had a point.

"Mama's cultivated passivity to an art," she said, and Richard squinted up at her--the sun was at her back, highlighting the golden tint of his hair--his smile now sheepish.

"You might call it adaptability."

Mary shrugged. "I'll call it what it is. Mama accepts the hand life deals her and plays it." Even her anger with Papa for misinvesting her fortune had lasted but a moment. "If it's difficulty you want, then it's my father we ought to invite."

"Lord Grantham never has nor never shall approve of me. Thankfully I don't require him to."

Richard shifted Jeannie onto the other knee. "Do you?"

Mary wasn't sure that she didn't. On the other hand, she hadn't let that stop her from attending Mark Carlisle's funeral.

"He won't disown me for marrying you," she said, seating herself next to Richard, laying the buttercups aside on the bench. "He may want to bar you from Downton--"

"That presumes I'd want to darken that door."

"--but Mama would never allow him to do that. You may have to forego after-dinner port and cigars, though."

"As I've given up smoking, it'll suit me fine to go through for coffee with the ladies. I much prefer working my charms on the fairer sex."

"Jeannie thinks you're charming, anyway."

Richard glared playfully; with the impeccable comic timing only small children were possessed of, Jeannie shrieked and wriggled off his lap. He leapt up after her, but the back door opened with a creak and Aileen called her youngest in.

"Shall we join them inside?" asked Richard as the door swung shut. He put out his hand to assist Mary to stand, and she reached to place her palm in his. Before their skin touched, however, she
withdrew, seized by a sudden thought.

"You don't think I ought to ask Isobel?"

His silence and steady gaze confirmed that this was exactly what he thought.

"Why?"

"Quite simply, Mary…" Once again Richard reached for her, both hands this time, and drew her to her feet. "…because I know you. You may act cold, you may even convince yourself you don't care what anyone thinks, but eventually that conscience of yours will get the better of you."

"You do realise that makes it sound as though a conscience is a character flaw?"

Richard emitted a puff of a laugh, releasing one of her hands as he swept his hair back in a self-conscious gesture. He dropped the other one, too, when his drifting gaze locked on something over her shoulder. As he side-stepped her, Mary turned to watch him stride along the length of the vegetable patch.

"If you aren't reconciled to Mrs Crawley," he continued, stooping to pluck a thistle that sprouted in the midst of the marigolds, "in time her disapproval will become Matthew's."

The weed proved stubborn, and the lines deepened on his face as he gave it a harder tug, though still in vain. He straightened slightly so he could dig around the base of the stalk with the toe of his shoe.

"Little by little, the guilt would eat away at you…and at our marriage."

He bent, grasped the stem, and yanked at the thistle. This time it gave way easily, roots and all, small clumps of soil showering the heads of the marigolds. His eyes met Mary's.

"I can't let that happen."

Would it ever cease to be strange to discuss Matthew with him? It was necessary, Mary knew, and she was proud of Richard for facing the truth head-on that Matthew's ghost would, from time to time, rise from the grave. But he needn't come between them.

Mary went to him, kneeling close by to pull up an errant dandelion sprouting in a clump of orange marigolds. When she'd cast it aside into the grass, she caught Richard looking at her with a grin.

"What?"

"Lady Mary Crawley, pulling weeds."

She rolled her eyes, dusted off her hands and stood. "I'll phone Isobel now."

"Before breakfast?"

"She'll be up."

~*~
Not only did Mary speak to Isobel before breakfast, but she secured her acceptance of the invitation to Edinburgh before Richard had a chance to make the arrangements for their stay. Luckily his friend from *The Scotsman*, Mr John Geddie, had previously offered Richard the use of his house as he and his wife were soon bound on holiday, and they were only too delighted to host his future wife and step-son.

"So I'll only be imposing on your hospitality for one more night," Mary informed Richard's brother when they visited the shop later that morning, George having left the flat before it had been settled that Isobel would bring the baby on tomorrow evening's train.

"Having you's almost a holiday for Aileen, compared to the lads," George replied.

"Although it would appear you're having a bit of a day off yourself, thanks to one lad," said Richard with a nod down the shop, where young Mark tidied a display of men's hats with a look of concentration on his face that strengthened his resemblance to his uncle.

George snorted. "If only you'd seen me dealing with the customer responsible for that mess. Why is it that the people who try on the most hats never buy any?"

Mary glanced away; she and her sisters were guilty of committing this offense on more than one occasion when they'd browsed the Downton village shops out of sheer boredom. "Spoiled for choice?"

"He said he'd come back when there was a sale on," Mark piped in.

"They never do," his father muttered, frowning out the front windows; the clear early morning they'd passed in the garden had given away to a more typical Scottish drizzle. At present the four of them were the only people in the shop, but surely Edinburgthers weren't put off shopping by a little precipitation?

"Aileen'll be glad to have all the kids home," said George, removing his spectacles as he stepped around the counter, buffing the lenses on his apron. "But will you feel imposed on, Richie?"

Richard was to stay on in his family's home; the corner of George's mouth twisted upward with mockery, and he was not even privy to the information that Isobel had stipulated that she trusted the arrangements for their accommodations would fall within the bounds of propriety, Mary and her intended sleeping under separate roofs.

"It'll be good preparation," Richard replied. "Baptism by fire into domestic life."

"For that brood you mean to raise in a three-room flat?"

Mary thought suddenly of the summer, when young Mark told her how they'd all three gone to play rooftop golf at Selfridge's and Richard tweaked George about how he could own a department store instead of a corner dry goods shop if he had an ounce of ambition. Was George on the defensive against Richard's disapproval now? *I'm not ashamed to be what they call a self-made man. In fact I'm proud of it.*

The jangle of the shop bell heralding the arrival of customers brought further conversation—or quarrelling—between the brothers to an end.

“It’s time we were going, anyway,” Richard said, catching the door for Mary and unfurling his umbrella before the rain could drip off the awning onto her cloche. “John’s expecting us.”

They caught a taxi to North Bridge; Mr Geddie had told Richard to drop by and introduce her, if it
would put her at ease about staying in a stranger’s house, but when they arrived at the office—a red sandstone building that stood out not only because it towered above the other buildings in the neighbourhood, but also because its façade was an obviously modern addition—a secretary informed them he’d been called to an unexpected meeting, which they were informed might be quite long.


“It’s stopped raining, for the time being,” he said as they stepped outside once more. “Fancy a walk through Old Town?”

Recalling how oppressive the house had felt after Sybil and Matthew’s funerals, Mary took his arm. “Lead the way.”

He did so, silently; they’d said so many things already today that she could hardly begrudge him a lapse in conversation. She felt in need of a little quiet herself, to let it all sink in as she admired the medieval stone buildings that lined the narrow street.

After some minutes elapsed, she did break the silence to ask, “What’s that dome up ahead?”

They stopped at a corner for passing motor traffic, and a glance up at Richard showed him to be blinking at the city skyline as though he had not been aware of it until now.

"The Old College. I meant to take you up the Royal Mile. Instead I've walked my old route to the university." He lowered his arm to put his hand into his trouser pocket, but Mary kept her arm linked with his. "Like a homing pigeon. Although I never intended for this to always be home."

"Aileen told me you were meant to attend Glasgow. You won a scholarship?"

She'd chosen her words deliberately, not wanting to rub salt into his wounds by speaking directly of his father's illness, but Richard was never one to side-step unpleasant truths.

"I gave up a scholarship." In profile, the muscle rippled beneath his cheekbone as he tensed his jaw.

"Yes, I know." Mary stroked his sleeve. "Don't be upset with her. I asked about your…family dynamics."

"Upset with Aileen? That would be the equivalent of you being upset with Sybil, I think."

"I was upset with Sybil, as you may recall. For trying to elope with the…with Tom."

"You were not." Richard turned his head to look at her directly. "You were upset with yourself for not having the courage to follow your heart, family be damned."

The assessment was not incorrect. Mary chafed her fingers, though Richard's face softened.

"I'm not upset with Aileen," he said, "or with you. I'm glad you've taken an interest, and I'm rather relieved not to have to explain it all myself. It's…difficult, right now."

The street cleared for them to cross, but Richard did not move from the pavement, even though other pedestrians stepped around them. Mary gave his arm a squeeze.

"Will you show me your old haunts?" Something had obviously drawn him there.

"If you like."

The reply was bland enough, and accompanied by a shrug. However, as they made their way
onward down South Bridge Street toward the University of Edinburgh, and he pointed out a side street here down which the back door of a dance hall or a bookie's office provided many a scoop when he was a fledgling reporter for The Scotsman, or here Rutherford's Bar, a public house that served the best cottage pie you ever tasted which fuelled revisions for exams or writing for The Student, the university's magazine--founded by Robert Louis Stevenson, he said with a puff of his chest, who also patronised Rutherford's--he disproved that old claim that he wasn't the sort of person who got excited. When the downpour began again without warning, dousing them before Richard could get his umbrella open, she saw he hadn't left the student far behind. As they scrambled for shelter, he kept a hand at her back, leaning close to her to shield them both from the rain and guide her across the street. His rich chuckle rumbled through her mingling with hers and echoing with the clatter of their feet as they passed beneath the archways of the Old College.

Breathless, Mary leaned against a pillar overlooking the quadrangle. It wasn't terribly picturesque, the square covered in gravel rather than grass--which ought to have thrived here, with all this rain--and the grey buildings dreary streaked with damp against the grey sky. She shivered, very slightly, and Richard put down the umbrella and slipped off his jacket, draping it over her shoulders. The heat of his body still clung to it.

"I'd call you a gentleman, if it weren't really that you're a Scotsman. This is a blistering hot day for you, isn't it? Not a sacrifice at all to give a lady your jacket."

He laughed again, and took advantage of the relative privacy--in addition to the rain, it was summer holidays for the students, although a half-dozen bicycles leant against stair railings suggested there were at least a few lurking about--and kissed her.

As they drew apart, she looked up into his eyes, reached to adjust his trilby where it had been knocked askew.

"You did sacrifice a great deal for your family," she said.

Richard shrugged, though not in a way that suggested this embarrassed him. "It's what one does, isn't it? But don't think for a moment I didn't work as hard for myself as I did for them. Anyway," he said, turning to look out at the quadrangle, "it isn't as if the University of Edinburgh held me back."

"You mean you never wonder if you'd have done better than a millionaire with a knighthood if you'd attended Glasgow?"

No longer shivering, she returned his jacket to him and they moved on, linking arms beneath covered walkways, cutting through buildings, peeking into lecture halls. It may as well have been a foreign country to Mary, who'd never set foot into an institute of learning, her education conducted at home with governesses.

In the Playfair Library Hall, busts of professors past standing sentry before fluted columns. The sculptures reminded her of walking through the Gray's Inn Gardens with Edith, and she told Richard what her sister had said about wishing sometimes to have been born male so she could have read a degree and had a profession. He gestured with his hat toward a table where a young woman pored over a stack of books, and whispered that those opportunities would be open to their daughters.
They ambled down the length of the vast hall beneath a barrel-vaulted ceiling, which Richard told her was where he'd sat many an examination. The yellow glow of electric lights above gave the illusion of a sunny day, though she could still hear the rain drumming down on the roof.

“Didn’t George have any interest in attending university?” she asked. "My impression of your family is that great value was placed on your education."

“It was.” Richard turned down one of the aisles, eyes raking over gold-embossed titles that lined the tall shelves. "But George was never academically inclined. Of course by inclined I mean in terms of application, not adeptness. I might even go so far as to say that of the two of us, George is the cleverer."

*Might* being the operative word. Richard probably had not gone that far.

“When George brought home low marks from school,” he continued, "Dad was ask why he couldn't be more like me, whether he didn't want to go to university like me. If George had ever thought about it, that was exactly the wrong way to try and convince him. And Mother didn't help. She'd ask why George would want to be like me, when I'd come to this heathen place and lost all my morals."

"What an indictment,” Mary only half heard herself say, while Isobel's distressed tones rang in her head: *I cannot fathom how you could for one moment consider rebuilding your life with a man as morally bankrupt as Sir Richard Carlisle! Was it only Mary whom Richard wanted Isobel to approve of? “Jean sounds like the sort of woman who could have given Granny a run for her money."

"Aye."

But if Jean Carlisle was like Granny, then she had a soft, even sweet centre beneath the prickly exterior.

“Did she truly disapprove of your work,” asked Mary as they rounded the shelf and came back up the next aisle toward the centre of the library, "or was it that she was disappointed you left Edinburgh to do it?"

“After she passed away, Dad showed me a scrapbook she'd kept of my achievements, so I suspect that like George, she did feel abandoned. Especially when Dad’s health was uncertain. Ironically, that was one of my reasons for going, as soon as I was able. Part of me blamed Edinburgh for his illness. I didn’t want to live and die here."

"And I never imagined living or dying anywhere but Downton."

Yet she would--although she didn't know where. London, she'd presumed, but now, as they exited the library and Richard scanned the street for a cab, she wondered…Was he considering a return to Edinburgh? She didn’t voice the question; after all, only this morning he’d said he had no plan for his stay.

“Plans change,” she said, slipping her hand into his free hand after he'd put on his hat. "And so do we."

Perhaps the clearest sign that she had, was that she could utter those words at all. That she could face the mystery of a future that was far from the one she’d ever imagined, and not be paralysed with fear.
Friend and Foe

Chapter Summary

A friend from Richard's past shows Mary a fresh perspective of her fiance. Will it change Isobel's mind about him, or has Richard made a permanent enemy in his formal rival's mother?

Chapter Notes

In this chapter, you'll meet an old friend of Richard's, Mr John Geddie, who actually was an editor and writer for the Scotsman, whose books you can read online. (Although you've got quite enough reading material with this chapter…) I hope you enjoy meeting him, and that I've done justice to who he was in real life.

The train shrieked its arrival into Edinburgh's Waverley railway station, and Richard took out his pocket watch, squinting to read the time.

Mary smirked, recalling George Carlisle's petulant remark from the previous day about his elder brother's superior eyesight.

"How is it…" she began over the chuffing of the engine; Richard's hand brushed her jacket between her shoulder blades as he leaned in to hear her. "…that the trains always seem to run on time whenever you're not aboard them?"

His mouth opened as if he'd taken offense, but then the corner twitched upward and the dimple flashed, as did his eyes with amusement. "It's a conspiracy."

"The British railway system against Sir Richard Carlisle. That sounds about right."

Chuckling, he slid his hand up to her shoulder, drawing her close against his side as the train screeched to a halt. Hardly an overtly demonstrative act of affection—well, perhaps for Richard it was—and certainly not one Mary begrudged him in his fragile state. Nevertheless, it raised Isobel's eyebrows as she disembarked. Mary leaned into him, wanting to reassure him that she would not be moved by her mother-in-law's disapproval, but he gave her shoulder a squeeze and stepped toward the train, hand extended to assist Isobel down.

"Mrs Crawley. How good of you to come."

His voice resonated affability—perhaps too much so, given the way Isobel dropped his hand as soon as her feet touched the pavement.

"Sir Richard. Forgive the belatedness of my sympathies for your loss. By Mary's account, Mr Carlisle was a fine man."

He thanked her. "We were lucky to have him for as long as we did."
He turned to take Nanny Phillips' elbow as she disembarked with George, and she looked much more grateful for his strong balancing hand.

"Hello, young man," he greeted the baby, his happiness unfeigned now; Mary only half-registered Isobel's peck on her cheek as she watched Richard shake her son's small hand.

She'd worried a little that their separation, brief as it was, would dull his memory and make him wary of her, but George nearly lunged out of Nanny's arms as she brought him to her.

"Darling boy." She brushed her lips over his fine hair and inhaling his baby smell—though it was a struggle not to wrinkle her nose as she caught a whiff of baby smell after twelve hours' travel. "Was he any trouble on the train?"

"A model passenger," Isobel replied, grinning. "He fell asleep as soon as we started down the tracks, and napped throughout the journey. And enjoyed cake in the restaurant car. Just like his papa."

*Model* had not been the word Mary used to describe Matthew's habit of leaving her to divert herself for hours at a time on their journey to the south of France for their honeymoon, and she'd rather relentlessly teased him about not having got enough cake at their wedding breakfast.

"The apple doesn't fall far, does it?" Darting a glance at Richard, she was pleased to see his expression remained unperturbed during this discussion of Matthew.

"A cross-country train ride, before his first birthday," he said. "We'll make a world traveller of this lad."

Isobel attempted, but did not entirely succeed, to smile.

"You must be so tired," Mary said. "Richard can see to the luggage while we go to the motor."

In the past, Isobel would have argued that it was good to stretch her legs after so many hours on a train and insisted on overseeing the collection of bags herself, but she nodded readily. Mary felt the familiar tug of guilt, but before she went off with Isobel to the station exist, she met Richard's eye and saw his resolve. *I won't let that happen.*

When they were situated in the Crossley tourer loaned by their hosts and May had sent the chauffeur to assist with the baggage, Isobel lost no time in asking, "Why me, Mary? Why did you ask me to bring George, and not your own mother?"

Mary rescued the brim of her hat from George's hand, kissing the small dimpled fingers before she reached into her handbag for a wooden horse she'd bought him the previous afternoon while she and Richard were out. At once George put it in his mouth and gnawed at the head.

"Because you're George's grandmother, too," she replied. "I hope you'll always see me as your daughter-in-law, even if my surname ceases to be Crawley."

"Oh Mary." Isobel's eyes welled. "I could no more stop loving you than Matthew could. If that were possible, none of this would wound so deeply."

She turned to look out the window, where Richard strode from the station ahead of the chauffeur and Nanny Philips, who were negotiating the trunks. As he neared the motor, George bounced on Mary's lap, flailing his arms, and Richard paused in the middle of giving the driver some instructions to wave.

Isobel glanced away and fiddled with the handbag in her lap. "Am I to understand you and Sir
"Richard are to marry soon?"

"Sooner rather than later," Mary answered, honestly but carefully. Seeing a twitch in Isobel's cheek, she went on, "But he is in mourning. We'll move forward with as much propriety as we can. I'm sorry that we-that I didn't from the beginning."

"That means a great deal to me," said Isobel. "Perhaps we may consider this our fresh start."

Although Mary agreed with the sentiment, privately she questioned the notion of new beginnings when they involved marriage plans. In return for the use of their home, the Geddies requested the honour of joining their guests for dinner before embarking on holiday. It was an informal affair, no one donning dinner dress in concession to Isobel's day of travel, and with no one else in attendance, yet their host pressed over the table at the start of the meal with an air of ceremony.

"Just a few evenings ago," said Mr Geddie, whose rigidly groomed iron hair and eyes which peered like steel beneath a sharp brow did not at all match his warm demeanour, "we gathered here to remember one of the finest men I've ever had the privilege to know. I think I can safely say there could be no better way to honour Mark Carlisle than by celebrating the forthcoming marriage of his son. To mourning turned to dancing."

They clinked glasses, and Mary was relieved when Richard attempted to deflect this awkward moment.

"So long as I'm not expected to actually cut a rug," he quipped.

"As I recall," said Mr Geddie, chuckling as he resumed his seat, "the secretaries always left room for you on their dance cards at the Scotsman Christmas parties."

Mary tucked in to her soup-Cullen Skink-picturing a scene straight from A Christmas Carol, of a skinny young Richard being coaxed from behind a newspaper to waltz working class girls in their best Sunday frocks about a holly-decked warehouse. From experience she knew how well he fitted the role of Ebenezer Scrooge-though of course his ill humour had not been unprovoked.

"Amused, are you?" asked Richard, and Mary realised she'd smiled at her own imaginings.

"Just thinking how Dickensian your youth sounds."

Her smile widened at his eyes narrowing in not totally mock-annoyance; when their host spoke again, Richard turned to him with benign interest.

"Ah, but standing on the corners, a gangly lad in his knickerbockers and cap, a stack of newspapers as big as he was tucked under his arm, young Richard recalled to mind such characters as Oliver Twist or David Copperfield. And, like the author himself, he had a real flair for the dramatic when it came to embellishing the headlines to entice people to buy them."

Mary put her spoon to her lips to stifle a laugh. Mr Geddie had rather an authorial style of conversation himself.

"It was the first time we met. I remember it like it was yesterday—do you, Richard?" There was such fondness in his voice that Mary was surprised he did not lapse into the familial Richie.

"How could I forget? Try though I might to do so. But must you divulge my embarrassing past to my fiancée?"

"Yes," Mary said, "yes he absolutely must."
Richard huffed as he reached for his wine glass, but for a man who did not historically laugh at himself, he bore the teasing with good grace. It was different, she supposed, coming from a fellow newspaperman and longstanding friend. And from the woman whose love he was assured of. Beneath the table, she tapped his foot with the tip of her shoe; he glanced down at her, the corner of his mouth just twitching upward.

"Why should you be embarrassed for your bride-to-be to know you were something of a prodigy?" asked Mr Geddie. "Richard couldn't have been more than thirteen or fourteen at the time, and I was on my way into the office—we were on Cockburn Street then—and as I stood waiting to cross the street I observed him sell a few papers to passers-by. To a labourer he called out, One killed as safety measures fail to prevent Clippens refinery explosion; a young woman with her two small children in tow parted with a penny to read how an Inferno claims newlywed's life, leaving devastated widow in its wake; and as I approached he took stock of my morning suit and took the following tack to sell me a copy of the paper I sub-edited: Business as usual after Clippens fire; insurance to cover minimal damages."

"Heavens," said Mary. "Who knew one newspaper article could leave so much room for interpretation?"

Mr Geddie chuckled. "Somehow it ran the gamut from insurance report to penny dreadful."

"My job was to sell newspapers."

Richard's tone was edged with defensiveness, which made Mary suspect this was the exact speech he'd made to Mr Geddie all those years ago.

"Refinery accidents occurred so frequently back then," he continued. "I had to find some way to distinguish one day's papers from the next. I didn't imagine the labourer or the young mother would pay to read about twenty-five hundred pounds' damage were done in an oil works explosion. The Glasgow Herald always seemed to report the most gruesome tales."

"This is how I knew Richard had what it took to be a great newsman," said Mr Geddie.

"A taste for lurid sensationalism?" Mary quipped. Hawker of newspaper scandal, indeed.

However, Mr Geddie was in earnest. "Some of the newsboys may have read the headlines of the papers they sold, but Richard devoured every word on every page of the Scotsman and the Edinburgh Evening Dispatch—and every other paper he could get his hands on, including the aforementioned Glasgow Herald. He knew the competition as well as our papers, and he also knew how to market to a particular readership. It was clear he was a born businessman."

He dabbed the corner of his mouth with his serviette, and as he drew it away, it twitched as though with a laugh.

"Although there was a part of me that thought he might become a novelist rather than a journalist."

"You might say I've at last found an outlet for that proclivity with this literary venture I'm to embark on."

"Richard told me about your sister's endeavours," Mr Geddie said to Mary. "Marvellous, simply marvellous. I shall look forward to reading her book. To be sure, the Great War will be a much explored by novelists. Very important for future generations to know what our boys sacrificed."

There was a faint tremor in his voice that might have been age, but Mary knew too well the look which passed between him and his wife. Isobel, who'd been silent during the reminiscing about
Richard, wore it too. Though Matthew had not fallen on the battlefield, she'd lived with the fear that he would be killed. Even when his life had been out of danger, she'd endured the pain of watching him despair that he would have any real life; that his sacrifice had been the future generation of which Mr Geddie spoke.

Emotion welled in Mary as she thought of her son, their son, sleeping upstairs. She drank from her water glass to clear the lump from her throat, but her voice remained choked.

"Do you know," she said, "I hadn't thought of it in that light."

She'd thought it might, despite Edith's dubious authorship, be helpful to Evelyn to find some order to his experiences of the War. That it could give Matthew's son a glimpse of the father he would never know, had never occurred to her.

The tablecloth ruffled against her skirt as Richard's hand covered hers where it rested in her lap. She knew what he thought of the war, that he probably saw fiction on the subject chiefly in terms of monetary value. But she also knew that this did not mean he was unsympathetic to her own feelings.

She gave his hand a squeeze, then released it to take up her soup spoon once more, steadiness restored to her hand and her voice.

"You had better see to it that Edith's published."

There were chuckles all around—except from Isobel, who raised her glass to hide her weak attempt at a smile. Her discomfiture was not only noticed by Mary; as the soup was cleared from the table and the Auld Reekie steak brought out, Mr Geddie, the consummate host, changed the topic of conversation, too.

"Is this your first time in Edinburgh, Mrs Crawley?"

"It may as well be, it's been so long since I was here," Isobel replied. "I'd forgotten what a picturesque city it is, with the castle up above. I was almost sorry our drive from the station wasn't a bit longer."

"The most awe-inspiring view of Edinburgh is, of course, from Arthur's Seat." He paused cutting his steak, knife and fork suspended over his plate as his clear eyes looked distant. "A hill for magnitude, a mountain in virtue of its bold design."

"Is that how you put it in Romantic Edinburgh?" Richard asked; Mary had thought it sounded like a quotation.

"Richard refers to the book I authored," Mr Geddie said—that explained her earlier thought about his narrative manner of speaking—and cut a bite of steak. When he had swallowed, he resumed the thread of conversation. "In fact I was quoting Robert Louis Stevenson's Picturesque Notes. My descriptions of our city hardly compare with his acuity. You ought to experience it for yourself, Mrs Crawley. I almost wish we weren't bound for Samoa so I could invite you along on one of our excursions. I take a group up every Sunday before kirk. Perhaps Richard could guide you in my stead."


"For a septuagenarian like me, you mean?" Mr Geddie's grey eyes twinkled. "A man like you in his prime ought to take it easily. Or have you grown too accustomed to being chauffeured all around London?"

"On the contrary," Richard replied, "Mary's taught me to appreciate walks in the countryside. I bear
up admirably-provided I'm not dressed in unseasonable tweed."

"I shouldn't think it possible to dress unseasonably for the Scottish countryside?" she returned.

"It is for the natives."

The remainder of the dinner conversation passed in this vein, pleasant and dominated by their host. He was seventy-six, he announced over the salad course, but didn't feel as if he'd aged since he was fifty-six. This he attributed it to being a prodigious walker, cycler, and a regular golfer at the Braid Hills Golf Course which he'd helped found.

"Feel free to invoke my name there," he said, "should you and Mary like to play while you're in town. George's family would be welcome, too, of course."

"That's very kind," said Mary, "but I'm afraid I've never golfed."

"Oh, I urge you to try," Mr Geddie said. "It's a great sport for husbands and wives to play together." He winked, then addressed Isobel: "And for people of a certain age. The more advanced mine becomes, the more vital activity becomes."

She smiled at him-wearily. "Ordinarily I would agree with you, but I'm afraid tonight I must make excuse for my certain age. Rest suddenly seems most vital. Please excuse me."

The men stood as she rose to go, Mr Geddie assuring Isobel that he and his wife must soon retire, too, having an early train to catch.

"But first," he said, with a gleam in his eye, "I believe Mrs McCready's made us a lovely Dundee cake."

"A fitting end to a rampantly Scottish dinner," Richard said, glancing at Mary with a gleam in his eye.

He was goading her, but she remained unruffled. "At Duneagle, Cousin Hugh likes to finish off with a bagpiper. It makes for a nice change to have my cake and still be able to hear, too."

There was laughter all around, including from Richard, and she thought it was a shame Duneagle was no longer in the family. She'd have liked to take him there.

"You're going to Samoa?" Mary asked Mrs Geddie, who'd spoken almost as little as Isobel had throughout the meal, though she'd seemed pleased to let her husband carry the conversation.

"Yes, to Vailima."

"Robert Louis Stephenson's final resting place, you know," Mr Geddie interjected. "Though of course it is not our intention that it should be ours."

"Simply keeping up a tradition of literary Scots holidaying there?" Mary said, which appeared to please her host very much-and her fiancé, she thought, catching his gaze on her. "What a distance," she added. "I'm not sure if I should have the endurance for such a journey."

"And here I was going to suggest it for our honeymoon destination." Richard tasted the Dundee cake and closed his eyes briefly in a look of appreciation. "Are you planning to write a book on Samoa, John?"

"Not precisely-but then I never did plan to write books on Tibet and the African lakes."
A fellow of the National Geographic Society, for the next hour he told them of his travels to these and other lands. Mary, having indulged in a little more of the port wine, was more interested in the contemplative look on Richard's face as his old friend he'd joked about honeymooning in a distant land, but a memory surfaced from their first engagement, when he had not been joking. The war had only recently ended, and he'd remarked that she must be looking forward to being able to travel again. She had not in fact been looking forward to much of anything; now she realised that he had been looking forward to more cross-country jaunts to Downton, to the life he'd dreamt of as a restless boy in Edinburgh and through hard work made a reality. That life had been disrupted by the war as much as by her inability to see what he wanted to share with her. *If I take you to see The Marriage of Figaro,* he'd told her that night at the opera, *it'll be in Milan.*

"...heard much about the Earl of Carnavon's excavation in Egypt, Lady Mary?" Mr Geddie's address drew her out of her musings.

Richard's dimples winked and she knew he'd caught her at inattention, but she sipped her port and maintained her composure as she replied, "I haven't been much in society of late."

"Of course, forgive me-"

"Not at all. I do recall my grandmother and aunt mentioning the mania for Egypt."

She glanced to Richard, who shook his head, clearly thinking that was precisely what he'd expect Granny to say.

"I'd like to behold the pyramids, to walk where Pharaohs trod," Mr Geddie waxed lyrical.

"Perhaps you could make a detour on your way home from Samoa," Richard suggested.

"Perhaps. Although I think I'll be more than ready to get home. No matter how much of the world I see, I always come back to Edinburgh. She's my one true love—apart from Mrs Geddie, of course."

He looked like a man in love, this author of *Romantic Edinburgh.* In retrospect, she realised, a similar look had been on Richard's face as they walked around the university.

The Geddies' Crossley idled on the street in front of the house, chauffeur standing sentry beside the rear door. Richard lingered on the doorstep, heedless of the moths flapping about the porch light that burned overhead, clearly reluctant to retire to his brother's house across town.

"You're certain you don't feel I'm abandoning you?"

His thumb scuffed over the ridges of Mary's knuckles as he held her hand. She thought how he'd clung to her the past two nights in bed and suspected it was he who was the more loath to be alone tonight.

"I don't think Isobel left you much choice in the matter."

She spoke lightly, meaning it as a joke, but Richard's brows pulled together as his gaze drifted over her shoulder to the door, which stood ajar, as though to remind them that they were not truly alone—although their chaperones, Isobel and the Geddies, had already retired to bed. It would be easy, so very easy, for Richard to sneak upstairs with her to her room...The purring engine of the car reminded her that the chauffeur would know. Not that Richard couldn't ensure discretion...

"How did she seem to you?"
Richard's question confirmed Mary's belief that the approval he sought from Isobel was not merely for her sake. Her own thumb stroked his palm, and his curled fingers tightened around hers.

"Tired from twelve hours on a train," she answered.

A slight tilt of his head signalled his concession to this point, though Mary still sensed his dubiousness. To distract him, she went on, glibly.

"I'm rather sorry Mr and Mrs Geddie are off on holiday. He's the most entertaining host I've had in quite some time."

He smiled, relaxing as he released her hand to put his arms about her waist instead.

"And," she added, "he's more moon and June than you led me to believe newspaper men could be."

Richard drew her hips against his, his voice scarcely more than a breath as he leaned in to nuzzle her cheek. "I'm more moon and June than I led you to be."

"Mm," she murmured her agreement, turning her head to brush her mouth to his; as his lips yielded to her she twined her arms around his neck. At the touch of his tongue, however, she broke the kiss, leaning back in the circle of his arms to look him in the eye.

"He reminds me of you."

Richard raised an eyebrow in question.

"Or rather," she clarified, "what you might be like at seventy-six."

"Still working, still active, still traveling…I certainly hope so."

Mary had been curling the hair at his collar around her fingers, but she brought one hand up to stroke the greying patch at his temples. "Don't forget still handsome…"

"I don't think I'm at all sorry he's off on holiday," he said, eyes narrowed in feigned jealousy, which he at once belied by turning his head to brush his lips across the heel of her hand. Then, clasping it in his own, he pulled her alongside him to unhurriedly descend the front walk to the street.

"Will you take up golf, then?" she asked.

He stopped in front of the garden gate, dropping her hand as he faced her. "Do you think I can carry off knickerbockers and argyle socks?"

Mary stepped back and appraised him from top to toe, conjuring the image of him in such costume, and of herself beside him on the links, attired in a knitted cardigan and pleated skirt. They made a handsome pair, even in her imagination, he even more so—though she would never tell him—as she thought how very harassed he would be by sand traps and water hazards; with her cool head, she stood a strong chance of being the superior golfer.

"Mm, you do have the calves for it," she said.

"That, my dear," he said, smirking as he lifted the latch to open the gate, "is precisely why Mrs Crawley insisted you and I sleep under different roofs."

When the Geddies' housemaid admitted Richard to the drawing room the following afternoon, the women having been left to their own devices for the morning, Mary observed with some concern
that although they had passed the night under separate roofs, he did not appear to have slept much at all. His face bore the same dark circles and deep lines it had in those first sleepless nights after Mark died, and he sank onto the settee as if his legs had given out, sighing heavily. However, her concern abated somewhat when she saw that his lips curved upward as he leaned his head back on the cushion and closed his eyes.

"Peace and quiet at last," he said, his voice a deep rumble which made Mary smile, though she knew that timbre was, in part, due to fatigue.

Relaxing in her own armchair, she said, "Reconsidering the value of-how did you put it?-baptism by fire into domestic life?"

Her attention was drawn from him by a slice of her own domestic life, George crawling at impressive speed across the Oriental rug past her chair to pull up on the edge of the coffee table. Balancing on splayed legs like the baby giraffe they saw at the London Zoo, he looked around to bestow a slobbery smile at her and his grandmother, who had been reading to him in the window seat, before he turned back to regard the man on the settee from beneath a furrowed brow.

George had not, thankfully, begun to walk in the days that Mary was in Edinburgh without him. She thought he appeared to be holding a debate within himself about whether to let go and cross the gap between it and the settee unassisted. One hand did, the other flailing toward Richard's knees. Mary rose from the edge of her own chair to pluck George out of the way before Richard was disturbed. Before she could, he opened his eyes and swooped her son over his head.

"Much as I hate to make one of my brother's points," Richard replied, as though there had been no lapse in conversation, bouncing George on his lap, "my desire is reaffirmed for my domestic life to occur in a large house. Or at least a house with large beds."

Three year-old Andy, he explained, had wandered into his room around midnight, saying that his brother was kicking and hogging all the covers, and could he sleep with Uncle Richard? Needless to say, only one of them slept, and Richard suspected that Andy was, in fact, the one who'd been kicking and hogging the covers in his own bed. Mary stifled a laugh as she noticed that across the room Isobel, now paging through *Romantic Edinburgh*, pursed her lips in an expression that could only be described as smug. Richard saw the look, too, his eyes narrowing on her mother-in-law.

"George is due for his afternoon nap," Mary intervened. "Perhaps you ought to have one, too?"

Richard's features relaxed back into the pleasantly bland mask he'd worn so often at Downton, which she'd mistaken for shallowness of feeling.

"I had something else in mind." He released George to toddle along the furniture back to Mary, then placed his own hands on his knees as he pushed up from the settee. "Would you and Mrs Crawley care to accompany me to Princes Street? I've an errand there. Afterwards I thought we might treat ourselves to tea. We'll be near Jenners."

"The department store?" Isobel asked. "How convenient. I wanted to go shopping for a gift to thank the Geddies for their hospitality."

"Does Jenners have rooftop golf?" Mary teased.

"All that talk last night's put it on your mind, has it?"

The smile lines deepened at the corners of Richard's eyes, and the dimples winked in his cheeks. Daring her, she imagined, to think of athletic calves in the presence of her mother-in-law. George's
tug at her skirt gave her an excuse to avert her gaze. She picked him up and kissed his cheek, and he fist ed her pearl necklace in his hand.

"Alas," Richard said, "Jenners is known as the Harrods of the North. Not the Selfridges."

"Then I'll get my hat."

A newspaper lay on the back seat of the Crossley when Mary climbed into the car. Richard took it up as he slid in beside her, folding it as though he meant to pass the drive into New Town reading. But as they pulled away from the curb, he leaned around Mary to address Isobel.

"You're comfortable enough in the Geddis' home, then?" he asked, as though following on from an earlier thread of conversation.

"More than. I'm so appreciative of the trouble you took to arrange it for us."

The muscle flickered beneath Richard's cheekbone; this was not Isobel's customary warmth. "No trouble at all," he muttered, sitting back in his seat and raising his paper.

"Isobel and I took George for a long walk this morning," Mary said, hoping to ease the conversation along, "before it started to rain. We couldn't stop remarking what a charming street this is."

"Couldn't you?"

Richard regarded her with a very pleased-and slightly surprised-expression. So intent was his gaze, in fact, that she felt self-conscious and allowed her own to flicker over his shoulder, out the window. The rain had stopped shortly after luncheon, but the fresh scent lingered in the air, mingling with that of freshly mown grass. Wet flowers and foliage appeared painted in richer hues than they had before the storm, glistening as the sun at times emerged from behind the clouds.

"It's easy to see how one might be inspired to write *Romantic Edinburgh* when residing in a neighbourhood like Stockbridge."

"As opposed to, say, Morningside?"

His brows twitched upward in challenge. She did not rise to it, except to roll her eyes.

"This is as fashionable as any London neighbourhood," Richard said.

"Yet very different," Isobel remarked, the topic benign enough to draw her in; Mary pressed her lips together in a small smile at her own success. "London houses are almost all identical. Here there's a consistent architectural style, yet a variation which creates visual interest."

"The surrounding streets have a more uniform look, but you're correct about Ann Street."

"One could almost forget they're attached houses."

"Or in the middle of a city at all," Mary added.

Ann Street's Georgian mansions sprawled horizontally, no more than three storeys high, most of them only two, revealing more of the sky above peaked rooftops than the towering London row houses did. Front gardens, though small, lent the illusion of separation between the properties as well as setting them back from the street, and wrought iron gates were obscured by shrubberies and creeping roses.

"We walked along Dean Terrace, too," she said. "The street overlooking the river?"

"There's a touch of the country in Stockbridge," she said-if one did not breathe too deeply and catch a whiff of the unavoidable industry.

"With the benefit of being only a five-minute drive from Princes Street," Richard said, grinning. "The best of all possible worlds?"

How many times had she said that whenever she was in London she felt homesick for Downton, yet in the country she grew restless for the excitement of town? If she'd been alone with Richard, she would have voiced the thought she'd had earlier that if he had any desire to return to the city of his youth, she could imagine herself living contentedly here, too. But only two days ago he'd said he'd no notion of how long this visit to Edinburgh would last. Doubtless he'd given as little thought to settling here permanently. Especially when he'd told her how hard he'd worked to leave it.

While she mused, Richard had turned his attention to his newspaper, but he didn't have long to read before the car slowed to a stop. They seemed to be parked in front of a row of grey stone shop buildings, though the top of the car and Richard's movement to disembark the vehicle blocked her view.

"What's this mysterious errand?" she asked.

"No mystery," he replied as he offered one hand to assist her out of from the Crossley, gesturing with his hat in the other toward one of the shops. He released her and turned back to hand Isobel down, and Mary gawped up at the painted sign above the door: Princes Street Cyclery, the stylised letters formed the shape of a bicycle frame and tires. Belatedly she noticed the large, brightly coloured posters that hung in the two display windows, featuring some of the bicycles the shop presumably sold: there seemed to be a kind called the Flying Scot. Of course there did.

"Don't tell me Mr Geddie's joke about getting soft has inspired you to trade your Silver Ghost for a bike," Mary said as he came to stand alongside her on the pavement.

He gave her a briefly incredulous look, then used the reflection in the shop window to check that his Trilby was perched just so on his head.

"Certainly not for my daily commute. My competitors would have a field day captioning the photographs. Publisher Pedals Papers."

Mary snorted, and Isobel quipped, "And you'd fall so dreadfully behind in your newspaper reading."

"Cycling's a terrific sport, though," he went on. "I wouldn't rule out picking it back up. Joining a club. It can't all be sedate golf if I intend to stay fit."

Mary tried to picture him leaning over a bicycle, racing around some mountain curve, but found she could not do so as easily as she'd imagined him on a golf course. Perhaps because her mind more readily recalled that of Matthew riding about Downton village with his briefcase strapped to the back, or up the lane from Crawley House to the Abbey, blue eyes boyishly bright beneath the brim of his cap. Her breast constricted guiltily at the memory of her own scorn for his preferred mode of transportation and recreation. More than once she'd wished he'd stuck with his trusty bicycle, however middle-class it was, instead of speeding down country lanes in the more fashionable and utterly impractical green AC Six.

"At the moment I'm not shopping for myself." Richard's voice thankfully interrupted that unpleasant line of thought. "Imagine my chagrin when I discovered this morning that my brother's lads are..."
riding my old bike. It wasn't even new when I got it."

A reminiscing look filled his eyes, a smile ghosted his lips.

"A neighbour sold it to me cheaply, because it needed a bit of work. Mother scolded me for wasting my money on a rusty rattletrap I'd likely fall off and break my neck, but Dad used it to teach me basic mechanics. And of course he taught me how to ride it."

There was a catch in his voice, as well as a tremor at the corner of his mouth. Abruptly he left Mary's side, reaching the shop door in a single stride. One hand on the knob, he turned back, composed again.

"Anyway, it's too big for George to ride safely. Andy sits on the handlebars and that's extremely dangerous. There's simply nothing for it but to buy each of the boys his own bicycle. I hoped you might have a little insight, Mrs Crawley," he added, with a gesture of his free hand, "especially as you've met Mark."

Having all but forgotten Isobel's presence, Mary now looked to her in concern. If she felt the connection with Matthew in this, then surely his mother must also. Isobel, however, appeared collected enough.

"Cycling is wholesome recreation for growing children," she said. "Beyond that, any knowledge I once had on the subject must be woefully out of date."

"Nevertheless, I've no doubt you'll have advice regarding the practicalities."

It would have sounded almost like a backhanded compliment, had Mary not known he was on a mission to win her mother-in-law over.

"I should think that rather more within the shop owner's scope of expertise," replied Isobel in clipped syllables. "Though I'm sure it will be fascinating to look around the shop."

The waiter informed them he would return momentarily with their tea and turned to go, but Richard held up a hand, indicating for him to wait.

"Shall I order a bottle of champagne as well?" His pleasantly inquiring gaze touched Mary, then Isobel across the table. "To celebrate our bicycle shopping success?"

"I'd raise a glass to being out of that shop at last," Mary said, not entirely joking.

She'd felt decidedly claustrophobic in the shop with a single narrow aisle hedged on both sides with so many bicycles that she seemed to be bumping into tires literally left and right. And with all that inventory, Richard had still placed a special order to a factory in Glasgow for his eldest nephew's new bike instead of selecting one of the models the owner had in stock.

"Tea will be more than sufficient for me," Isobel said. "But of course whatever you like, Sir Richard."

Apart from venturing the occasional opinion, her attitude in the shop had been this same mildly dismissive one; Richard, in turn, had furrowed his brow and looked as if she were thwarting some plan.

"Why don't we save the champagne for the Palm Court of the Ritz?" Mary suggested.
The waiter looked from her to Richard, askance.

"As the lady says."

His tone that sent the man hurrying off to bring the tea. Richard took his pyramid-folded serviette from the table and unfurled the crisply starched cloth with a snap—a gesture which Mary nearly took to be annoyance with her, except that he was watching Isobel, who was looking out the window.

"It isn't the Ritz," he said, "but there's no matching Jenners for view."

Their table, which he'd reserved and had been ready and waiting for them upon their arrival at the department store restaurant, overlooked Edinburgh Castle.

Isobel turned her head slightly toward him in acknowledgement, without taking her eyes from the scene. "It is breath-taking."

"And just think," Mary said, touching Richard's foot with her toe to draw his attention, "we didn't even have to hike up a hill to see it."

He smirked. "Only a hydraulic lift."

The waiter returned to their table with the gleaming silver teapot, followed by a second bearing a tiered tray of sandwiches, scones, and cakes. No, Jenners wasn't the Ritz, but the tea looked to be every bit as delicious. What the Edinburgh restaurant lacked in the gilded splendour of London, it made up for with the stately familiarity of vaulted glass ceiling and dark oak panelled galleries.

"For all I harassed John about his Sunday excursions to Arthur's Seat," Richard said, helping himself to a sandwich, "it's a fine idea. We might go up first thing, before the heat of the day-"

"There's a heat of the day in Edinburgh?" Mary cut in.

"-and still be in time for the eleven o'clock service at St Stephen's."

Mary swallowed her bite of scone rather suddenly. In all the years she'd known Richard, this was the first time, as far as she could recall, that he'd volunteered to attend church. Only the Christmas he'd spent at Downton had he accompanied her family, but apart from that he never did, not even for the sake of making a good impression on his prospective in-laws on his first visit.

*I was raised Presbyterian,* he'd said, and excused himself to the sanctuary of the library with the Sunday editions.

Later, Mary had taken him aside and asked, *You said you were raised Presbyterian. Does that mean you aren't a Presbyterian now? Or Anglican? Or...anything?*

He hadn't looked at all ashamed that she'd found out his Atheism; on the contrary, he looked almost pleased that she had. *Normally I don't beat around the bush, but I thought for my first visit to Downton, it was quite enough that your grandmother believes me unpatriotic. Let's let her labour under the delusion that I'm a proud transplanted Scot clinging to the last vestiges of his heritage for a while before we drop the inevitable bombshell that I'm a godless heathen, shall we?*

*It could be worse,* she'd replied. *You could be Catholic."

More recently, after he'd rejected the invitation to attend prayer with George and Aileen on the eve of his own father's funeral, she found it frankly astounding that he'd schedule a church service during his stay in Edinburgh. Not that she believed for a moment that he was turning over a new religious
Nor did Isobel.

"Really now, Sir Richard," she said, voice sharp, clinking her teacup as she replaced it on its saucer, control breaking at last, "don't you think you're rather laying it on with a trowel?"

Richard finished chewing his sandwich, then dabbed at the corner of his mouth with his serviette. Lowering it again, he replied, tight-lipped, "I'm afraid I don't follow your meaning."

"Isobel," Mary said, "if you're upset about the bicycles-"

"I could tolerate your patently obvious attempts to curry my favour by soliciting advice you didn't require," Isobel said, "to take me along with you on this errand which paints you as a devoted family man, but church? You're not a churchgoing man, nor have you ever pretended otherwise. Please, dispense with this farce."

He looked exactly as he had when Matthew called him a liar. Though livid, he trailed the tip of one long finger around the rim of his untouched teacup.

"It's true." His lips curved in the barest hint of a smile as they formed words uttered in low rasping tones, his anger well under control so as to be conveyed without making a scene. "I am not a religious man. However, I respect that other people are. That you are, Mrs Crawley, and Mary is and..." He paused, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed. A bitter pill. "...that Matthew was, and would wish for his son to be raised as a churchgoer. Do you doubt my sincere wish to raise George with respect to his parentage? Is that what you mean by farce?"

Isobel blinked. "For much of our acquaintance I believed you were sincere. In that regard."

"And now?"

She tilted her chin upward, indignant and righteous. "I've been made aware of more information about your past dealings with Mary and Matthew and poor Lavinia Swire."

"The only dealing I ever had with Matthew was a blow from his fist when I pointed out an uncomfortable truth about his treatment of Lavinia," Richard snarled. His hand curled into a fist; Mary was amazed he refrained from slamming it down on the table. "Have you been made aware of that?"

Before Isobel could retort, he went on, flexing his fingers, the tendons rippling across the back of his hand.

"As for Lavinia, I presume you refer to the Marconi scandal. From your sheltered vantage point you view my actions as nothing short of exploitation. I won't be indicted by you for an action which, a decade ago, commended me for unearthing government corruption. And let me assure you, in my world, few would have repaid her so generously as I did. It was a more than fair exchange of favours. Finally..."

He seemed to loom over the table as he sat up straighter in his chair, broad shoulders squaring with his slow intake of breath.

"...the only person whose forgiveness I require for the way I behaved towards Mary is, believe it or not, Mary."

Sarcasm had thickened his voice, but as he spoke her name, his eyes had found hers, and he spoke in
a hush.

"She has given it, and closed that unfortunate chapter in our story."

He fell silent. As Isobel remained quiet, looking at her plate, hands hidden in her lap, Mary suddenly became very aware of the sounds of tea-time carrying on around them, the tinkle of china and the laughter and pleasant conversation of the other diners seeming to echo off the vaulted ceiling. She had all but forgotten they were at a restaurant.

Richard reached for the teapot and poured himself a cup, steam swirling above the silver leaf rim.

"Forgiveness and second chances, Mrs Crawley," he said. "Isn't that the crux of your religion?"
"How is Isobel enjoying Edinburgh?" Mama's voice crackled through the earpiece, her knack for unintentional irony not in the least thwarted by four hundred miles of telephone lines.

"Well..." Mary scuffed her thumb along the smooth base of the receiver as she contemplated her answer. "With the exception of Jenners, I believe she enjoys the city very much."

"What a relief," Mama said, oblivious to Mary's insinuation—although to be fair, subtleties were easily missed over the phone.

To be even more fair, Mama might simply too polite to mention the inevitable tension between Isobel and Richard.

"Although I'm surprised she doesn't care for Jenners," she went on. "Last time I was in Edinburgh, I thought I even preferred it to Harrod's. The tea room's scrumptious."

"The tea room did seem to colour her perception." Mary squelched a snort of laughter despite the gravity of what had occurred there.

She clutched the telephone tighter as her heart gave a twinge of sudden longing that this conversation were taking place in person rather than over the telephone. That she and Richard had stuck to their original plan and that her mother were here. Of course, if that were the case, they wouldn't be having this conversation at all, either in person or via telephone. And how pleasant that would be.

More seriously, Mary said, "She had a sick headache for a few days afterward."

At least, that was the excuse Isobel gave for not having much to do with anyone. Frankly, Mary was surprised she hadn't boarded the first train out of Edinburgh after the debacle. It was somewhat to Isobel's credit that she'd stayed, even she had spent the time stewing in her own juices. On the other hand, if one was entitled to have a bit of a sulk, it was after having one's Christianity castigated by an irreligious person.

"I'm sorry to hear she's been unwell," said Mama.

"She's feeling much better now. We've been to the Botanic Garden, and the National Gallery."

By feeling much better, Mary meant that Isobel had emerged from isolation and, if not precisely made peace with Richard, at least apologised for confronting him in public. Mary was unclear as to the specifics, having only found out about the meeting from Richard after the fact; even then he'd seemed indisposed to divulge much more than that it had occurred. That Isobel was willing to try to forgive his trespasses was enough for Richard, he said, so Mary did not press him for more. Though she found it increasingly difficult not to ask why Isobel's approval mattered so much to him.

Mama was talking again. "What a coincidence—Rose and I just attended an exhibition with Lord Gillingham and his fiancée! If only we could have been at the same National Gallery..."

"They took your advice, you know," Mary changed the subject in the hope of ameliorating the mutual longing expressed in Mama's sigh; it was too much to hope it was merely static on the line. "Miss Lane Fox and he have scheduled an appointment with Richard's estate agent to view Haxby."

It had been a bright spot for Mary, the day after the Jenners debacle when Richard had been busy tying up some of Mark's final affairs—and perhaps having something of a sulk himself—to receive the
call from Miss Fields. Stephen Battle had contacted her, not wanting to disturb Sir Richard whilst he was in mourning; the secretary had, in turn, asked Mary to convey the news at whatever time she deemed most appropriate. For her part, Mary took unexpected pleasure in being regarded as the gatekeeper to Richard's emotions.

Although she might have misjudged the timing somewhat, as his reaction hadn't been precisely the one of relief at finally having the burden of the estate lifted as he coped with everything else.

"I should hope Lord Gillingham takes his fiancée to see it, as it's Miss Lane Fox's fortune that will allow him to live in the style to which he's accustomed," he'd said, with some bitterness. "Although I suppose a bride giving her groom a house is more bold and modern than my aspiration."

"Not hardly," Mary replied. "You forget my lot have a longstanding tradition of fortune hunting. My own parents included."

He let out a puff of a laugh. "A fair point. Yet I'm the one accused of being too business-like."

But the last was said without resentment—at least not much—and the gentle curve of his mouth as he inclined his head toward Mary assured her that she'd got through to him.

"Not anymore," she replied low, tilting her face up to meet his kiss.

"Do you know the date of Tony's visit?" Mama asked. "Only I'll invite them to the house party if they'll be in the neighbourhood."

"Invite them anyway. Fashionable neighbours might distract from the fact that Haxby now stands in the midst of twelve thousand acres of hops farmland."

"You sound like your father. Although even he'd probably prefer commercial farming to this house builder who's approached Tom about some of our property. At least hops won't spoil Haxby's views."

"What's this?"

"You'd have to ask him. I'm sure he'd be only too happy to discuss it with you. After all, Downton's half yours now. Oh, Mary!" Mama's tone turned abruptly pleading, so that Mary could just imagine the rounded blue eyes beneath sloping brows. "I know you're needed in Edinburgh right now, but do you know when you'll be home? I need you, too, if I'm to pull off this party. You showed such flair at the last one, and that's exactly what we want, for Georgie's first birthday…"

"I'm sorry, Mama, I really don't know."

Mary wasn't sure she meant she didn't know when she would be home, or that she didn't know if flair was what was wanted for Georgie's first birthday. It was not, after all, the only first that would occur on that date.

She was certain, however, that she was grateful for Mama's acceptance of her decision to remain in Edinburgh, so she said, "I'll ask Richard if he knows anyone who might be available to entertain your guests."

The effusiveness of Mama's response made Mary smirk. Richard was more correct than he knew: he'd just won her mother's approval across four hundred miles of telephone lines.

The sun was at its zenith, yet Mary shivered as the Scottish wind reached beneath the turned-up
"Cold, Lady Mary?" asked Richard. "I'll have you know this is a balmy summer's day."

An upward glance at him revealed his cheeks to be a little reddened by the lash of the breeze, but he did not appear uncomfortable in his suit, sans greatcoat.

"A hazard of bobbed hair, I suppose."

"Ah, the high price of fashion," he teased, but the backs of his fingers were warm against her cheek as he reached up to tuck a wind-blown lock behind her ear. His tone became one of genuine concern as he indicated where the rest of the group—George, Aileen, their boys, and Isobel, a little separate from the group, Jeannie and Georgie having stayed behind with Nanny Phillips—sat eating the sandwiches Aileen had packed while they waited for the daily firing of Edinburgh Castle's One o'clock Gun. "You'd be out of the wind down there."

"And cede the high ground?" Mary twined her arm through Richard's and drew herself close against his side. "The view from here is…"

Indescribable, really. Isobel had called Edinburgh picturesque, and it was, but that didn't go nearly far enough. From the Western Battlements the entire city lay before them in miniature. Beyond that, the day was clear enough that she could just make out the snowy peaks of the Highlands, at first mistaken for wispy clouds against the deep blue of the sky until Richard told her they were the mountains.

He reached across his body to cover her hand where it rested in the crook of his arm. "I couldn't agree more."

Any other man would have taken the opportunity to pay her an insipid compliment, but an upward glance revealed Richard's admiring gaze to belong entirely to his hometown. Mary felt only the slightest twinge of jealousy, which dissipated altogether when his voice rumbled through her again.

"We'll have to bring George one of these days. When he's old enough to remember."

She hummed in agreement. If all boys were anything like Richard's nephews—and she assumed they must be, as Isobel, in their past several days' interactions with the Carlisles, had frequently looked as though she were far away, no doubt remembering Matthew's boyhood—then George would be sure to be as keen on exploring the dungeons and Mons Meg, the enormous medieval cannon, as they.

"I'm sure we'll be frequent visitors."

If this surprised him, his unfaltering mild expression gave no indication of it. "Heavens, you've set your sights on Edinburgh Castle now, have you? Although the price Mr Battle's negotiating with Lord Gillingham for Haxby seems fair, I'm not sure I'll turn that large a profit. And just imagine how extensive the renovations would be."

"Richard, please." Still holding his arm, Mary turned to face him, his gaze dropping to meet hers. "I'm being serious. I'll have to move somewhere when we marry…"

She stopped, the deepening lines of his face making her realise she'd uttered almost the same words before, with a much different sentiment. Quickly, she switched tacks.

"Obviously living near my family is out of the question, but you've seemed to enjoy the time with
yours. So have I."

Still Richard said nothing, so Mary went on, with less certainty, "I'm only saying that if you want to…"

"Wither I goest, thou wilt go? My people shall be thy people?"

At first she gritted her teeth at his mockery, then decided two could play that game. "The part about thy God being my God presents a bit of a problem."

"I attended service with you last Sunday, and quoted the Bible just now."

"Richard…"

He took her free hand, drawing it up to graze his lips over her knuckles before he turned back to look out once more over the battlements, their clasped hands resting on the stone ledge. His thumb scuffed over the ring he'd given her a few days before. Mark Carlisle's will instructed his sons to divide some old family jewellery between them; a Cairngorm agate set of Jean's had gone to Aileen, but their grandma Marjorie's ring was expressly intended for Mary.

"Was it her engagement ring?" she'd asked, examining the intricate spiked leaf motif worked into the sterling band; a single amethyst formed the blossom of the thistle.

"Granddad worked for the railway. He couldn't afford one, until their silver anniversary."

"My. That'll bring us even better luck than an engagement ring, I should think."

Richard had not returned her smile, but regarded her for a moment with his head tilted. "When are you going to let go of your superstitious notions? If this ring brings us anything, it'll be the reminder that a good marriage is the result of two people working hard to make it so."

Put off by him calling her superstitious, Mary had started to retort about him taking himself far too seriously, but caught herself. Marriage was serious. Short as her marriage to Matthew had been, it was time enough for her to learn it wasn't a simple matter of loving each other and everything working out perfectly. Happily ever after was hard-earned-a fact Richard had been aware of before she even accepted his proposal. Then, his talk of work only made her think what a business arrangement their engagement was. Now, she knew better.

Her silence as these thoughts went through her mind must have made him self-conscious, because he said, "Of course you mustn't feel obligated to wear it. Especially not if you think it'll make Mrs Crawley uncomfortable..."

"It wasn't the ring that would do that, she'd thought, but aloud said, "I'm honoured to wear it, Richard, and proud. It's a symbol of your heritage."

"His Scottish heritage; even more, a symbol of a family heritage worth as much—if not more—than any pedigree."

The sound of Richard clearing his throat brought her back to the present.

"It means a great deal to me that you feel at home here, with my family. More than I can say. I can say it's crossed my mind more than once that it might be nice to live nearer to them. Especially once we have children of our own. But..." The brim of his trilby shadowed his face as he leant against the ledge, peering down at his nephews, who had finished their sandwiches and now pretended to shoot at each other. "...a part of me fears it would be ceding the high ground. All my life I tried to get
"You and I have the opposite problem," Mary said. "All my life, I never wanted to leave Downton. But I did."

She watched the muscle flex beneath Richard's cheekbone. He knew that better than anyone. His restraint at not saying so was impressive.

"You're co-owner," he said, tilting his head to look up at her with a wry grin.

"You wouldn't exactly be retiring from the newspaper business to play golf," Mary replied, "and Downton's nearly exactly as close to Edinburgh as it is to London. When you go to work, I can visit and make sure my half's still above water."

"I'd have company for half the train ride."

Mary's lips curved in a smile. *I'll love him dearly, if he'll ever look up from the page.*

Straightening up, Richard faced her again, studying her intently. "You've given this a lot of thought," he said; at her nod, he went on, more eagerly, "And you'd be satisfied with that arrangement? You believe it would be in George's interests, as the future Earl of Grantham and heir to Downton?"

"You know, in a strange way, I think it's what Matthew would have wanted."

Richard's eyes widened, and his lips parted in a look of incredulity.

"Obviously not all of the particulars," Mary admitted, the reddening of her cheeks having nothing to do with the lash of the wind, and glanced away, "but he spoke often of a simpler life. Of... *Our children.*...George knowing the world outside Downton, and having choices. He didn't want him to be limited by a title and an estate that accounted to mere tradition in modern times."

Because he'd understood how that *tradition*, governed by the law of the land which discriminated against her on the basis of her sex, limited *her*-and, by extension, *them*. She didn't think Papa entirely grasped the magnitude of Matthew's gift, in naming her heir to his half of the estate. For the first time in her life, she had the security to make her own choices.

She'd begun to wring the strap of her purse in both hands, but Richard's long fingers closed around them to still her fidgeting.

"I can't promise George, or any of our children, or you a simple life," he said. "Not in any sense. But the world will be at your door. And if you'd like it to start in Edinburgh... The corner of his mouth twitched, and there was a glimmer in his eye. "...I do happen to know of a newly renovated castle for sale."

*Of course he did.* "Does it have *en suite* dungeons?"

*BOOM.*

The firing of the One o'clock Gun startled Mary into her laughing fiancé's arms.

The fair weather and pleasant family outing had provided the Carlisles with a much needed respite during their time of loss, but the following day's dark clouds and steady drizzle served to remind that they were very much in mourning. When Mary and Isobel arrived at the Morningside flat after Georgie's nap, the children's greetings were more subdued than usual. In the parlour, the middle boy
was curled up in Mark's armchair, wrapped in his afghan, peering out the window with eyes whose downturned shape he shared with his uncle made him look even sadder.

"It makes me feel as if the whole world's crying for Grandpa," George Jr said in his small, tremulous voice.

Abruptly, Richard excused himself, plucked hat and raincoat from the hall tree, and went out. Mary didn't follow-she presumed he didn't a moment to compose himself as his own grief reared up-instead tried to distract the boys by teaching them a card game. At first only Mark joined in, tentatively, but when he began to enjoy himself it was too tempting for George, who caved when Isobel said she'd like to play and would he partner with her?

An hour slipped by, Mary noticed, to her surprise, but not until nearly another passed did she begin to worry about Richard. Thankfully he didn't leave her long in that state of concern, returning just before the two hour mark, arms so laden with parcels from a toy shop that he could scarcely carry his umbrella.

As the boys eagerly tore away the brown paper to reveal jigsaw puzzles, board games, and a Meccano set, Richard seated himself heavily on the settee beside Mary, who was gathering up the cards and putting them back in their box.

"I thought they could do with a bit of cheering up," he said, quietly, "but it would appear you've already got that well in hand."

"They're brave little chaps," she said, but Richard's soft smile as he looked at her made it plain that he referred as much to himself as to the children.

He wasn't the only one watching her; she felt Isobel's gaze from across the room, but when Mary looked up, her mother-in-law's eyes darted back to the picture book she'd lapsed in reading to Georgie.

George Carlisle had a few words about his brother's shopping spree when he came home from work to find the parlour strewn with toys and boisterous boys. "This stuff won't fill up the empty place their grandpa left, Richie."

"Only a fool would think so." Then, in quite a different tone, Richard added, "Dad would hate to think he'd left the boys devoid of fun."

For a moment George considered this, the upward twist of his mouth suggesting scepticism. Unexpectedly, he rolled up his shirtsleeves and crouched beside the coffee table with Richard and the children. By the time Aileen called them to supper, his own mood seemed as improved as theirs by the mentally stimulating play.

Or perhaps it was that the void his brother's long absence from the family was at last filled. How Mark would love to know that.

The meal passed without incident-no doubt a rare occurrence in the Carlisle household—and the adults lingered at the table, relishing the relative peace of the dining room after the elder three boys, who wolfed down their supper, were excused to play with the Meccano set a little longer before bedtime. Their muted voices still carried through the small house, and the babies chattered and banged spoons on the trays of their high chairs.

"This Caledonian Cream is delicious, Mrs Carlisle," remarked Isobel, who'd been largely quiet throughout the day-not that the children scarcely allowed the adults to get a word in edgewise. "A
perfect summer dessert."

Aileen thanked her, the usual soft-spoken tone giving way to a sigh as her gaze drifted out the window at the back garden, sodden and growing even more so as the drizzle continued. "If only we were having perfect summer weather. The paper said we would, or I'd have planned a more seasonable menu."

"Now that's yellow journalism if I ever heard it," George said, leaning back in his chair to light up an after-dinner cigarette; smoking was not reserved for strictly male company in the Carlisle house. "First order of business when Richie gets back to the office: sack the weather reporter."

"I'm not sure it was one of Richard's papers," Aileen remarked.

"Uh-oh, Richie..." George waggled his eyebrows. "Your own sister-in-law, fraternizing with the competition." Oblivious to Richard's eyeroll, he turned to his wife, almost boyishly eager. "Was it one of Northcliffe's, love?"

"Honestly, George!" Aileen admonished her husband, but as she flicked her eyes toward Richard, her cheeks tinged pink. "I just glanced at the first one on the stand in the store."

"If it was the Mail," Richard said, "standards are slipping quickly. The man's not been in the ground a week."

"On the contrary, Mrs Carlisle," said Isobel a little too loudly, clearly uncomfortable with the reference to the newspaper magnate's recent death, and perhaps also the brothers' banter which, for once, was all in good fun. "Cheery foods are most suitable for dreary days." She scooped another bit of marmalade and cream onto her spoon. "Nothing suggests sunshine and warmth like oranges."

Aileen looked grateful and reassured, both with regard to her cooking and the change of subject, and she was not the only one to experience those emotions. Although Isobel's mood over the past several days had been subdued, Mary had breathed much easier when she spoke glowingly of Aileen after their first meeting. "I can see why you feel so comfortable with her. She reminds me rather of Sybil."

She did Mary, too, although she hadn't realized it consciously until Isobel put it into words. Their voices shared the same whispering, wistful quality, and even when they were hard at work they carried themselves with that effortless grace that did not allow even drudgery to seem beneath them, which Mary observed so often when she observed her sister working in the hospital. Before she knew Aileen Carlisle, Mary had found it difficult to imagine the brief life Sybil had with Tom in Dublin. Now her imagination readily produced the image of her youngest sister in a flat very like the Morningside one, looking after her little girl with the same happy patience as Aileen mothered her children. Blinking away tears, she just as easily pictured Sybil charging into the line of fire with Tom and Kieran poised to tear each other's throats out, as the Carlisle brothers had been before Aileen's fiery and courageous intervention.

"Mark was very fond of oranges," Aileen said, her smile widening as Richard raised his eyebrows at her.

"Mad about them would be a more apt description, wouldn't you say?"

George exhaled smoke around a raspy laugh. "Remember the time he dragged us to that exhibit at the National Gallery, and he said, The Renaissance painters had it all wrong. Eve wouldn't have been tempted by a wormy old apple-""

"A juicy orange, now..." Richard took over the story, but George was chuckling too hard along with
everyone to mind. "Ma was incensed. *Sacrilege, Mark."

"Ma! Dad!"

Shouts and pounding feet beyond the dining room door as the boys clambered from the parlour interrupted the adults' conversation and had them all pushing back their chairs and standing, certain that some calamity had befallen the children. The swinging door opened with a bang.

"Mark!" barked George. "If I've told you lads once I've told you a thousand times, don't bang the door into the wall!"

"Sorry, Dad!" Mark squeaked in tones of chagrin, while his bright-eyed middle brother chirped, "A van just stopped in front of our house!"

"A van?" Aileen echoed.

"A delivery van!" Mark said by way of explanation. The bell rang, and he nearly tumbled over George and Andrew as he darted back into the hall to answer it.

"It'll be for the neighbours," George called after his sons, before plopping back down onto his chair to draw from his cigarette and spoon a generous second helping of Caledonian Cream. "We're not expecting any delivery. Leastaways not anything in a bloody van."

Isobel shot Mary a dubious look, as Richard said, "Ah, that'll be the bicycles."

If George's mouth had not been full, Mary imagined he would have gawped. He gulped down his bite and parroted, "Bicycles? I swear, Richard, if this you playing the rich uncle again-"

"I'm not playing the rich uncle, I am the rich uncle. Now come give me a hand. Aileen wasn't the only one counting on accurate weather reports."

He strode off, George shambling after him, hands shoved deep into his trouser pockets and muttering, "Don't know where he expects me to store a fleet of bicycles..."

"There'll be room enough in the garden shed if you'll throw out that junk as I've been after you to do," said Aileen, with a chipperness that made her husband's frown lines deepen.

"Ought to make Richard clear out the bloody shed."

By the time the women wiped the babies' hands and faces and took them out of their high chairs to watch the excitement from the doorstep, Richard was signing for the two bicycles and one tricycle which his nephews were already riding in circles in the street.

"Mind the cars!" George called to them, leaning against the gate.

"I don't like to be a spoilsport," Richard said, "but they really oughtn't to ride them in the rain at all. The road's slick, visibility's diminished..."

George exhaled a puff of smoke, then tossed the glowing butt of his cigarette into a puddle. "Richie, this is *Edinburgh*. If they're forbidden to ride in the rain, why bother getting them bikes at all? We rode yours in foul weather as well as fair. With me sat on the handlebars, no less."

"My," said Mary, adjusting Georgie on her hip as she turned to keep him under the shelter of the overhang. "Talk of diminished visibility. And you survived your childhood more or less unscathed."

Richard glanced at her, brow furrowed as though he wanted to argue. He didn't; only tilted his head
in something of a concession and delved into his trouser pocket for a few bills which he handed to the delivery man before he climbed up into the driver's seat-"For your trouble in the rain"-before instructing the boys to clear out of the street till the van had driven off.

"I suppose a brief inaugural ride won't do any harm," he said as they took to the street again. "We do have five pairs of adult eyes to keep on them, and it's an opportunity to learn bicycle safety."

For a moment he watched them race toward the end of the street-the older boys, anyway; little Andrew on his tricycle lagged far behind, though his short legs pedalled as fast as they could-then Richard came back up the walk to join the women in front of the flat. Aileen pecked him on the cheek and thanked him, but he only gave her a distracted smile and said, "Are you sure it isn't too cool and damp for Jeannie and George out here?"

Hearing his name, George squealed happily and reached for Richard, who passed off his umbrella to Mary so he could take the boy in his arms.

"I'm sure you'll see to it he's warm and dry enough," she said, "seeing as you're as conscientious as any self-respecting nanny."

"Perhaps you won't need to hire one," Aileen joked, brown eyes warm with laughter.

"I think Richard draws the line at changing napkins."

"Mary certainly does," he retorted.

"I'll go find George's cardigan," Isobel said. At the choked quality in her voice, Mary turned, but her mother-in-law had already disappeared into the hall.

George's fussing drew her attention back to the outdoor scene. He flailed and kicked in Richard's arms, evidently jealous of Jeannie toddling down the walk holding her mother's hand to get a closer look at her brothers on their bicycles.

"Ah, it's hard to be the youngest, isn't it?" Richard's low rumbling voice soothed him somewhat, but George was not truly mollified till his feet in their little white leather boots touched the ground, Mary holding the umbrella over them as Richard stooped to let George take halting steps whilst holding to his index fingers. "I wanted to get bikes for everyone, but your mama insisted that would be very silly when you've a few years before you're ready for that. And she's right." His eyes flicked up to her, and a smile played at the corner of his mouth. "We'll want to get you the latest tricycle model when you're big enough."

"You talk about it as though you were buying him his first Rolls Royce," Mary said.

"He should have the best. You never know if we may be nurturing a future in cycling."

"I'll make you a deal: you train him for the Tour de France, and I'll get him ready for the Grand National."

Richard hitched an eyebrow. "The Scottish Grand National, I hope you mean."

"We have decided to settle in Edinburgh."

Approval evident in the glimmer of his eyes, Richard said, "The place I told you about just happens to include stables."

"Does it? In that case, I'm sold."
"Sold on what?" George Carlisle butted into the conversation.

Handing off the umbrella to Richard, Mary excused herself to see what was keeping Isobel, deeming it wise to let Richard break it to his brother in private that he was thinking of buying a castle across town from the flat. When she'd asked whether he didn't think it ostentatious, he'd only shrugged and said, "If George wanted to live in a castle, he'd have done more with his life than run a shop."

Scarcely two steps inside the house, Mary knew something was wrong: the tiny knitted cardigan still hung on a peg on the hall tree.

"Isobel?"

Softly, she shut the front door behind her, lingering in the hall a moment longer before approaching the parlour. Sure enough, Isobel was there. She sat in the corner armchair, gazing vacantly out the bay window with red-rimmed eyes, clutching a crumpled handkerchief in her hands.

"I'm sorry," Mary said, averting her gaze. "I didn't mean to intrude."

"I'm sorry for imposing my grief on Sir Richard's family."

Unsure how to respond to that, Mary said, "We can leave, if you're ready. It's nearly George's bedtime anyway."

"I am."

Mary had a sense that Isobel did not mean she was ready only to leave the Carlisle house. "I'll let Richard know."

"Mary." Isobel's hoarse voice halted her in the doorway. Mary faced her mother-in-law as she pushed up from her chair, but Isobel's attention was on the task of folding her handkerchief. "I do appreciate what you and he are trying to do, but I'm afraid it's no use."

"You believe Richard won't be a good husband and stepfather?"

"I wish it were that simple. For what it's worth, I believe to the contrary. He seems truly to have mended his ways."

Mary found this slightly patronising, but she ignored it in favour of the feeling of relief that Isobel at least did not live in fear that Richard would mistreat her and George.

"Which makes his assessment of my Christianity alarmingly accurate."

"No." Mary took a lurching step toward Isobel, "that's not-"

"I can't forgive him. Not for what he did while Matthew endured the trenches of France for king and country. Not for being alive when Matthew died in a senseless car crash. I don't want his second chance to be the life my son despaired of ever having."

Mary's gaze drifted over Isobel's shoulder to the window. Although the scene beyond was obscured by lace curtains and the rivulets of rain rolling down the glass, she saw Richard standing upright, George's head bobbing on his shoulder as he rubbed his eyes with his small fist.

"It's horribly wrong of me," Isobel said.

"It's perfectly understandable."
"I do hope that someday I can be reconciled to it, and forgive. But not now."

For the second time in not quite as many weeks, Mary and Richard stood on the platform of Edinburgh's Waverley Station, this time watching the train depart with Isobel Crawley. Well-Richard's attention was on the train; Mary's was on him, trying to decipher his body language: hands shoved deep in the pockets of his greatcoat, trilby pulled low, almost to the ridge of his brow so she couldn't see how deeply furrowed his forehead was—although she had a pretty good idea that it was, given the tension of the muscle beneath his cheekbone.

Isobel was not going back to Grantham House in London, or even to Crawley House in Downton village but, surprisingly, to her brother's home in Manchester. "I ought to have gone long before now sooner," she'd said when Mary asked her plans. "Edward's been pestering me to stay since… Matthew's funeral."

When Isobel had boarded the first class carriage, Mary told him, "Isobel said that seeing you with your family reminded her what a healing balm it could be to be amongst one's own people."

"So you see, my dear?" Isobel had said, smiling wanly, "This visit has done me some good."

Richard did not seem hugely comforted by that. "It didn't do us any good."

Mary wasn't sure she agreed, but she didn't say so. "It didn't do any harm. More importantly, it didn't change my mind about our plans."

He looked down at her, then, his expression unreadable. "You've no regrets?"

The only one had been that her decision to settle in Edinburgh would separate Isobel from her grandson, but Isobel's self-imposed exile to Manchester would have done that regardless.

As the train's shrill whistle blasted through the station, Mary reached up to stroke Richard's sleeve. "I'm through with regrets."

That coaxed a smile out of him—or her touch did—and as the train chuffed into motion, they turned to exit the station.

"I'm glad to hear it," Richard said, "although I suppose that makes me a hypocrite. Because I very much regret not sticking to your plan to invite Lady Grantham."

Resisting the powerful urge to say I told you so, Mary felt she was being very generous when she replied instead, "You weren't wrong about her being the easy one to win over. You've assured me she'll like the singer you've secured for her house party…"

"She will, indeed, based on what you've told me about her music preferences."

Mary couldn't remember this ever having been a topic of discussion, and was slightly unnerved by his apparent ability to remember every word that passed between them. "So that rules out Josephine Earle and her powder puff costume."

Richard snorted. "Are you sure that isn't your preference, which has very little to do with music? Although I won't deny it crossed my mind it would be highly entertaining to see your grandmother's look of disapproval."

The word disapproval brought the niggling thought to the forefront of Mary's mind. With a light squeeze of her fingertips, she signaled for Richard to stop walking. They were outside the station
now, and the vigilant chauffeur spotted them and leapt out of the car to stand sentry at the rear door.

"What is it?" Richard asked.

A heartbeat of hesitation, then Mary blurted out, "Why did Isobel's approval matter so much to you?"

His bicep tightened beneath her fingertips, and when he spoke his voice sounded taut, too, as if his jaw were clenched. Which it was. "I told you. Because you're-

"Yes, you told me why you want it for me. What I want to know is: why do you want it?"

He peered at her from beneath his trilby with some surprise before he glanced away, disentangling his arm from her grasp as he withdrew his hand from his pocket to tug at the hair that curled above his starched collar.

"Because...when I first came to Downton, Isobel was the only one of your lot who hadn't already made up her mind to dislike me. We had a...rapport, and it was still there when we met again this spring. It rankles that I've lost her good opinion because your father decided to air our dirty laundry, when she's seen for herself that my intentions toward you and George are honourable."

"She believes that," Mary told him. "For what it's worth."

"Not much." He raised his chin, looking over Mary's head; she watched the muscle flicker in his cheek he ground his teeth. "I knew we'd have an uphill battle against Lord Grantham, and I suppose I thought she'd be a useful ally. I've never run from a fight. I just thought it'd be nice if it wasn't me against the whole bloody world, for once."

Mary reached up, cupping his jaw in her hand, her thumb scuffing over his cheekbone. A smile eased the weary lines from his face.

"But it isn't," he rasped. "Is it?"

"No," Mary said. "It's you and me. And George. And the whole bloody Carlisle clan."
Between Me and My Sister

The telephone clanged, echoing in the high-ceilinged front hall and startling the butler so that he very nearly dropped the suitcase he was carrying downstairs.

"I say! It's early for a call." The grandfather clock read a quarter past five.

"I'll answer it," Mary said, so he wouldn't have to interrupt loading the motor. "It's probably Sir Richard for me, anyway."

The caller was not him, but it was for her.

"Edith," she said in some surprise when her sister's familiar, nasal tone filled the earpiece. "What do you want?"

Static crackled with what could only be Edith's puff of exasperation. "I wanted to invite you my wedding, but if you're going to be like that…"

"For heaven's sake, Edith, it's too early to start," Mary muttered, rolling her eyes. "Which, incidentally, is why I was surprised you'd phoned. Did you just say wedding?" she asked, belatedly.

"You're going home today, aren't you?"

"On the six o'clock train. We're leaving for the station as soon as our luggage is in the car." Mary and George were going back to Downton, at last; Richard would accompany them as far as York, then go on to London.

"How would you and he feel about a little detour through Gretna?"

Gretna. Not precisely a little detour. There could be only one reason for going there.

"Evelyn told me you weren't in a big rush to marry."

"We're not."

"Then why elope?"

"The timing feels right. On reflection it doesn't make much sense for me to bother with finding a new flat when I'm going to be married in the near future."

"I thought you were going to stay with Aunt Rosamund."

"Mary. I'm a twenty-eight year-old woman with a career and a love life. How could staying with one's aunt accommodate any of that?"

Half a dozen retorts were on the tip of Mary's tongue. All of them sounded like something Granny might say, so she uttered none.

"Look," she said instead, turning to look out the front door to see how the butler and chauffeur were getting on with loading the baggage into the, "it isn't that I'm not happy for you and Evelyn."

"Isn't it?" Edith's voice sounded archly in her ear. "Only you haven't offered a word to indicate otherwise."
"Congratulations." Turning her back to the door, Mary said, more sincerely, "Mama and Papa will want to wish you joy, too."

"Will they? They weren't overjoyed the last time I was going to be married."

*It was your choice of bridegroom they weren't overjoyed about,* Mary started to say, but caught herself; she hardly had room to speak to *that,* and didn't fancy being called a hypocrite by Edith, of all people.

"It's different this time. They're very fond of Evelyn."

"I don't need their approval. Or want it."

Mary was clenching her jaw. She relaxed it, releasing a long breath. "Are you sure an elopement is what you *do* want? Most people only have one wedding, and-"

"I've had one. It was the most horrible and humiliating day of my life."

The quaver in Edith's voice made it easy for Mary to picture the tremor of her chin. She heard an intake of breath, long and slow, followed by an exhale, and realised she could picture her sister puffing away at a cigarette, as well. At this hour?

"Surely you can appreciate that I don't want any association with that day on the one that is to be my happiest."

A fair point.

"Anyway," Edith went on, "you know Evelyn. He's hardly one to crave being at the centre of attention. I'll leave that to you and Richard."

And here Mary had been at the brink of saying her point about Evelyn was another fair one.

"I haven't said if we'll come," she said.

"It'll just be a quick ceremony at the registrar's, then a jaunt over to Carlisle for dinner and dancing at the Crown and Mitre. If you won't come for me, come for Evelyn."

Nanny Phillips was descending the stairs, George in her arms blinking sleepily, confused as to why he'd been awakened so early. As soon as his bleary eyes settled on Mary, however, they brightened, his face breaking into a grin. She beckoned for Nanny to bring him over so she could kiss him, but he hollered when he was taken away again.

"What would I do about George?" Mary spoke into the phone as the sound of his cries receded.

"Send him ahead to Downton with Nanny as planned? Mama will want to monopolise him anyway, after you've had him in London for months."

It wasn't an unappealing prospect. She wouldn't mind a night alone with Richard, either, before they had almost the whole of England between them for the next few weeks.

"Let me phone Richard, then I'll ring you right back."

"Fine."

"Oh, and Edith? If I come…it won't be for Evelyn. I mean it will, but-"
"Don't worry, Mary, I won't make you say it."

Richard readily agreed to the last minute change of plans. Nanny Phillips agreed, too, albeit with some less willingness. She voiced her reservations about traveling alone with the Earl of Grantham's grandson with no explanation as to why—for it was too early to phone Downton and explain, and in any case, Mary forbade the woman to say anything other than _Her ladyship had an unexpected errand that would keep her in Scotland for one more day_. Mary's promise to send her parents a telegram mollified Nanny somewhat, but it was evident that she didn't like keeping secrets from her employer about his daughters. Which would have been all right if Mary had been a débutante of twenty, but chafed from her vantage point as a widow of thirty. She understood why Edith wasn't keen to move in with Aunt Rosamund.

"I wish you'd let her tell them we're going to Gretna," Richard said, looking over her shoulder as she filled in the telegraph slip at the railway station. "Edith would still have her secret, and no one would be lying."

"And it would have the added bonus of annoying Papa until I return home tomorrow _unmarried_?"

Laugh lines criss-crossed at the corners of Richard's eyes, and the light blue flickered with his amusement. "Annoy doesn't go nearly far enough for what Lord Grantham would feel if he thought you eloped with me."

Pursing her lips to suppress her laughter, Mary returned to her telegram. "You're incorrigible."

She scanned the brief note she'd written for errors, but slid it slowly across the counter toward the telegraph operator as a thought occurred. She kept it to herself until she and Richard were in the privacy of their train compartment.

"You weren't hinting that you'd like to make it a double wedding?" she asked.

Not looking up from his newspaper, Richard replied, "Mary, if you haven't learned by now that I never _hint_ at anything, then you don't know me at all."

She _hmm_ed her concession as she thumbed through the newest issue of _Vogue_ she'd picked up at the station.

After a moment, Richard said, "I've waited too long for a society wedding to marry you in a shabby little office. You see? I've come right out and said it."

"I appreciate your straightforwardness. Will you also come right out and tell me whether you mean London society, or Edinburgh?"

His gaze drifted over the top of the newspaper now to meet hers, bright as his eyes caught the glare off the carriage window. "Edinburgh—if you've no objections."

"None at all."

"Good." He was smiling as he started to return to his paper, but when he looked up again, it was gone. "Not at the family church, of course. Somewhere more fashionable."

_And not called St Matthew's_, Mary thought, but did not say. That may have been _too_ straightforward, even for Richard.
The Lucile bridal gown Edith had worn for her halted wedding to Sir Anthony Strallan was, even by Mary's critical eye for fashion, a tough act to follow. Somehow she managed to do it with a cream silk day dress, simple yet elegant with a draped neckline and gathered detailing on the sleeves, paired with a cunning little cloche which offset her newly cropped curls. Or perhaps it was the look of serenity that suited Edith best. She'd been radiant that other morning in the church, gliding down the aisle on Papa's arm as though in a dream—indeed, marriage had been the only dream Mary knew her younger sister to cherish—but it was a dream she'd looked half-terrified of waking up from. Now, in the registrar's office in Gretna, the soft expression in her brown eyes could only be described as sure—of herself and her bridegroom.

For his part, Evelyn had never been what Mary would describe as effusive, but she knew he wanted to marry for love. Or had, once, when the world was simpler. She didn't dare to presume whether he felt anything so strong as being in love with Edith, or she with him, but as he calmly repeated his vows, he was obviously content. Compared to what he had been last spring, chain smoking in the shadowy corner of Murray's Nightclub, it was enough for Mary to sincerely wish them joy.

"It means so awfully much," he told her that night, as they shared a dance in the hotel's Tudor Revival-style assembly hall, "your being here with us."

"It means so awfully much that you wanted me to be," Mary replied.

For a moment their conversation was suspended as a singer's voice, tinny when projected through the microphone, joined the cacophony of horns and piano reverberating off the barrel vaulted ceiling of the hall.

_I went to a dance with my sister Kate_

_Everybody there thought she danced so great…_

As the dance steps turned Mary toward the small stage at the end of the hall, she glimpsed the singer, a black woman who made a striking figure in a white lace dress with a corsage of pink peonies pinned at the drop waist of the gown. The string of beads which fell over her bosom clacked in the microphone as she bobbed in time to the music.

_I realized a thing or two_

_When I got wise to something new_

_When I looked at Kate, she was in a trance_

_And then I knew it was in her dance_

_All the boys are going wild_

_Over sister Katie's style…_

"I was surprised," Mary went on, leaning in toward Evelyn so she could be heard over the music, "considering that the last time I saw you, there wasn't any rush."

Evelyn glanced away, expression sheepish until his eyes settled on his bride. Edith beamed as she twirled with Richard, the jewelled bandeau nestled into her curls and the glass beadwork of the evening dress she'd changed into shimmering as they caught the light from the candelabra chandeliers.

_Oh, I wish I could I shimmy like my sister Kate_
"Despite the storied history of Gretna," he said, "I'm afraid our decision was a pragmatic rather than a romantic one. Not that we're devoid of romance."

"But you're more than moon and June."

Evelyn's brow dimpled in perplexity. Rather than explain, Mary allowed her gaze to drift over his shoulder to Richard; much to her pleasure, his dance partner did not wholly captivate him, and she found her eyes meeting his.

"Precisely." Evelyn's voice, relaxed into his easy drawl, drew her attention back to him. "A lot more. You know, strange as it sounds, I'm glad I didn't marry before the War."

My mama wanted to know last night
What makes the boys think Kate's so nice
Now all the boys in the neighbourhood
They know that she can shimmy and it's understood…

"Not strange at all," Mary said. "The War changed you."

This was a sad and serious topic, more so juxtaposed with the frivolous song which underscored it. She flashed a bright smile, and squeezed his shoulder.

"But you're recognisably my old chum Evelyn."

It was true a physical sense, as well as an emotional one. Most of the extra weight she'd been surprised to see him carry last spring was gone. Of course there would be no regaining the ground his hairline had ceded, and it wouldn't be long before the silver hairs outnumbered the dark ones, but now they made him look more sage than scarred—though she knew he carried those, too.

"You're back," she added, not wanting him to feel as though she was giving him a total brush-off.

The familiar crooked grin he gave told her he didn't. "Father thinks so. Said since I'm more or less myself again and he was off to Branksome to open the shoot, I may as well live like a proper gentleman in the London house instead of my rooms at the club. And as Edith wasn't thrilled with the prospect of living with your Aunt Rosamund…"

"She's your Aunt Rosamund now, too, you know."

To Mary's great amusement, Evelyn looked almost goofy at the notion.

"Yes, I suppose she is. And you're my sister. I can't think of anyone I'd rather have for an in-law."

I know that I'm late, but I'll be up-to-date
When I shimmy like my sister Kate
I mean, when I shimmy like my sister Kate...

"I hope that means you'll come to stay with me often in Edinburgh." She told him about Craigcrook Castle, which she and Richard had looked over together a few days earlier. "There's a stable and sufficient park to ride in. Richard hates horses but agreed to learn on the condition that I take up
"cycling."

"And that condition doesn't agree with you?"

"Not at all."

"Then you and I'll ride, while our spouses bike."

"Did someone say spouses?" Edith said, practically shouting over the swell of the brass band as Richard spun her toward them. "I hope you don't mind if I dance with my new husband again," she said, releasing her partner.

It was more the sort of overly pleased attitude about her change of status that Mary would have expected from her sister; as Evelyn released her with a peck on the cheek and Richard took his place, one hand curled around Mary's and the other at the small of her back, she found herself rooted to the parquet, unable to fall into step with the dance.

Now I can shimmy like my sister Kate

I know that I'm real late...

"Something wrong?" Richard's hand released hers, the one at her back sliding down to her hip to gently steer her out of the way of the shimmying, shimmering dancers around them.

"I've just realised-someday Edith will be the Viscountess Branksome."

"She'll outrank you."

Mary glanced away, as much to avoid seeing the twinge of his lips as he attempted, not very successfully, to hold back a smirk, as to prevent his seeing her brows draw together in vexation. His arm uncurled from around her waist, and he turned to take two champagne flutes from the tray of a waiter en route to a nearby table. Ignoring the man's huff, Richard drank from one, then extended the other to Mary.

"I hope this doesn't mean you're going to drop me for a Viscount of your own."

The brush of his fingertips as she took the proffered glass made her look up at him again.

"You can rest easy. I don't know any."

His mouth opened in a small 0 of protest, which may or may not have been mock, and Mary smothered her own smug expression by sipping from her champagne.

"Well-" she amended. "Lord Gillingham, but I've always thought Tony a bit of an idiot. And I should hate to put a crimp in your plans to finally get rid of of Haxby if I took him from Miss Lane Fox."

"I'm touched by your consideration for my bank account."

"Not your bank account, darling." Mary took his arm and guided him toward the table where she and Edith had left their metallic beaded handbags. "Your heart."

She waited until he'd drawn out her chair, his hands brushing her bare shoulders as she sat, before she added, "Anyway, the dearly departed Lord Northcliffe was raised to a viscountcy, wasn't he?"

Richard's eyebrows went up in a wry expression. "He was. Fortunately for you, I'm not planning on
that golf retirement before I get a peerage." He drained his champagne, signalled a waiter, and seated himself beside her. "I promise to do everything in my power to ensure you and Edith are, at the very least, equals."

Sweet papa, just like my sister Kate!

For now, Mary remained on fully equal terms with Edith, not only in the rank afforded them by their father's status, but in his eyes as errant children.

She'd scarcely set foot in the house the following afternoon when Papa accosted her in the vestibule, shaking a newspaper at her.

"How could you allow this to happen?"

"Robert, please." Mama's heels clicked on the tiles as she hurried after him. "I thought we agreed to discuss this calmly. Over tea."

Mary could not, of course, read the newspaper as he waved it about, crumpled in his fist, but she didn't have to to know what had got him so worked up.

Clasping her hands together in front of her skirt, she replied, "For what it's worth, I told Edith you and Mama would be sorry not to see her get married."

"Yet you stood as witness, giving your tacit approval to this madcap scheme!"

Mary started to point out that there was nothing very tacit at all about it, but before she could Papa fired off another round of his verbal barrage.

"You and Sir Richard Carlisle!" He spat the name, underscored by a rustle of the newspaper as he jabbed his forefinger into it. "I imagine he wrote this little announcement, made sure it ran in all the papers, did he?"

"Imagine whatever you like."

"I don't like any of this at all, that's the whole point!"

"What your father means," Mama intervened, stepping between them, "is that we're a little hurt we had to find out our daughter got married in the morning paper."

"Along with every other Tom, Dick, and Harry in the country," said Papa through his teeth. "It's not only that. People will think she-"

"-got married on a whim," Mary cut in, sparing him some discomfort. "People do it every day. Considering what might have been said about her living with Mr Gregson for the better part of a year, we've dodged a bullet."

"We certainly have," said Mama. "What's done is done, Robert."

Mary did not miss the note of resignation in her voice, or the well of tears in her eyes; what gave her a slight twinge of regret that she'd agreed to keep Edith's marriage a secret, though, was the brave face her mother put on.

"All that matters is that Edith has at last found some happiness." She turned her imploring eyes on Mary. "She is happy, isn't she darling?"
"The happiest I've seen her," Mary replied. "And that includes my eleventh birthday when I tripped coming down the staircase and tore my new dress before my party."

Mama's eyes welled again, though this time she smiled brilliantly. "Good." She said, blinking them back with an almost savage nod of her head. "You can tell me all about the ceremony over tea. What did she wear?"

As she allowed herself to be led to the library, Mary was conscious that she was still wearing her hat. Strange as it was to be dressed as a visitor for tea in her own home, she didn't have the heart to ask her mother to excuse her upstairs to take it off. Anyway, as this was not to be her home for very much longer, feeling like a guest was a sensation she would have to grow accustomed to. It was infinitely preferable to the sensation of wandering the halls in black, feeling more akin to those who no longer lived there than to those who did.

She hardly had time to reflect on her own self-awareness, however; she entered the library to find George within, standing up and holding on to the edge of the sofa cushion beside Tom, begging for bits of biscuit which his cousin Sybbie, perched on her father's knee, happily supplied.

"Hello, darling boy!"

Not until he turned at the sound of her voice, his wide grin as he edged his way around the sofa revealing mashed biscuit and a stream of slobber, did she realise how much she'd missed him in their day of separation. Not that she didn't wrinkle her nose at the prospect of what he might get on her clothes as he dropped to all fours and crawled with astonishing speed toward her.

"Thank you for not walking while Mummy was away," she said, scooping him up into her arms. "I wanted to see your Auntie Edith get married. You've a new uncle now. Can you say Uncle Evelyn?"

"Unca Evie!" Sybbie eagerly obliged.

Laughing, Mary carried George to the sitting area, settling on the sofa across from Tom. "Scarcely a member of the family for a day, and Evelyn's already got a new nickname."

"And that's another thing," said Papa, flinging the newspaper onto the coffee table as he stalked to the fireplace. "Evelyn Napier? Not that I don't like the chap very much, but wasn't he your beau, Mary?"

Mary only avoided a dramatic eye roll because Carson came over with tea. "Once upon a time," she said, standing George on the Persian rug so she could hold her cup and saucer. "Evelyn and I make very good friends, Papa."

"He never proposed to her," Mama said, sitting down beside Mary, leaning toward George to pull silly faces at him. "He meant to, but he changed his mind when he realized Mary thought him a bit boring."

China clinked as Mary set her cup down on her saucer too quickly in her surprise. "Where on earth did you get an idea like that?"

"Why, Evelyn told me!"

Mary was too busy goggling to ask her mother for further explanation.

"Better a boring husband than a boorish one," Papa muttered.

"Edith must find Evelyn interesting enough to satisfy him," said Mama, "and if we didn't get to give
our daughter a wedding, we can certainly give her a wedding celebration. Yet another reason to make this house party a real occasion!"

Nanny arrived to collect the children. While Mary went to the sideboard for a sandwich and a slice of cake—I have missed the fruits of Mrs Patmore’s kitchen, she told Carson, who said he'd be sure to pass her compliments on to the cook-Mama retrieved her party-planning lists from the secretary. As the women resumed their places on the high-backed red sofa, Tom vacated his, eyebrows at Mary in a look that told her she might much rather join him and Papa discussing estate business.

"Cora, she's only just got off the train. Is now really the time to go into all that?"

Mary silently blessed her father for trying to spare her, miffed as he was—although most probably he was more concerned with sparing himself hearing more about what had no doubt been Mama's incessant chatter on the subject. Still, she didn't have the heart to ask her mother to wait until she'd at least taken her hat off, so she perused the guest list as she ate a cucumber sandwich, enjoying the low rumble of the masculine voices in the background.

"Who is…” She squinted at her mother's spidery script. "…Miss Sarah Bunting?"

At this, Papa and Tom fell silent, the latter going—most intriguingly—red in the face.

"She's the new-" His words came out choked, and he cleared his throat. "Miss Bunting teaches school. In the village."

"Which," Papa said, "is precisely why I must ask: why is she on the guest list?"

"Why shouldn't she be?” Mama rejoined. "She's a friend of Tom's. Isn't she, Tom?"

"Well we've spoken a few times."

"My dear," Papa tried again, "you know I defer to you in these matters, but are you certain this is quite the place for Miss Bunting? Only I can't imagine how a school teacher might fit in."

It seemed not to occur to him how this remark might—indeed did, if his body language, hands clasped behind his back, eyes fixed out the library windows—make Tom feel.

"I don't know," Mary said. "Lately I've been surprised to discover how easily people fit into places you'd never expect them to."

Tom gave her a grateful smile, but Papa huffed.

"I suppose that's your way of saying the Carlisle clan have embraced you with open arms? That they've convinced you they're in the right after the brother invaded our home and insulted all of us—including Tom?"

"Robert…” said Mama, through her teeth, though her eyes were not on the husband she was admonishing, but on Mary's left hand, folded over the right in her lap. Or rather, on the amethyst ring she wore on her fourth finger.

"Of course George Carlisle wasn't in the right that night." Mary glanced at Tom as she stood, but he avoided making eye contact. "That isn't all there is to him, and yes, I have become rather fond of Richard's family. So much so that I offered to live in Edinburgh when we marry, so he can be nearer to them. In fact the wheels are already in motion for the purchase of a home there. Craigcrook Castle."
"How lovely that sounds," said Mama. "Will Richard renovate it?"

Alas, her attempt at pacification had precisely the opposite effect.

Jaw tight, lips scarcely moving, Papa said, "The man has driven away Cousin Isobel, and has all but spirited away our daughter and grandson, but yes, by all means, let's discuss his plans to ruin yet another great house with his vulgar renovations!"

His mockery stung, but Mary maintained her composure, forcing herself not to twist the engagement ring around her finger.

"It isn't my wish to discuss any of it," she said. "Only to inform you of my intentions to marry Sir Richard and to live in Edinburgh. I may be your daughter, but I am an adult, and my decisions are not up for debate."

Her heart was pounding, the blood pumping so loudly in her ears that she almost couldn't hear herself. She paused to draw a calming breath, relieved when her father, apparently, took her at her word and did not take the break in her speech to make it into a debate anyway.

"That said," she went on, smiling slightly, "I do appreciate that you want only the best for George and me. I'm confident that in the end, you'll be glad your daughter won't always be a widow and your grandson an orphan. Now if you will excuse me-I'll just go up and take off my hat."

The view from the top of the hill had always been one of Mary's favourites, but today she felt as though she were seeing it for the first time. Always before she'd viewed the house itself, a study in perfect symmetry framed by the clearing in the woods above and the two great Lebanon cedars below. Now, she took in the whole panorama, the house but one feature in the midst of the greater outlying property, miles of pasture and farmland, a patchwork quilt of uses or, more accurately, possible uses, which Tom had been filling her in on.

"Downton needs to generate more income," he said. "With this much land, there's no reason why it can't. We've just got to farm it more intensively. In some cases that means absorbing some of the tenancies. In others, that'll mean partnering with the more capable farmers. Mr Drewe, for example."

Papa and Tom had discussed-or debated-Timothy Drewe in London. Born and bred on Yew Tree Farm, Mr Drewe returned to Yorkshire in the summer to attend his father's funeral and with the intention of taking over the tenancy which had been his family's legacy for generations. Monetarily, it made most sense to foreclose on the unproductive farm, and Matthew would have suggested exactly that. Papa, of course, disagreed, and Tom was caught in the interesting position of agreeing with him for once, if not for precisely the same reasons. Drewe, it was decided, would stay, and embark upon a new venture in pig farming which, if it failed, would not be disastrous. If it succeeded, on the other hand, it would be a boon indeed.

"It sounds as if you've got it well in hand," Mary said. "Papa, of course, will simply be thrilled the land won't be broken up and sold to a beer manufacturer."

"We'll let Haxby have the monopoly in hops for now." Grinning, Tom turned, gesturing for her to go ahead as they made their way through the clearing back to where he'd parked the truck, a few early fallen leaves crunching beneath their boots. "Talking of which, am I to understand Mr Battle's management of Haxby Park is responsible for the purchase of Craigcrook Castle?"

She didn't dare say so, given their past alteration, but the way Tom said it reminded her of George Carlisle's reaction to the news that Richard meant to buy the property: not resentful, precisely, but
bemused by the disparity in his brother's style of living to his own. Mary's neck pricked beneath the collar of her purple coat.

"Don't let the word castle deceive you. It's four and a half acres compared to Haxby's twelve thousand, and the house itself is rather small."

"You and I have vastly different definitions of small. Is it larger than Downton Place?"

Mary met his eye as he opened the door of the truck for her. "Do you think I'd have agreed to it if it wasn't?"

"Not for a moment."

They shared a laugh as Tom handed her up into the vehicle, but by the time he'd come around to his side and climbed into the driver's seat, Mary became serious again.

"I hope you don't feel I'm shirking my responsibilities as co-owner," she said. "I know estate management's something of a compromise of your own beliefs, and I do mean to take an interest in things, for George's sake."

"Not at all," Tom said. "On the contrary I think it's brave of you. Striking out, building your new life in a new place."

Mary relaxed against her seat. "I'm not sure if it's brave so much as about time. Wouldn't Sybil say so?"

She'd looked at Tom as she said it, and although he returned her smile, sadly, his eyes fixed on his hands as they rested on the steering wheel.

"Sybil would've been thrilled to see you follow your heart, wherever it may lead." He glanced sideways, with a twinkle of mischief. "In this case, a smallish castle with a scant four and a half acres."

"And a hot-headed, frequently disagreeable brother-in-law?"

Tom's brow furrowed beneath the brim of his cap; to his credit, he only said, "Sybil had to deal with one of those, too."

"Indeed." More seriously, Mary added, "I've often wished I were as brave as her. It means a lot, coming from you."

"I definitely saw her in you yesterday, when you stood up to your father for Sir Richard."

The soft look on his face made it plain he was thinking of the night he and Sybil announced their engagement, and she'd done battle for him in the drawing room. Abruptly, though, the lines of his brow and jaw appeared more harshly drawn, and an edge pushed the lilt from his brogue as he went on:

"Not that I'm entirely sure he's deserving of it, but if you can forgive him, it's not my place to hold a grudge in your stead."

"Fair enough."

He started the truck, the roar of the engine effectively putting an end to the conversation. As Tom turned onto the road, which was little more than twin trails worn in the hillside, Mary decided not to
"What about you, Tom?" she asked instead. "Where is your heart leading? You mentioned a while back you wouldn't stay at Downton forever."

He didn't answer at once, and she listened to the crunch beneath the tires and the scraping over overgrown bushes against the fenders, fearing she'd overstepped the mark.

At length, he said, "I think it's telling me to stay here. For a while yet."

Mary couldn't say she wasn't pleased he'd be here during her stays at Downton, or that George would have a cousin to play with in the nursery. "Would that decision have anything to do with your friend Miss Bunting?"

Tom kept his eyes on the road, but his grin broadened. "It may have. A little."

As Mary had posed the question, she was a surprised when the answer gave her a little twinge. Their conversation up till now had brought Sybil near, almost a physical presence alongside Tom, only for it to withdraw again, a little further even than before, with the idea of him moving on. It was right, of course, that he should, as she had, but she empathised with what Isobel, and Papa felt with regard to her impending remarriage.

More than that, though, she empathised with what Tom felt.

"Tell me about her," she said.

Tom released the steering wheel with one hand, reaching back to rub the back of his neck. "Well... she's political."

*Of course she is.*

"Good," Mary said, cheerfully. "She'll make for a terribly interesting dinner party."
Lesser of Two Evils

Chapter Summary

Two years after he left Downton in disgrace, Richard finds himself a guest there once again. But is he the only one who makes the Crawleys' hackles rise?

September, 1922

"Sir Richard Carlisle," Carson intoned, his bass voice sonorous over the hum of guests mingling in Downton's great hall and the strains of jazz music on the phonograph Rose insisted on setting up in one corner.

The talking did not stop entirely, although the volume dropped as the partygoers' attention drifted from their conversation partners to the most recent arrival. Mary was as curious as any of them. She didn't excuse herself from Lady Amelia Semphill or her mother, the Viscountess-soon-to-be Dowager Viscountess-Gillingham, but watched her parents receive Richard.

"Carlisle," Papa said, by way of greeting, his lips scarcely moving.

Richard replied in kind: "Grantham."

They dropped hands like hot coals, only for Mama to catch Richard's in both of hers, her own welcome as gushing as Papa's had been restrained. The taut lines of Richard's face relaxed, crinkles appearing at the corners of his eyes and dimples in his cheeks as he smiled, no doubt in response to the thanks she lavished on him for arranging Dame Nellie Melba's concert to follow dinner. Bright blue eyes flickered sideways, finding Mary in a glance that was at once conspiratorial and compelled her to abandon Lady Gillingham and Amelia.

Before she'd got quite out of earshot, she heard the former muse to her daughter: "Sir Richard Carlisle…Why do I feel I've heard that name recently? I know he's the one with the newspapers-

"Tony's buying Haxby Park from him, Mama. The estate he was stuck with after Lady Mary threw him over for her Mr Crawley."

"Ah, yes…"

It was all Mary could do to keep walking away from them, although her pace slowed and her shoulders stiffened.

"But it would appear he's come back," said Lady Gillingham.

"Like a boomerang."

Mother and daughter tittered, but the sound died as Edith rounded the corner of the staircase on her new husband's arm, looking more bridal than she had at their wedding: the metallic beaded dress she'd danced in at the hotel now sported a trailing train from her shoulders, which made Mary feel underdressed her own gown of plum lace. As her sister's elopement, and "poor old Evelyn's decline" since he broke off his engagement to Amelia's sister-in-law before the War became the new subject of their gossip, Mary proceeded to Richard, who was still in her mother's clutches—quite literally.
"Has Dame Nellie got settled in comfortably?" he inquired with a glance toward the vestibule, where Carson oversaw Alfred collecting cloaks from the newly arrived Fothergills. A lopsided grin of mischief pulled at his mouth, and he added, "I hope she hasn't thrown the staff into an uproar with a diva's demands.

Mama blinked, following his gaze to the servants with her own. "Not that I'm aware of." Her wide eyes settled once more on Richard. "Are you sure you won't reconsider staying here?"

Papa coughed.

"That's a hospitable offer, Lady Grantham," Richard said, emphasizing lady, "but York is more convenient for my business at Haxby."

"Of course," she ceded—but only with regard to sleeping arrangements. She persisted, "I'm sure Mary would love for you to come over Monday, after the party's broken up. We're having a little family celebration for George's birthday."

Papa looked as though he might choke, and Mary was at the brink of intervening—though she hadn't the slightest idea how—when Richard slipped his hands into his pockets and said, quietly, "Thank you, again, Lady Grantham. I've already told Mary that I'm mindful of that day's significance for her, and for you all. I shouldn't wish to impose myself, when I'm not strictly family."

"I do hope you enjoy your evening," Mama said, then turned to receive Sir Laurence and Lady Fothergill.

Although Richard appeared cool and collected sauntering toward Mary, she felt the warmth of his sigh of relief against her cheek as he leaned in to kiss her softly. As he drew back, she glimpsed Amelia and Lady Gillingham over his shoulder, regarding this affectionate greeting from her former fiancé with raised eyebrows.

"Cocktail, Sir Richard?" said Thomas, coming by with a tray.

Ignoring the smirk which he, unlike Carson, did not have the good grace to mask, Mary said, "I think it's a necessity, for him to overcome the shock of being made such an offer at Downton."

Richard didn't deny it as he took a drink, and a glimpse of Thomas' face as he went off to serve other guests made Mary strongly suspect that his account of this moment would be a source of mirth in the servants' hall.

"You see?" she said. "Papa and Carson are coming into the Twenties, even if they are kicking and screaming and the way. Talking of which..." She tucked her hand into the crook of Richard's elbow, directing him with a gentle squeeze of her fingers toward the fireplace. "I hope you'll come along quietly to speak to Granny."

"I may require another cocktail for that."

Richard got a reprieve when they were intercepted en route to Granny by Rose, who didn't wait for an introduction.

"I'm Mary's cousin Rose-Rose MacClare—I've been simply dying to meet you!" The gaze she swept over him, and the upward quirk of her eyebrows at Mary, indicated this was not in the least an exaggeration. "How splendid that we're to have another Scotsman in the family. Daddy will be over the moon. But what a shame we haven't got Duneagle anymore! You'd have loved it."

Mary felt a flutter of panic at the reference to what might have been, but thankfully Richard took
Rose's remark in the spirit with which it was intended.

"I'm sure I should. You'll have to visit us at Craigcrook, and your parents, when next they're in the country. It's a far cry from Duneagle, but-"

"Craigcrook's in Edinburgh and I adore Edinburgh. Only I wish it were a bit closer to Downton. Are you sure you and Mary truly don't want to keep Haxby Park? You could throw the most ripping parties there."

"Were'n't you telling me only yesterday how much you were looking forward to Miss Lane Fox's parties?" Mary chided.

Rose laughed. "Oh, what a funny coincidence, there she is now!" Carson was just announcing the arrival of the Honourable Miss Lane Fox and Lord Gillingham. "Wait here, Sir Richard, I'll introduce you."

They did not wait, Mary deeming it an opportune moment to get on with his reunion with Granny as Tom was with her to take the edge off. Slightly surprised at how willingly Richard allowed her to lead him onward, she started to tease him about the cocktail, when it occurred to her that the couple who were buying his estate might rank about as high on his list of people to meet tonight as the Duchess of Yeoville presently did on Tom's.

"...of course, your grace," he was saying to her, and Mary cringed—but wished she had not when she saw the expression mirrored on her grandmother's face.

"Never address a duchess as your grace," Granny admonished him when her old friend, trying unsuccessfully not to look befuddled by Tom's blunder, took herself off to speak to poor Lady Raven, "unless you're a servant or an official at formal gatherings."

"Isn't this a formal gathering?" Tom asked, tugging at his white bowtie. He hadn't meant it as a joke, but Richard chuckled.

"A formal social gathering." Mary's fingers dug into Richard's arm as she bit her tongue against the urge to remind him that he'd once fumbled with terms of address, too. *Lady Painswick,* indeed.

"I thought that was the whole point?" came the broadly accented tones of Miss Bunting, who'd been watching the scene unfold. "To remind us at all times of the divide between the upper and lower classes?"

"Ah, but the upper classes don't like to be reminded of it when they're forced to mix with us," Richard said, and the schoolteacher's eyes gleamed, regarding him as a co-conspirator.

"And you are-?"

"A man who doesn't keep his promises," Granny said under her breath.

"I would express my regrets on that score, Lady Grantham," Richard replied, "but to do so would be an insult to your granddaughter."

"My—we certainly can't have that," Mary joked, though she hardly felt it; rather, she felt as though she might need the second drink. "Miss Bunting, this is my fiancé, Sir Richard Carlisle."

Some of the wind appeared to have gone out of her sails, Mary noted with pleasure—as did Granny, who snorted as she picked her way around the group—but the schoolteacher recovered. "So not exactly one of us."
Richard regarded her tolerantly from above the rim of his glass. "I gather you fancy yourself a Socialist, Miss Bunting."

"I don't fancy, I am one."

"I knew a lot of you, as a fledgling journalist. In fact my fellow Liberals regard me as something of a Leftist."

He shook his head slightly as he said this, as though not believing any rational person could think such a thing of him. Tom's face revealed he, too, was skeptical of this notion, while Miss Bunting's expression begged Richard to go on. He took another sip, and Mary feared suddenly that it might have been better if before-dinner drinks hadn't come to Downton; he'd put his foot in his mouth often enough in the old days without cocktails loosening his tongue.

"There were a few ideas that attracted me, once upon a time. Alas-" He gave Miss Bunting a pointed look, and his tone changed from teasing to dead serious. "the rigid organisation and endless talking did not."

"No. I can only imagine a millionaire publisher shouldn't like to listen to all that talking about wealth."

"Perhaps I ought to have said it was the nursery tantrums I grew weary of." He spoke deliberately, seeming almost unperturbed by her mockery, but clearly reining in his temper at her mockery, as he was accustomed to doing with his brother. "You can stomp and shake your fists and shout all you like, Miss Bunting, but it's the men like me, the pioneers, who bring the real reform. We show that anything is possible."

Miss Bunting spluttered, her eyes darting past him to Tom, looking to him for help. But Tom didn't seem aware of her, his brow furrowed as he considered what had been said. Richard turned his back on the schoolteacher, putting an effective end to the debate as he extended his hand to Tom.

"Mr Branson."

"Sir Richard."

"Just Richard, please-after all, it's a social gathering, and we're to be family."

Tom did not return the courtesy of inviting Richard to use his Christian name. If this perturbed Richard, his face didn't show it, though his free hand slipped into his trouser pocket and he eyed the dregs at the bottom of his glass before he went on.

"I'd be interested to hear whether being the manager of a great house has changed your perspective at all. Why, we may even find we have a deal in common now."

"On the other hand we may not," Tom replied. "You underestimate the strength of my convictions and my tolerance for organisation and talking."

"Then I look forward to spirited debate."

"Give yourself a little credit, Tom," said Mary, "you've certainly changed your tune about sitting through formal dinner parties."

She was rewarded with an exaggerated eyeroll from her brother-in-law; and she sipped from her cocktail to smother the smile that formed as she met Richard's twinkling eyes over the rim of the glass.
Dinner passed without incident—"Which is perhaps eventful in and of itself," Mary couldn't resist remarking when Mama grasped her hand whispered her relief as she led the other ladies through to the drawing room for coffee.

"A rather old-fashioned bookend to a dinner party," Edith said, her eyes trained on the dining room door as it shut on the men, lingering over port wine and cigars, "considering we began with cocktails."

"I quite agree," said Miss Bunting, sidling alongside Edith. "Some women can vote now. Presumably some of them would enjoy discussing what they're voting for."

"May we expect you to start picketing in front of the door?" asked Granny.

Although the harsh Miss Bunting in no way resembled sweet Sybil, Mary nevertheless recognised her in the righteous indignation which burned in the schoolteacher's eyes. A glance at Edith, smiling sadly, with soft eyes, showed that she saw it, too. That did not, of course, mean that either of them had any intention of standing in solidarity with her as a sister against Granny's sarcasm; fortunately for all of them, their cousin intervened.

"Miss Bunting," Rose said, linking arms with the teacher and drawing her aside, "have you made it over to Thirsk to see The Bohemian Girl? If you haven't, you simply must take a break from marking spelling tests. Gladys Cooper is simply marvellous…"

"Is it really terribly old-fashioned?" Mama implored, eyes rounded with worry as she glanced around the drawing room at her female guests, milling about the drawing room in bejewelled clusters. "Only it seemed practical to separate after dinner, to give Dame Nellie time to warm up before the recital."

"Don't worry," Mary reassured her. "Edith's not as concerned with Downton being modern as she is with not being parted from her husband for half an hour."

"Funny," Edith came back. "I was about to ask whether you're worried about what trouble your fiancé might get into without your gentling influence?"

"On the contrary. I think it's for the best that Miss Bunting and he are kept out of the same room for as long as possible."

Edith gave her a dubious look, and rightly so; as Mary made a circuit of the room, moving closer to the dining room door, she only half-heard the conversations with the other ladies, ears trained for raised voices on the other side. Not Richard's—he always remained so cool as he needled other people, as he was with Tom and Miss Bunting before dinner.

As he was when the men finally emerged, the thick odour of cigar smoke wafting with them into the drawing room. Her father and Tony Gillingham, on the other hand, could not mask their piqued expressions quickly enough to escape the notice of their women. Mabel Lane Fox, whose conversation with Mary had mutually lapsed when the men came through, touched her arm lightly to excuse herself and went to her fiancé.

"Tony, darling," she said, softly, "you're so terribly handsome when you're cross, but I hope you can find your party mood again."

"How could I not, when I'm back in the room with you?" Tony attempted to smile at her, but the corners of his mouth tugged downward again as his dark eyes, beneath knit brows, settled on Evelyn's colleague from the Home Office who'd just come through, looking oblivious to having caused any trouble. "And away from that Blake chap."
"What did he say?" Mama's stage whisper to Papa drew Mary's attention to them.

"Only that he wished for the downfall of the aristocracy," he replied, eying his coffee it as if he wished it were something rather stronger.

"Then by no means must we let Miss Bunting get him in her clutches," Granny said. "That would be an unholy alliance."

The alliance that Blake chap seemed intent on forming at the moment, however, was with Richard. Mary moved to join them at once, Mr Blake's strident tones reaching her halfway across the room.

"You're a Liberal, Sir Richard. Surely you don't disagree that if the landowners want to keep their lands and the hands to work them, they must modernise their farms?"

"In theory, Mr Blake, I do agree with you. But you, like so many urban Liberals, are naïve about rural realities."

"Would you care to enlighten me as to those realities, Carlisle, as you are apparently a unique urban Liberal?"

"Gladly. Country people, rich or poor, don't take kindly to being told they're doing everything wrong and that we know better."

Mary choked back a laugh at that, the sound drawing Richard's eye, briefly. Yes, his past at Downton had given him first hand experience dealing with country people.

Returning his full attention to Mr, Blake, he went on: "You seem to believe that our leaders are touting agricultural reform for reasons other than to sway the rural vote from the Conservatives. That strikes me as incredibly naïve."

"Politicians making appeals to promote their own agendas?" Mary quipped, coming to stand beside Richard. "You'd better phone your editor to stop the presses."

He looked down at her with a smirk, but Mr Blake was not amused.

"Change will come. I don't believe for a moment that a modern, self-made man like you is so disillusioned as to think otherwise."

Richard lifted his chin as he faced the other man. "A little advice, Mr Blake: if you wish to hasten that change, try not to sound like a Bolshevik when you talk about it to the aristocracy. There's no need to frighten people before you turn their world upside-down."

At that point, Mr Blake wisely extricated himself from the discussion. Miss Bunting, who had been listening nearby, followed—much to Granny's chagrin—though Tom, curiously, did not. Mary made a mental note to tease about whether the night hadn't revealed him to share more views with Richard than with the schoolteacher.

For now, she linked arms with her fiancé and led him further into the room. "Did Mr Blake really wish for the downfall of the aristocracy, or was Papa being hyperbolic?"

"What do you think? Blake overheard Gillingham compliment the improvements to Haxby, and took it as an invitation to lecture on the decline of the English countryside. Which is a bit rich, coming from a man set to inherit a baronetcy and sizeable estate in Ireland."

"Is he? How disappointed Miss Bunting will be to learn he's another one of us."
They took coffee, and Mabel beckoned them over to the fireplace, where she and Tony were talking with Edith and Evelyn.

"It's probably not the sort of thing one ought to say in mixed company," she said, "but I thought Sir Richard ought to know I can hardly wait to take my first bath at Haxby."

Mary's eyebrows went up at that.

"Heavens," Richard replied smoothly, although Mary thought his cheeks had pinkened slightly, "are you sure it's only coffee you've been imbibing in?"

"The en suites are the epitome of luxury," Mabel went on, uninhibited. "I shall feel I'm on an extended stay at an hotel, rather than living in my own home."

Mary felt the rumble of Richard's polite chuckle, low enough that she could still hear her father mutter:

"This is all your doing, Cora, saddling a couple of newlyweds with that monstrosity."

"Not everybody finds modern creature comforts an affront to good taste," came Mama's taut reply, as if through her teeth. "Ladies and gentlemen," she said, suddenly full voce, fluttering from Papa's side, "Carson's just given the signal that Dame Nellie's ready to grace us with song."

"Shall we?" Richard said, offering Mary his arm.

"We shall. Although," she added as he escorted her through the saloon to the music room, "I can't help but feel that after all this entertaining conversation we've had tonight, Dame Nellie's performance may be superfluous."

"I should hope not," he replied, good-natured but not precisely joking, "given the strings I had to pull to get her here."

The opera recital included the familiar O mio babbino caro, and Mary woke the next morning with the aria stuck in her head. She was humming it, in fact, when Anna brought the breakfast tray.

"Your ladyship enjoyed the recital, I take it?"

They hadn't discussed the concert last night; it had ended late, and from across the music room Anna's slightly puffy face bore signs of the fatigue Mary remembered from the latter months of her own pregnancy. She'd dismissed the maid, insisting she'd got used to doing for herself in Edinburgh, and Anna hadn't put up much of a protest.

"I did," Mary replied—although when Dame Nellie introduced the Puccini aria, in which a young woman pleads for her father to accept her lover, Richard and she had turned to each other with mirrored expressions of raised eyebrows. *What strings did you pull to get her to perform* that? she'd murmured to him during the applause which followed, and he'd sworn up and down he'd made no such request. Despite his track record for honesty, Mary had not been fully convinced until he pointed out that he would never compare her to a character who begged her father for anything.

"What about you?" Mary asked Anna. "Were you transported to higher planes of delight by Dame Nellie?"

The maid bent—with some difficulty due to her increased midsection—to retrieve Mary's discarded evening clothes from the dressing table bench, and moved with a rolling gait toward the wardrobe.
Baby Bates seemed to be, if it's not too indelicate to say."

"You saw me through childbirth. I should think we're well past indelicacies."

"It was like a Ghillies ball inside me."

"That settles it: you must be having a girl, a born reeler like her mother."

Looking pleased, Anna said, "I did find it a tad distracting from Dame Nellie, though."

"Quite." Mary smiled, remembering a similar experience at the cinema in Ripon when she was expecting George. By the third time Matthew had to stand up so she could squeeze around him to get to the ladies' room, he and the other film-goers had been grumbling in frustration about paying *not to watch* For Her Father's Sake. "What about Bates?"

"Opera's not really to his taste. Or mine, truth be told. I suppose it's one of those things that takes some growing on some people?"

It certainly had on her since Richard took her to see The Barber of Seville in London. She hadn't considered herself a great fan then—even now she was by no means an *aficionada*—yet last night's concert had touched her deeply, Dame Nellie's song choices evoking the full range of emotions she'd experienced over the course of the past year since Matthew's death. Which was another reason why she'd wanted to be alone afterward, in the bedroom they'd shared.

"Still," Anna's voice, underscored by the soft thump of the drawer in which she'd replaced the evening gloves, pulled Mary out of her reverie. "I appreciate the opportunity to hear fine music. Dame Nellie Melba, here at Downton. Sir Richard knows all sorts, doesn't he?"

"His father was a great lover of opera," Mary replied; of course the fresh loss of Mark Carlisle had not been insignificant to her emotional response to the music, and Richard had held her hand tightly throughout the performance. "What were you and he talking about afterward?"

After the awkward conversations he'd been a part of earlier in the evening, Mary had been a little surprised when Richard left her side following the concert—even more so when she saw him drawing a slightly alarmed-looking Anna aside for a conversation he obviously intended to be private. Even now the maid did not look entirely comfortable as she opened a drawer to take out a fresh set of underclothes.

"Oh…that…" She turned her head to look at Mary in bed. "He apologised, your ladyship."

Mary sloshed tea onto her saucer. "Apologised?"

"Not in so many words, but…he said he knew he'd made me uncomfortable all those years ago and for what it was worth, my integrity and indomitability make me exactly the sort of woman he likes to employ, and if I ever fancy a change in careers, to apply. As what, I haven't the faintest idea," she added, a smile easing the tension from her features. "I don't know the first thing about typing or shorthand—pity I didn't learn from Gwen—and clearly I won't be working at all for much longer."

The hand holding the lingerie came to rest against her belly, the free one in the small of her back as she made her lumbering way back to lay them out on the dressing table. "Of course Sir Richard knows that, and it doesn't make the gesture any less meaningful."

"Why, Anna," said Mary, picking up her teacup again, struggling not to let her voice reveal how surprised and pleased she was by this development, "Perhaps you'll find Sir Richard's a bit like opera."
Anna's eyes met Mary's in the mirror, an old conspiratorial gleam in them which made a small, selfish part of Mary wish that her maid were not in a condition that would prevent them going on like this for always.

George's first birthday did not dawn so much as lighten a little, the rain which began during the night continuing through the day as a steady drizzle from impenetrable grey clouds. Given the other anniversary shared by the date, this might have cast rather a gloomy mood, but instead Mary felt that after a weekend of entertaining house guests, and venturing out in the morning to pay her respects in the churchyard, the weather lent an air of cosiness to the family celebration held at tea-time in the library before the first roaring fire of the autumn.

There were presents for him to open. Or rather, his cousin Sybbie, who had a year's more experience with presents, tore off the wrapping paper, whilst George was content to keep the adults on their toes preventing his eating the shredded bits. He received books and wooden blocks, a handsome rocking horse from Auntie Edith and Uncle Evelyn. "Never too early to start training for Olympia," the latter drawled, while Uncle Tom joked about his own gift of a football: "And in Ireland, we can dribble a football before we can walk."

"Well," Mary replied, wiping George's glistening chin with a serviette, "you'd be correct about the dribble."

Isobel, who had stayed in Manchester, sent an album of photographs of the Turnbull side of the family, and the American side were not to be outdone: a teddy bear came from Grandmamma, and toy boats from Uncle Harold, who'd enclosed a barely legible note which, after some moments' scrutiny, they deciphered: When you're older, I'll get you a yacht!

"Carlisle will love him," Papa muttered, the acerbity of the remark not making it any less accurate.

Richard’s family remembered George, too, the soon-to-be cousins having sent homemade cards, Aileen, a knitted jumper. And of course there was a present from Richard himself, a toy castle, whose single tower rising from the centre made them all think of Downton even before they read the enclosed card which said he'd purchased it for the likeness. You might make your electric train go past it, to remind you it's only a six hours to Downton by railway.

"He and Sybbie could set up their farm animals around it, too," said Mary, "and play Modernise the English Countryside."

"You'll have to invite Mr Blake over to join them," said Edith, provoking a sheepish look from her husband.

"Please," said Papa, getting up from the sofa, "let's not cast a shade on George's birthday by mentioning that ghastly prospect, even in jest."

He went to the sideboard where the tea things were laid out, leaving the others to ooh and aah over the castle. After a moment Mary looked up to find him watching her, so she joined him, asking Carson for a cup of tea.

"He still doesn't like us, does he?" asked Papa.

She knew he did not refer to Mr Blake. "He likes Rose." Lifting an eyebrow, she added, "You still don't like him, do you?"

"I wish I could say differently, Mary, but if I'm honest, I'm not sure I ever shall. That being said..." He looked back to George and his castle. "He's trying to understand us, isn't he? He understands
"Yes, Papa."

"Then that's a start."

Mary swallowed her tea painfully, surprised that a knot had formed in her throat. Unwilling to let her emotions get the better of her today, of all days, she drew a steadying breath and set her cup on her saucer.

"Of course he'll probably try to convince George to have en suites at Downton, or not to give the servants time off at Christmas and New Year-"

This produced a snort from Carson.

"-but he'll never say you deserve to lose your estate because of your Conservatism."

"Not to my face, at least?"

"Nor to mine. I laid a few ground rules for him early on. I have him well in hand."

That coaxed a faint smile from Papa. "I believe you do." He went on, grudgingly, "I suppose it is in his own best interest that George's inheritance thrive."

"Richard's too shrewd a businessman to see George a landless peer. And-" She hesitated, once more checking a swell of emotion at the sight of her son and niece playing with the castle, then forged ahead, "he's fond of him."

They sipped their tea in silence for a moment, watching the family in a rare moment of domestic accord, until Papa said, "It's just such a shame that gaining a stepfather may have cost George a grandmother."

Although Mary felt a pang of guilt for wounding Matthew's mother, she said, "Isobel's only gone to Manchester, Papa, not the moon."

Before the conversation could go on, George chose that moment to call out, "Mama!"

He'd pulled himself up on the ottoman, grinning as he hung on with only one hand. Mary set down her teacup to go to him, only to stop as George let go of the upholstery and took his first step toward her.
"Church!" said George, as Mary lifted him down from the car to stand on short, sturdy legs on the pavement.

"Yes, darling," she said, kneeling in front of him to adjust his coat and cap-a gentleman in miniature, she thought with a smile, and was glad she hadn't asked Nanny Philips to dress him in black. "We're visiting your papa in the churchyard."

"Papa?"

The fair eyebrows drew together above the bright eyes, the expression so like the one Matthew used to wear when he was perplexed that Mary felt a twinge in her breast.

In the first months of George's life she hadn't thought-or hadn't been able to bear the thought-that he favoured Matthew, but as he grew and changed over the next two years their resemblance became too striking to deny. Mostly she found it a comfort to have a tangible piece of him, of their marriage, though from time to time she worried that it might trouble Richard. His demeanour toward the boy never changed, though, and a person who didn't know the blue-eyed, blond-haired boy he carried on his shoulders around Edinburgh was not his son never would have guessed.

While she was glad that George had got a Dada at an age when he was too young to feel the pain of fatherlessness, the ache Mary felt now was that the Papa who rested in the churchyard was a concept beyond the grasp of her son's mind. When he was of an age to understand it, would he feel a connection to the name on the headstone, to the face in the photographs which looked so like his own?

"Don't forget your flowers, George."

Isobel's voice drew Mary's gaze back to the car, where the chauffeur was handing her mother-in-law down. She held out a bouquet of autumn wildflowers George had picked from one of Matthew's favourite walks at Downton. The boy toddled back to the car, took the flowers from his grandmother, then thrust them in Mary's face.

"Mama smell?"

"Mm, like French perfume," she said, rubbing pollen from her nose. Isobel laughed softly.

A bouquet of her own in hand-callas, as she had carried on her wedding day-she took George's hand in her free one. Isobel took the other, and the two women led him up the slope, picking a familiar path around the other markers, some stone, some simple wooden crosses, some ancient and some-too many-very new, to the family plot, where Crawleys going all the way back to the first Earl of Grantham rested.

The gravestone which bore Matthew's name suited him, solid and unassuming, bearing a simple epitaph: Beloved Husband and Father.

Still holding George's hand, she stooped again, placing her bouquet at the foot of the stone, Isobel
following suit.

"Your turn, Georgie," Mary said, her voice a little choked.

He stepped forward, pulling his hand from her grasp, and dropped his wildflowers onto the grass beside the hothouse once in a messy clump. Clapping his hands, he turned back to her, beaming.

"I do it! Pitty fowers?"

Mary sniffled and laughed simultaneously. "Yes, darling, very pretty. And if your dear papa is watching us, he'll be so glad to see what a helpful boy you are. And how happy. He'd never want you to be sad on your birthday, because it was the happiest day of his life."

And of hers. She owed it to George, to herself, not to think of it as the saddest. Especially not now that she'd learnt to be happy again.

An idea bloomed, which she kept to herself until they had paid their respects and returned to the car, not to drive back to Downton, but to the train station, where Richard was due in from London. He'd scarcely disembarked and kissed her, taken George in his arms, and exchanged nods with Isobel before she asked:

"Where do you think we might find fireworks?"

"Possibly the toy shop at Thirsk," Richard replied. "But what on earth do you want fireworks for?"

*I feel as though I've swallowed a box of fireworks.*

"For George's birthday," Mary said.

"I two!" George chimed in.

"A fine reason for fireworks," Richard said with a nod, although his tone was measured with uncertainty. "Lord Grantham will no doubt see this as my extravagant influence."

"I think *Donk* has decided extravagance is perfectly acceptable where his grandchildren are concerned."

At some point as they mingled with the Gillinghams' party guests, Mary lost track of Richard.

She'd told him, when they received the invitation to Haxby Park a few weeks previous, that they needn't accept, but he, on the other hand, insisted there was no good reason to refuse.

*Only that it used to be your house,* she'd thought, but did not say.

*He* had said, "We can't snub them. A lot of prominent people will be there, and anyway…” He'd twitched his brows above twinkling eyes, the dimple winking in his cheek. "Aren't you curious to see Haxby en fête?"

In fact Mary had seen Haxby since the new owners moved in; Mabel invited her round for tea during one of her visits to Downton while Richard worked in town. That was very different to the sort of *soirée* he'd used talk about the house being the suited for, though, and while Mary had been uninterested in imagining such back then, her curiosity was piqued to see whether the fashionable new Viscountess Gillingham matched his original vision.

As it turned out, it was difficult to see, or even to hear, much of anything at the party. The great hall
was packed full of people, the strains of Jack Ross and the Lotus Club Orchestra reverberated through the space. For a time, Mary tolerated her husband’s absence from her side, assuming he’d ensconced himself in one of the state rooms with some MP or other, as he was wont to do at parties, but after a while she tired of being left on her own to repeat the same conversations with her fellow partygoers: her honeymoon to see the excavation of Tut-ankh-Amen’s tomb, the Egyptian-themed gala they’d thrown in London over the summer, which had been the event of the season, their life in Edinburgh, and the rumours that Richard was soon to be granted a peerage. She went in search of him.

To her surprise, he was not to be found in the smoking room or the library or the billiard room any of the ground floor rooms. Thinking he might have stepped outside—men at these parties did like to show off their cars—she made her way back through the crowd assembled in the hall to drink and to dance, and happened to glance upward at the chandelier, annoyed by the glare of it.

It was then that she saw him, in the gallery above, leaning against the wrought-iron balustrade to look down on the party. Mary raised a gloved hand, but Richard didn’t return the wave. He must not have seen her among the other guests—lost in thought, no doubt. She almost smiled to herself in satisfaction that her reservations about coming here were, by all appearances, correct. Not that she wanted him to be hurt by the past, but it was reassuring to know that he was not above being occasionally haunted by it, as she was.

Somehow she managed to cross the crowded hall to the staircase without being waylaid for conversation, and she quickly ascended the carpeted steps. It really was a beautiful staircase, she thought, sliding her silk evening glove over the gilt railing. Now that there were pictures hanging on the gallery walls, breaking up the vast white, it did not seem so ostentatiously big.

Still, she infinitely preferred her own, more modest, home at Craigcrook.

At the top of the stairs Mary turned around, facing Richard from the length of the gallery. Still he did not see her. She stood motionless for a moment, remembering when he’d brought her here before he bought the place, how they’d spoken to each other from opposite sides, so much empty space between them. An apt depiction of their relationship in those days.

But no more.

For one thing, they’d never hear each other above the roar of the party.

With renewed purpose, she circled the gallery toward him.

"Well," she broke the silence as she rounded the corner, and when she emerged around it he was looking at her. "It appears we did what we set out to do."

Richard’s eyebrows went up, head tilted slightly in an expression of inquiry. Mary waited until she’d drawn alongside him, her hands resting on the balustrade beside his.

"Rescued it," she elaborated. "Gave it another chapter."

He gave a short puff of a laugh. "I suppose we have. Just not one in which we feature very heavily."

For a moment neither of them spoke, both watching the party scene below.

Mary inched her hand along the railing until it brushed against Richard’s, curled her fingers lightly over his. "I know it touches a nerve to see Tony and Mabel fulfil the dream you had for it."

"You must think me a sentimental idiot, to still find it difficult to let go."
"I'm glad you are."

He gave her a sideways glare, and with a squeeze of his hand she went on:

"If it had been easy for you to let go of Haxby, you'd have sold it years ago, and wouldn't have been desperate enough to ask me to help you sell it."

He considered this, and their entwined hands resting on the ledge. "What you're saying is that buying Haxby drove us apart, but selling it brought us back together?"

That hadn't been exactly what she meant, but it was not inaccurate.

The hand not holding hers pushed off the balustrade, and he slipped it into his pocket. "At least we made a handsome profit," he said, more cheerfully. He tugged at her hand and started to turn, but Mary did not move to follow.

"Richard…"

Once again he gave her that questioning look.

She hadn't planned to tell him like this, certainly not here, not even tonight, but suddenly the timing and setting seemed exactly right.

"I'm pregnant."

For a moment he stood silent.

Then his face shifted, his eyes brightening as he gazed at her as if she were the only soul in the great house. As if none of the grandeur compared to her.

His fingers curled tight around hers, as tight as she clung to his hand, and he removed the other from his pocket to cup her cheek.

He opened his mouth as though to speak. She even heard the hitch of his breath. Beyond that, though, no sound escaped his lips. Mary lifted her chin slightly, intending to fill the pause with a joke, but as the callused pad of his thumb scuffed over her cheekbone, she found herself, too, unable to speak. And unwilling.

Richard leaned in and kissed her, there in the gallery of Haxby Park, as he had not when it was theirs.

She kissed him back, raking her fingers through his hair, smiling as much at the feeling of his mouth against hers as at the irony of it all. That by not having something, they were building a life together worth far more than either of them imagined.

Fin

Chapter End Notes

When I first posted this story as a one-shot, I never imagined it would end up becoming a 32-chapter fic of around 170k words that would occupy two years minus a few days of my life. There was quite a bit I never imagined about this story when I first started
brainstorming it in the spring of 2013 with my beta-reader vladnyrki, which I now realize is rather appropriate for this story. Telling it has been a journey I consider well worth making, and I hope reading it has been for you all, too. Thank you, so terribly much, for taking it with me. <3

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