And Then There Were None

by Laurentia

Summary

Based on the Agatha Christie novel. In 1926 the family and servants of Lord Grantham assemble for a weekend devised to put the past behind them. Only someone can't forget and one by one they are haunted by their mistakes. And one by one they pay for them.

Notes

A/N: After re-reading "And Then There Were None" for about the hundredth time (and my copy is an old one that has the title we can't say anymore) it occurred to me that our beloved Downton characters should have a similarly ghastly experience! Narrowing their numbers down to ten was a lot harder than I thought it would be so apologies to anyone who's favourites are not present - cutting out some of them really did break my heart!

I have already posted this elsewhere but for my first fic on here I wanted something I'm proud of that went down well.
Prologue

The West Yorkshire fog was particularly bad in the year 1926 and the inhabitants and guests of Downton Abbey knew they were in for a long weekend. They couldn't know how long it would eventually become.

Violet, the Dowager Countess, would have told them about the last time this occurred – Lord Grantham had barely been eight years old at the time and was therefore unlikely to remember in particularly vivid detail, even if he had been present – but alas she had passed away some four years earlier and was thus finally silent on matters such as these. Many within the household considered this a silent blessing and though she was much missed, her tongue was not. But without her guidance they were unprepared for the fog that descended upon them and though a mere change in the weather was not so problematic that it was unbearable, they were undeniable stuck.

The saving grace was that the food supplies were high and, assuming the fog did not hover for several months, they would not starve. And they had intended to be in each other's company this weekend anyway, so really things were not too bad. It was not as though anyone could control the weather and all of them agreed that the forecast had been so vague anything could have happened. No one had known after all.

Except for one.

One who had overheard the Dowager Countess, so many years ago now, talking about the changed that led up to the fog descending and had known they were all to be trapped this weekend. Cut off from the rest of the world, the phone-lines knocked out by the wind the previous week and with smog so thick even the bravest chauffeur would not dare to drive a car into it.

One who had planned it all.
Chapter One:

I.

They would be understaffed this weekend, Cora, the Dowager Countess of Grantham, noticed with a sigh. She longed to get involved and tell Mary that perhaps it would be wise to send to the village for more people with so many of their staff either having gone to the great beyond and not yet being replaced, two being on a sort of honeymoon in Kent, and those remaining unable to manage the amount of work. But it was no longer her place to do so and though Mary had made it clear that she did want some help from her Mama when it came to being a Countess, Cora remembered the feeling of being imposed upon by your predecessor all too well.

Instead she wondered through the rooms that had been her home, her world, for so many years and tried to contain any further sighing lest she start to sound like a steam train. The move from Downton to the Dower House had not been necessarily required – the new masters were after all, rather benevolent – but she had felt it was her duty. Violet had not put up a fuss when her Lord Grantham had died and had moved into her new home and Cora was determined to do her proud.

She brushed her hand over the back of the plush, lilac covered chair she had sat in when she presented her first and second daughters to visitors and considered herself lucky to have been invited at all. After everything that had happened she could well understand if some of the family didn't want to be around her.

It was all so damned unfair though…it wasn't as though it had even been her fault.

II.

Lady Edith stopped by the side of the road two miles down the road that led to Downton Abbey and got out of her motorcar. She leant against the hot metal and lit a cigarette, already mentally preparing herself for the weekend ahead. She had seen so little of her family since her Father's funeral that she could have turned up to find Mary in possession of several children for all she knew of the births and deaths

She snorted with the malicious thought that perhaps Aunt Rosamund had hated all of them as much as she did the current family. She'd been banished to London with a dead man's money and such a disgrace to all the family that none of them visited her: even Aunt Rosamund, despite the similarities of their situations, had turned on her in the end and Edith thought it the greatest insult. To be ignored by her hypocritical family was one thing but to have her exile approved by a woman who she knew had done to Uncle Marmaduke what she'd-

Edith scowled at the memories she couldn't prevent racing through her mind.

Being four years old. Being in London, in Aunt Rosamund's terribly vulgar house, knowing that downstairs her Mama was laughing with the other guests, safe in the knowledge her darling daughters were all asleep and all was right with the world. Uncle Marmaduke had been forced to retire early from the party – he'd been ill as long as Edith remembered - and she wanted to see him. She stumbled on the hem of her too long nightdress and bought her hands up to steady herself, pushing against the door heavily before she righted herself. It flew open and-

A car horn blasted as it shot past her and she jumped, nearly dropping her cigarette and taking a deep drag to steady her nerves. Who had that idiot been? She certainly cared for speed herself –
the top of the range car she was currently leaning against was a testament to that – but honestly! People should look where they were damn well going!

That idiot could have killed someone.

III.

Thomas Barrow slipped out of the drawing room unnoticed by the Dowager.

He had learnt from his predecessor that the greatest quality in a servant was being able to blend into the wall for the majority of the time before becoming visible when needed. It had sounded bloody stupid to him when he had been a second, then first, footman but now old Carson's words echoed in his head and every time he so much as folded a bleedin' napkin it felt like the man was looking over his shoulder.

He hadn't changed many things during the short time he had been in charge and in the back of his head, where he still walked behind Carson, he knew O'Brien was right and he was scared. He wasn't scared of his employers: he'd served in the trenches with Lord Grantham after all and everyone knew half the reason for his elevation had been the camaraderie they had developed, and he still thought Mary Crawley was no better than she ought to be, even if she happened to have her Mother's title now. However, he was scared that he'd do something wrong.

The people that inhabited Downton held no fear for him but the ghosts were around every corner, lurking in every cupboard and seemed to wait for him in the dead of night. The war had frayed his nerves – the last few years had made them worse with one thing and another. He ignored the Dowager Countess because he could and he never knew what to say to her anyway – she barely spoke to anyone but O'Brien these days anyway – and he had a feeling that she too was consumed with ghosts.

The front door rang and he went to answer it, glad for a living soul to interact with.

IV.

Tom Branson drove like the wind.

It felt good, after so much time, after all the hardships of the war and the many years he had spent being in service and resenting every second that he was forced to remain a mere chauffeur whilst she was in front of him, to be able to drive so recklessly again. As much as it pained him, and it was the sort of painful thought he usually dealt with by driving as fast as he could, feeling the world move around him until he felt like he had escaped the knowledge that she just hadn't damn well wanted him!

If Lady Sybil Crawley had been so inclined she could have reached out her soft, pampered hands and taken his, but he had been forever forbidden from doing the same. That had been ten years ago and he didn't know if he could forgive or forget – Sybil hadn't truly rejected him after all and Branson was nothing is not a fair man – but this weekend he was getting an unexpected opportunity for a second chance.

The war had done a lot for all the of them and he was pleased that the class boundaries had been sufficiently frayed that he, a mere chauffeur who by good fortune now owned a garage, was invited to Downton as a guest. He might not be good enough to marry the Earl's sister-in-law, but Matthew Crawley was a decent man and hadn't forgotten those that had stood shoulder to shoulder with him, knee deep in mud and sharing the fear that the next shell might have their names on it.
And maybe he'd get a chance to speak to Sybil…it had been too long and maybe enough time had passed now. He wanted to know everything she'd been up to and tell her his stories; he wasn't above admitting he'd missed having her riding in the car beside him.

V.

Anna Bates tugged at the last corner of the bed covering, making it as straight as it would go, before she turned to leave the room that had been chosen for the Dowager Countess for the duration of her stay. She knew it wasn't her place to say anything, but couldn't help but think the younger Lady Grantham might be pushing her luck a bit by putting her Mother in her old bedroom.

The relationship between the two women was not exactly sparkling these days and Anna smoothed off the bottom of the bed before turning to leave. The door was opened before she could leave it and an unwelcome obstacle stood in her path. She muttered a polite greeting to Miss O'Brien and quickly by-passed the older woman – the last thing she needed was a reminder of the choice that had been put towards her the other day.

She supposed there were worst positions to be in in life. Only a week ago Lady Mary, the Countess she should say, had asked her whether she would like to advance to being her official lady's maid, or whether she would prefer to continue on as she was and be the Housekeeper in a few more years. They were both better jobs, she and John had both said so when they'd discussed it, but she knew that if she took either of them then it could be the end of any dreams she had for her future.

There would be no children for them if she was a Housekeeper or lady's maid – it had been hard enough for them to get married and keep their jobs, she doubted whether their employers would stretch to them having a baby. They were not on the most solid of grounds anyway. The Countess was on her side, Anna knew that Mary really didn't have much choice given the scandal she could reveal if she was feeling spiteful, but the new Earl did not favour Bates in the way his predecessor had. Her husband only really had the job because Anna had begged them to keep him on and by unfortunate happenstance Molesley had lost his life in the war.

She needed to make a decision. But which?

She forgot it for the time being, having more pressing things to worry about, and walked purposefully downstairs to organise the maids before coming back up to see to the Countess. She was doing both jobs anyway so if she chose soon she might get respite from one of them at least.

She resolved to get this weekend out of the way first. Things might be clearer come Monday.

VI.

Matthew Crawley, the 7th Earl of Grantham, stood up in his study as he heard the front door bell ring for the second time. His Mother-in-law, he was pleased to note, had not inherited her predecessors desire to control and instruct along with her title and had done them the courtesy of not barging in. He thought it really was a mark of Cora's character that she never gave the slightest outward hint that she resented now being a guest in her own home.

He listened at the door, feeling something of a recluse for refusing to leave his sanctuary until he was sure the newly arrived guest was someone he didn't need his wife by his side to speak to. The voices were muffled and he was glad Thomas had the sense to escort them towards the drawing room – he'd heard Cora go in their earlier and he didn't really want to be present for some reunions.
He sighed and slumped back down into the chair by the crackling fireplace, wondering how he had reached this point. He had been a confident man once, a man who had twice put himself in the firing line – once quite literally and the other when he had come into a world more foreign to him than war had ever been. But now he was a shadow of his former self. He wasn't alone of course and he kept Thomas Barrow in his household partly out of benevolence, but partly due to the guilty fact it reminded him that his own state could have been worse.

Seeing Tom Branson might not help as much. If ever a man had shrugged off what had happened in the war then it was Branson, but Matthew couldn't begrudge him his easily sated conscience and nerves. Branson had recovered, Thomas couldn't and as for him…well he didn't deserve to recover did he?

VII.

Sarah O'Brien finished unpacking Cora's case for the weekend, long since having stopped wondering why her ladyship needed quite so much for the sake of one weekend, most of which she would probably spend in bed. There wasn't anything wrong with her strictly speaking, but even Sarah was unable to convince her that extended bed-rest was only going to make her weaker.

She never argued and really this weekend wouldn't be too bad – it would be bizarre to sleep in Mrs Hughes old bedroom though, her own had been given to Anna after she'd left for the Dower House – and she'd be able to speak to Thomas over the few days they were here. Assuming the young man managed to spare her a moment between all his new duties. She smiled slightly at the thought – he'd done well. After all the plotting and planning, he's gone further than they'd thought he could for his age.

Small mercies she supposed.

She picked up Cora's shawl at the last minute and slipped down the servant's staircase until she found herself in an utterly deserted kitchen. The smell of slowly roasting beef came from the over and other than various great pots on the stove simmering away there was no one to be seen. She knew the cook was away for the evening: exactly how old Patmore had managed to swing that when there were exactly four of them to look after the whole bloody house, O'Brien would never know.

She sighed and sat down wishing she could be pleased with the way things had changed. Maybe…if the heir had been a child and his Mother and Father were still in their seats…

She pushed the thought aside, unable to bear it. But she couldn't help but wonder whether the family would be quite so scattered if the heir had lived.

VIII.

Lady Sybil Crawley smiled at Thomas as she went past him towards the drawing room. She could never think of him as simply Barrow, as really he should be known now, but then again, she still couldn't quite think of this house as being anything other than her Father's. She didn't resent Matthew as some had in the past, but she still found it difficult.

The war really had been rather helpful for her.

The need for nurses had been high and her training, whilst rushed, was as good as anyone was ever going to receive in terms of experience. After the war people had ceased to sneer at the daughter of an Earl trying to enter the workplace and she had done a great deal better than even she had anticipated and she was already the ward sister. From the moment she had first stepped
onto a ward, ten years ago now, she had known she wanted to help. Even in the early days when she'd been largely hopeless she'd wanted to help.

She HAD helped in those early days she supposed…in her way.

She entered the drawing room and was immediately met by her Mother. She managed a terse smile but couldn't bring herself to exactly run into her remaining parents arms, although a small part of her that was still a little girl, wanted to so desperately. The silence was nearly unbearable.

The minutes ticked by on the old grandfather clock and Sybil remembered the days of looking up at Carson, the great looming bear of her youth that had always seemed such a tower of strength, as he wound the clock and polished the gold lining till it shone.

Her Mother sat down and Sybil spared some concern for the extra lines she could see on her face and the dullness of her eyes, but if she went to her Mother to comfort her it was tantamount to forgiving her wasn't it?

The door opened and Edith swaggered in, dressed in trousers far tighter than anything Sybil would have dared to wear, looking more sophisticated than Sybil had ever imagined her older sister could. She was holding a cigarette and smiled at Thomas as she turned to leave the room before casting a look of utter disdain over her family.

"Good lord Mama, you've aged rather. And Sybil, what on earth are you wearing? You look like you stole it from Cousin Isobel's wardrobe."

IX.

John Bates slipped into the kitchen, having waited a few minutes in the corridor until he heard Miss O'Brien stomp upstairs muttering darkly under her breath. He cast an eye over the vegetables Mrs Patmore had left them strict instructions on how to cook when the time came and wondered why she had been given permission to leave tonight of all nights. But who was he to question the decision making of his employers?

He shook his head in amused confusion and sat down. His leg had been getting worse and worse and these days it ached constantly; the lingering remains of a Catholic in him thought that perhaps it was some divine punishment for past actions but he allowed himself a much grimmer smile over that thought. For his sins, an aching leg wasn't nearly enough!

He tried to stretch it out and found the pain didn't alleviate. So he tried to distract himself by mentally preparing for tonight. It was certainly going to be an experience.

Tom Branson would be dining with the family and Bates spared a wistful smile for what the late Lord Grantham would have thought about that. But if they made the allowance for Branson the new Earl had thought just for once they might throw caution to the wind and all eat in the same room. With the weather becoming so cold and closed in it seemed more sensible to not heat so many rooms, but the thought of what the Dowager Countess, his own friend and master, and the late and much missed Carson would make of the arrangement gave him pause. Surely the walls of Downton wouldn't actually fall down if servants and employers ate together?

But he had it on authority that the current Dowager Countess took all her meals with O'Brien these days, Thomas had been oddly bearable since his return to Downton so Bates didn't think he'd cause a fuss and as for him and Anna…he was sure they'd cope for one evening.

He had a feeling it might be an evening to remember and as he heaved himself out of the chair, walking with agonising steps up the stairs to tend to Lord Grantham, he hoped everyone was
assembled and they could get this over with.

X.

Mary Crawley, Countess of Grantham, looked out of the window of the master bedroom, a window that looked over the drive and let her know that now was when she should descend. Everyone had arrived.

Her Mother had arrived first, but then Cora had been raised to be polite and was the most likely to arrive exactly on time, followed by Sybil, Edith and now two cars were parked on the driveway – the chauffer that had bought first Mama and O'Brien over from the Dower House, and then fetched Sybil from the station had been dismissed for the weekend – and Mary knew she had to bite the bullet at long last. She'd been the one who wanted them all here after all. It was one anniversary that she would not celebrate without the rest of her family and it was about time that they all started to forgive and forget. There had been so much time and so much death.

The war had been nothing really. The angel of death had not come to Downton during the war but so soon after the people Mary had grown up surrounded by had dwindled, and even those remaining were not entirely intact. Her husband and her butler shaken by trauma they would speak of to no one, her Mama, people said, had never fully recovered physically from the miscarriage in '14 and the death of Lord Grantham had been the last nail in the coffin. Even Bates was slower than ever before and Anna, though not physically deficient, was absent in her mind. Mary knew she wanted children.

She felt the cold turn of her blood that came whenever she thought of children and couldn’t suppress the slight shudder than went through her before she chastised herself for being foolish. She would have to face the idea of children eventually. Sooner rather than later as well.

She stood and smoothed down her skirt – what on earth had Edith been wearing? – checking her hair once before taking a deep breath and examining her overall appearance in the mirror. Not too different to the woman who had looked back at her when she was twenty-two, before the war, before Matthew, before all these deaths, before Kemal. She didn't like to think of his name too much these days.

Her sin against him was more than she could bear sometimes.

She pinched her cheeks to give them colour as her Mama had taught her and left the room, building up courage with every step until she entered the drawing room to find everyone assembled. Every eye turned to her and she conjured up her most gracious Countess smile."

"How wonderful to see you all together."
The Poem

Chapter Two:

I.

The poem had been on the mantelpiece when they'd all come into dinner but Mary could not for the life of her think who might have left it. Not one of those assembled would admit to having put it there but somebody must have done and as Mary sipped her wine she looked around her dining companions and wondered.

Matthew was out of the question. Her husband had never lied to her and looking into the blue eyes that shone as much as they had all those years ago, she knew he wouldn't. Besides which, pinning a typed up children's poem above the fireplace and then lying about it certainly didn't seem like the sort of thing he would ever do. Mary thought she knew him well enough now to be able to say with certainty that her husband's plea of ignorance was entirely truthful. He looked up from his fairly cordial conversation with Anna and met her eye, smiling at her momentarily and she smiled back instinctively, her eyes dancing with love.

He would be good to her when she told him. She had already told him so much and he had accepted one secret after another, never judging, only helping her to move through the pain and grief she had caused for herself. God only knew her family had hardly made their presence felt in the last few years when one tragedy after another had nearly pushed her to edge of despair. And it was all her fault. She had told herself this with increasing bitterness through the ten years they had tried and tried and now…perhaps now she was to be finally permitted to do her duty?

Her Grandmothers would spin in her grave at the thought of two generations of Countesses not managing to produce an heir.

She glanced once again at the poem and tapped the side of her glass sharply. Everyone froze mid-conversation, some displaying the confusion that she was making the announcements that should have been done by her husband, but she ignored them.

"Oh, don't worry, I'm not going to stop you all eating yet, I'm just curious how long you'll be able to keep up the pretence, whoever you might be…if this," she gestured towards the poem, "Is supposed to be a joke then I think it's in rather poor taste and I'd like an apology."

No one spoke and Mary sighed, knowing they would return to their apple crumble without paying her any heed. She glanced to her Mother and felt a stab of annoyance. There was not a person in this room that wouldn't have answered had Cora demanded something of them.

"Mama? You arrived first after all so no one would have seen you."

She felt her ire ebb away. Her Mother's nervous state was bad enough as it was, she really should have accused someone a bit more robust first – she didn't even really this it was her Mama, but she was closest.

Mary sighed. She'd opened a can of worms now.

II.

Cora's eyes went wide as the accusation was all but flung at her. How dare Mary accuse her of such things? She averted her gaze from her daughter and met O'Brien's eye instead, taking
comfort in her maids steady gaze and calming herself down, it wouldn't do to let her heart rate get too fast after all, who knew what damage it might do her. She wasn't a well woman!

She didn't look back at Mary and instead reached for her wine glass. She had been here first and she wished she hadn't been. Sitting in the slightly re-arranged drawing room had been terrible and she wondered once more how Violet had coped with returning to Downton once an upstart American had been in her place. Then again, Robert had not really allowed her to move things around too much. He hadn't been unkind about it at all, but had instead spoken in his sweetly reasonable tones until Cora nodded along with him, sure he was right and there really was no need to move things at all.

But Matthew's Mother, even if she had been inclined to move the furniture, had been dead seven years now. She'd been a strong and healthy woman but the post-war Influenza had not discriminated and had taken her meaning there was no one to influence the man now but his wife, and Mary had enjoyed making the house her own.

"I suppose I wouldn't have been seen no, but perhaps it was already here when we all arrived?"

She sipped her drink and stared at the poem, directly opposite her above the fire. Her voice was filled with steadiness now and she was able to look her eldest born in the eye with triumphant disdain.

"Besides which darling, if you recall I stopped the governess from reading that vile thing to you all when you were in the nursery because it upset you all so. Why on earth would I put that of all things up?"

Her eyes strained to look at the words. They were typed by the look of them and she managed a small smirk, meeting O'Brien's eye once again and gesturing for her maid to take a look, as though she were merely pointing out the weather to her, before turning back to her daughter.

"Plus neither of us would have the faintest idea how to use a typewriter."

She sipped her wine once more and waited for Mary's attention to turn away from her, she hoped to god it would soon – being stared at like this made her think of right after the accident had happened…

III.

Thomas neatly placed the final mouthful of his pudding into his mouth and wished he was still able to bloody well taste anything. For all that he thought Patmore was a blustering old buffoon whose eyesight was still bloody terrible, he knew she made a mean apple crumble and sighed as he sipped his water to wash the mouthful down.

He glanced across the table as O'Brien twisted her head to look at the mantelpiece and waited until she turned back round to meet her gaze and roll his eyes at the disagreements that were already brewing. She raised her eyebrows in the briefest of acknowledgements and he suppressed a smirk knowing his friend was about as enthusiastic about witnessing family arguments as he was, although he didn't envy her task later on. He didn't have anyone to tend to but the Dowager Countess was liable to be extremely emotional later on…although O'Brien must be used to it by now he supposed. Twelve years ago he had thought her days were numbered but now she had served more years at the pleasure of the Crawley family that any of them.

He saw her take a breath and look over at Cora filled with concern and he lost interest. She wasn't the woman she had once been, filled with indignation and the passionate desire to be away from all of this, but then again, he was far from driven by the same things he had been then.
War had mellowed him and his elevation had placated his ambition and now he was sat in the dining room with the Earl a mere few seats away from him. Being a skeleton staff tonight as they were it made sense to eat like this, but he still couldn't help but feel privileged to finally sit in one of the gilded, high-backed chair and see the room as the hundreds of guests who had passed through this room in his time at Downton must have done so. His eyes roamed over the polished wood, the gleaming silver and the flickering candlelight. Even after electricity had been installed in every room it didn't quite feel like a formal dinner without candlelight being there.

That being said, he thought with a distinctly confused frown that even his impassive features couldn't control, he had certainly not put that particular candleholder in the middle of the table this evening.

IV.

"It's not exactly difficult Mama…and I suppose someone could have paid to have it done. Which puts us all in the frame really."

From her place next to O'Brien – she was about the only person who had managed a smile when they had all been in the drawing room earlier – Edith spotted Thomas' face and immediately, easily, followed his gaze. What one earth was so special about that? It was just a candleholder.

It took her a moment but she recognised it and she now understood why Thomas might look so concerned by its presence. She lifted her eyes from the shining metal to her Mama, who was looking at her as though her traitorous crimes made her a latter day Judas, and wondered if she had even noticed. It was hard to tell really, she looked like she was constantly on the verge of tears and a breakdown and Edith could sense that O'Brien was permanently poised to shoot out of her seat and see to her mistress. It sickened her really, the devotion an otherwise sensible woman showed to her ill-deserving Mother but who was she to judge.

The windowpane rattled slightly and a slight breeze made the flames flicker and prompted Branson to leave his seat, immediately followed by Bates, to try and secure the window. Matthew, sensing their might be trouble at the table followed the two men to the window and took Bates' place as the two younger men climbed up onto side-tables as though they were scaling trench walls once more. Edith sighed and couldn't help but wish she could go and help them.

My some miraculous happenstance not one of the flames had gone out and Edith smiled at the robustness of the candleholder, preferring to look into the orange flame until it made her eyes ache slightly, rather than look up and face the ire of the room.

"Some of us more than others though…And I don't care what you say about the governess Mama, I've never heard that poem before in my life."

V.

Next to Thomas and rather pleased that the need for precedence in Matthew and Mary's household extended to Earl and Countess sitting either end of the table, Sybil frowned at Edith and looked up once more at the poem.

Ten little soldier boys went out to dine:

One choked his little self and then there were nine.

Nine little soldier boys sat up very later:

One overslept himself and then there were eight.
Eight little soldier boys traveling in Devon:
One said he’d stay there and then there were seven.

Seven little soldier boys chopping up sticks:
One chopped himself in halves and then there were six.

Six little soldier boys playing with a hive:
A bumblebee stung one and then there were five.

Five little soldier boys going in for law:
One got into Chancery and then there were four.

Four little soldier boys going out to sea:
A red herring swallowed one and then there were three.

Three little soldier boys walking in the zoo:
A big bear hugged one and then there were two.

Two little soldier boys sitting in the sun:
One got frizzled up and then there was one.

One little soldier boy left all alone:
He went and hanged himself and then there were none.

It was far from a pleasant little ditty but despite what Edith said, Sybil was certain she at least had heard the poem before and she immediately said so, earning a scowl from her middle sister and a smug smile from her eldest at having being backed up. Sybil sighed. This, she had most certainly not missed. She loved her sisters still, but their constant bickering was a childhood memory she was glad to consign to the back of her mind – now they were back and she supposed it would resume again.

Only…she had noticed it from the offset and with each moment she spent in their company, she noticed it more and more. Mary wasn't quite as commanding as she had once been and the look of hurt that their older sister had been able to draw out of Edith with such ease was yet to make any kind of appearance. Instead it seemed to Sybil as though Edith was irritated that they had dared to presume upon her valuable time, although what precisely her sister did these days she wasn't sure.

"Perhaps you've just forgotten Edith? Or maybe you were doing something else. I doubt Mama would make it up after all."

Sybil read over the last lines again and knew she remembered this poem. It had been the final lines, lines speaking of utter despair and loneliness that had made her sad when she was a child and now reading it again, she felt quite the same. She didn't want to be alone anymore and her eyes drifted to Branson as he sat back down on the other side of O'Brien. He looked the same, a little older, a little more confident perhaps, but still with the same kind eyes and infectious, impish smile.

She smiled at him and wondered. Had sufficient time passed for both of them? Were they able to
move on and was there the possibility they could do that together?

VI.

Anna witnessed the smile between the woman next to her and the man opposite and wondered how anyone could ever have ever thought they'd keep apart. They weren't children anymore and Lord Grantham and Mrs Hughes, the staunchest opponents they could have faced, were both gone and they were free to make their own choices and mistakes.

She spared a small smile for them but managed a more rueful and friendly one for Lord Grantham. To think, she wouldn't have dared say the wrong thing in the presence of the previous Earl but life was a strange thing and she had developed a small friendship of sorts with Matthew Crawley. Only of sorts mind and really it was mostly professional, but he was a rather different master to any they had ever had. His inexperience at running a household such as this and needing to instruct so many servants had shown through, and were it not for Thomas, his friend, who he had turned into a butler he wasn't scared to ask questions of, and Anna, who since Mrs Hughes had died had been Housekeeper in all but name, then he would have been overwhelmed. But Anna didn't begrudge him that and she was grateful to him, and Mary, for letting her marry John Bates after all.

There had been problems leading up the marriage that the previous Earl had tried to help them with – even though he couldn't claim parentage of his heir the two men had in common that they were romantics at heart – but there had been a particularly stark problem that neither Earl could overcome. The fact that Vera Bates was still living and refused to give John a divorce for anything in the world. By the time they'd found her she'd taken up with a married man herself and had no need for a divorce and if she was to be denied a normal and happy marriage then she had been damned determined to make sure John didn't have one either.

But that had been years ago now and Vera was gone for good.

Anna looked over to her husband and found she couldn't smile the way she wanted to. Not the way the Earl and Countess smiled at each other, Christ almighty they couldn't even manage the familiar smirks that O'Brien and Thomas shared! She tried to smile but it felt false and instead she turned her attention back to the women at the other end of the table. They were still shooting silent looks at each other.

She looked up at the mantelpiece and read the few lines she could see. It was a morbid thing, there was no doubt about that, but she was sure that whoever had put it there must be satisfied that they had caused unrest. They'd gotten their job done rather admirably.

VII.

Tom Branson looked at Lady Sybil.

Then down at his plate.

Then back up at Lady Sybil to find her eyes still on him.

He smiled and stretched out his leg as much as he could – why the bloody hell did the great and the good insist on having such bleedin' big dining tables! If he was anywhere normal he'd be able to reach her with more ease- there!

He nudged his foot against what he hoped was Sybil's and waited for a reaction and sure enough she looked up at him, lip quirking in amusement and eyes sparkling in surprise. That look was what he had come to Downton again for and nothing but that look. The talk about the poem bored
him, what did it matter who had done it, it was harmless if a bit grim either way. He would have put his money on Lady Edith really, but he wasn't foolish enough to say anything to the room at large. Instead he put all his attention into Sybil.

Things had changed hadn't they?

He wasn't a chauffeur and he didn't work for her father anymore! They could just be a mechanic and a nurse courting couldn't they? Something as simple as that and no one in her family would need to know if she didn't want them to.

He pressed the soft leather of his shoe against her ankle, waiting until her smirk grew and mischief danced in her eyes and he felt her slip her foot out of the shoe as she sipped her wine, the picture of innocence to look at.

He knew better now.

VIII.

O'Brien rolled her eyes as she saw the man next to her shuffle in his seat. He was clearly doing something under the table with Lady Sybil, but exactly what she really did dread to think so instead she didn't and left them to it. Sometimes, she thought not for the first time, it really was a bloody curse having an active mind and not being able to look the other way. She needed to know most things that went on but given the smirks being passed back and forth she thought that just this once she might be able to live in ignorance. She still knew more about it than most at the table and that was enough for her.

The meal was coming to an end now – thank goodness for small mercies! – and she wondered if the men would stay for brandy. It seemed a bit pointless really as one was a teetotaller and another wasn't permitted to drink because of pain medication. Plus Lady Edith would probably insist on staying with them and she smirked as she imagined that particular scene.

She looked over to Cora as frequently as she could without seeming a lunatic with nothing better to do, but after the girls had started sniping she'd been sure Cora would begin to get flustered and sure enough the Dowager Countess was resolutely looking at the poem, even though she couldn't possibly see it with the state of her eyesight, rather than joining in any discussion.

Sarah tried to catch her eye but it was to no avail and she was unwilling to draw attention to herself by looking around at the poem once more. She knew it of course – there had been no governess and no Mother to stop her from reading morbid things like that when she was young – but it had been a fair few years since she'd heard it. There must have been something that was causing this distress, as far as she was aware it was just a stupid poem, but Mary seemed rather overwrought by it. In fact she seemed a bit off to Sarah anyway. Regardless of the fact she wasn't exactly monitoring Mary's state of health, she could still see the change in the younger woman and she couldn't help but wonder what it had to do with the poem.

Sarah resolved that once everyone was safely upstairs and she had put Cora to bed, she would come back down and have a better look. She hated not knowing things and whoever had put it up was clearly trying to show off – maybe there'd be some clue…

Christ, she thought, can you hear yourself Sarah O'Brien? You're not in a murder mystery you daft cow.

She moved her gaze to Thomas, it was infinitely more sensible to focus on him and think of the fag they would have whilst the four of them did the washing up – although she was expecting to bunk off outside with the butler – rather than any daftness about poems. But Thomas was
distracted himself. She followed his gaze to the Earl and was looking when he picked up his spoon and tapped the side of his glass.

IX.

Matthew stood up to speak to his guests and glanced around at them one by one, wondering how so many years had gone by and how the faces around him could have changed so much. He smiled as easily as he could manage and cleared his throat.

"Well I'm sure I speak for both Mary and myself when I say it really is wonderful to see so many of you here."

He saw Edith smirk and lift her glass, mutter something behind the receptacle to O'Brien that caused the woman to smirk herself, but he ignored them. It really was a shame that for every charming Cora and sweet-natured Sybil that were here there had to be people like Edith and O'Brien.

"I know it's been a long time for some of us and I'm sure we'd like to raise a glass to the late Lord Grantham," he raised his own glass and waited till everyone else had done the same. He inclined his head towards Cora, who looked faraway and wasn't looking anywhere near him, despite clearly pretending to be doing so. "The last thing that bought us all together. And it's been four years since that tragedy and Mary and I," he inclined his glass to his wife. "Thought it was about time we came together to honour his memory."

They all raised their glasses and there was a mumbled mixture of "Lord Grantham" and "Papa", however, he didn't detect the "Robert" he had been expecting from his mother-in-law.

Before he could continue, he was surprised when Bates caught his eye and indicated he intended to stand. Matthew nodded at him to do so and rather to his surprise the man didn't speak but instead left the room. Matthew looked back over the others and couldn't help but smile.

"I hadn't even started wittering on either."

They all laughed politely and Matthew wondered for a moment if more of them were about to leave the dining room. No one else seemed to be dreaming of it and he looked to Anna, hoping she knew something but the confusion in her face was as much as his own.

A squeak reached his ears and the door opened.

X.

All eyes turned to Mr Bates as he entered the room once more, wheeling a table that Thomas recognised as once having being used to serve tea with, on top of which there was a small gramophone. Four of the inhabitants of the room immediately recognised it as having once resided in a corner of Mrs Hughes pantry, being broken out at Christmas, New Year, birthdays and various other special occasions.

"Forgive me m'lord, but I found this outside in the hall just before dinner and on top of it was a note saying it should be played once our meal had been finished."

He looked towards Matthew, who after a moment of confusion, again nodded permission for his valet to move the arm and place the pin onto the black record.

It scratched and came to life.
A voice sounded around the room that all of them recognised immediately. The Scottish brogue washed over them all, harsher than even those she had chastised remembered it ever being and there was not a soul in the room that was not unnerved by hearing Elsie Hughes' voice echoing through Downton Abbey once more.

"My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, you have all been gathered here to answer for your heinous crimes. Crimes that were committed in cold blood and for which you all escaped the law, but crimes you will be charged with today. Perhaps you will attempt to excuse your actions, however, I urge you, for the sake of your souls, to confess. The truth will be known regardless of your attempts to wriggle free of the law and the judgment of your peers. The charges, in order of precedent, stand thus:

Matthew Crawley, Earl of Grantham, that in the midst of war you purposefully allowed Mr George Bennett to be killed by firing squad, despite knowing of his innocence.

Mary Crawley, Countess of Grantham, that you took Kemal Pamuk for a lover and killed him with your lust before ridding yourself of his child.

Cora Crawley, Dowager Countess of Grantham, that in 1922 during a disagreement with the late Lord Grantham, you purposefully pushed him down the staircase, a fatal fall that was called an accident.

Lady Edith Napier, that you manipulated the war-wounded Evelyn Napier into marriage before slowly poisoning him to inherit his fortune.

Lady Sybil Crawley, that in 1917 whilst working as a nurse you killed a patient you believed to be beyond help.

Mr John Bates, that in order to marry your current wife you sought out, terrorised and eventually murdered your late wife Vera Bates when she wouldn't give you a divorce.

Miss Sarah O'Brien, that in 1914 you maliciously caused Cora, the now Dowager Countess, to miscarry her baby by engineering an accident in the bath.

Thomas Barrow, that in 1919, upon returning to Downton Abbey after the war, and sick of being a footman, you took the opportunity to give the wrong medicine to the ailing Charles Carson and after his death, took his job.

Mr Thomas Branson, that in 1913, before you were employed at Downton Abbey, you ran over and killed a man in Ireland and sped away to escape.

Mrs Anna Bates, that along with your husband you murdered Vera Bates and allowed her body to be disposed into the river without a proper burial.

These are the crimes of which you are accused. Do you plead you innocence or admit your guilt? Whatever your decision, may God have mercy upon your souls."

The voice had finished and only the scratches of the gramophone could be heard before silence
reigned and every single person in the room stared at the others. For a moment it seemed to those
assembled around the table that time had stopped. No one seemed to be breathing and the air was
static.

Finally someone dared to speak.

II.

"Mr Bates?" Sarah O'Brien spoke through gritted teeth as she placed her glass decisively back on
the dining table. "Is this some kind of joke?"

Bates stared back at her for a moment, the ghost of a smile playing over his lips, but serious and
straightforward in his speech. Despite all the years that had gone by Sarah still couldn't help but
dislike the air of insolence she always felt coming from Bates and in a moment like this is rattled
her more than ever before.

"If this is a joke I can assume you m'lord," he broke the gaze that had been held between he and
O'Brien and nodded towards Matthew instead. O'Brien seethed at the dismissal but could hardly
argue she deserved precedence over the Earl. "That it is nothing to do with me. I merely found the
recording."

"A likely story," O'Brien muttered, earning her a smile from both Thomas and Edith but a glare
from everyone else in hearing distance.

"Why would Mr Bates lie?" Sybil spoke up, glancing briefly at Anna and only speaking once it
became apparent the blonde woman was still too shocked to jump to her husband's defence
herself.

"It wouldn't be the first time," O'Brien muttered in response.

Silence fell after that and Bates rolled his eyes, picking up the recording to examine it. No one else
had yet recovered enough to speak and Sybil looked up and down the table before a cheery and
distinctly forced smile graced her lips.

"It must be a joke of course. The same person who put the poem up and-"

Quite without warning Anna's head shot up and she silenced the youngest of the sisters with the
half-frantic look in her eye. Had it been someone else the look would have been understandable,
but on Anna, whose ability to remain calm was second to none, it seemed a great deal worse.

"Mrs Hughes is dead! Unless she's speaking from beyond the grave she must've recorded thatlast
year…"

"Don't be daft," Thomas spoke up. "S'not exactly her style is it? Leave a recordin' accusin' us all
of murder with instruction for it not to be played until now."

"Unless she told someone to wait till we were all together?" O'Brien still hadn't taken her eyes off
Bates, something that was a great source of annoyance for the valet. He ignored her and sat back
down, his leg aching more with each passing moment he was on it.

"It's obvious isn't it?" Edith chipped in casually, interrupting the servants and seemingly utterly
unconcerned with the whole ordeal. "Someone's done a very good impression of her and the
damned thing's scratchy enough our mind will do the rest."

She looked to Mary and everyone present was rather surprised when the eldest nodded along with
her.
"Yes, I think you must be right. And someone's made up all those sick things."

"I'm sorry m'lady," O'Brien overcut her after a nod from Thomas and Anna. "But we 'eard that voice every day for years. There's no denyin' that's Mrs Hughes' voice."

III.

Cora felt the last shred of hope that it was a complete joke fade away with O'Brien's words. But why would Mrs Hughes, who had been so staunchly loyal and had never shown the slightest signs of mutiny, do something like this. She looked desperately to Mary, wishing the secrets of the universe would still reveal themselves in her eldest daughters face as they had when she was a baby and Cora had stared at her for hours.

"So what if it is," Mary spoke clearly but there was the faintest waiver in her voice. "Clearly someone forced her to record it and then decided it would be funny to play it back now of all times."

Everyone would have been inclined to agree were it not for something everyone else had either overlooked or were unwilling to think about. Cora thought it was probably the latter.

"But…don't you all see. It's all of us and just us. Not Mrs Patmore, or Daisy or William, just us. Someone planned this."

Silence reigned once more.

IV.

There was something else that as of yet no one seemed prepared to say and Matthew had a feeling he was going to have to be the one to do it. He supposed it was sort of his responsibility given his position but he couldn't help but wish someone else would bite the proverbial bullet first. Thomas perhaps? O'Brien didn't seem shy but then hers…hers had concerned someone else in the room hadn't it?

"There's something else of course. The accusations themselves. We seem to want to be ignoring those and perhaps it's just wishful thinking but whether Mrs Hughes did this herself, or someone else made her, they're not exactly accusing us of stealing a bike are they?"

No one spoke again and only a few met his gaze – the usual suspects.

"We have to ask ourselves why anyone would make up such terrible accusations and I think the answer is rather obvious isn't it?"

Again no one answered. He huffed out an annoyed breath and spoke directly, the annoyance and impatience obvious in his voice and in the agitated way he laid his arms on the table, leaning forwards imploringly.

"Edith, you said this was all obvious, surely you've worked out the answer?"

For the first time since she had arrived Edith seemed to waver for a moment. She opened her mouth to answer and Matthew could well imagine the witticism she might well come out with, however, she soon closed her mouth once more and resuming the look on insolence on her face she shook her head dismissively and looked back to her glass. Matthew could wait no longer.

"Well I'd say that it's quite clear that no one would make up these things. They'd have to be a complete crackpot."
Mary's brow furrowed slightly.

"But we heard them with our own ears darling and someone must have ma-"

"Unless they're true."

As Matthew had predicted, his statement did not exactly go down well, but it was interesting to see people's reactions nonetheless. He wondered who would be the first to object.

V.

Sybil felt the ripples around the room and looked at Mathew in confusion.

"You think we all did those things? You honestly think we're all capable of…"

She couldn't even say it. The very thought that Matthew, who she had always accepted as a brother and loved as such, thought she was capable of murder was unspeakable. Matthew was very quiet and for a moment Sybil thought he was embarrassed to have made the suggestion, but instead his gaze remained steady and she found his face unreadable. Why on earth would he say such a thing?

"Unless you're guilty Matthew?"

Edith's question cut across Sybil's silence, voicing the thought she cursed herself for having at all. It seemed that Edith's capacity for tact, slim though it had been many years ago, was now non-existent.

Matthew stared at the middle daughter with the same inscrutable expression and Sybil couldn't help but wonder. It was possible wasn't it? She heard such stories of what had gone on in the trenches during the war and a man being shot for nothing wouldn't have been unusual would it, especially when so many men were dying every single day for reasons just as flimsy. But Matthew would never be that unjust would he?

She thought desperately of all the young men that she'd seen die and once again felt her heart clench, as it had for so many years now, at the thought of the men hundreds of miles away who hadn't even have the comfort of a hospital bed to die in. It was a comfort, she had to believe that. If she didn't then it made her as bad as the damned recording accused her of being.

That man had been suffering and scared and in so much pain and she, so new at what she was doing, but compassionate enough to think that there was only one thing left to do for him, had done it. Surely there shouldn't be a crime in that?

And she had only ever told one person and she allowed herself the briefest of glances towards them…surely she hadn't been betrayed? Why on earth would they? What purpose would it serve and in such a public setting in which accusations had also been flung at them?

No, it had to be someone else. But who could have possibly found out?

VI.

Edith dragged her eyes away from Matthew and his damned unreadable face. He wasn't going to answer her it seemed and she hadn't exactly expected him to but it was becoming damned annoying to be ignored all the time!

"I'm not suggesting you are of course…"
She sighed and looked across the table to Thomas as potential ally but he had the frozen haunted expression she'd seen so many times on men returning from war, a look that Evelyn had carried for the years they were married before the memories had been too much for either of them to bare. She supposed the mention of so much death did different things to different people. Thomas was frozen, Mama looked like she was about to cry, Matthew was straining with his attempts to be reasonable, Sybil and Anna looked like they were moments away from turning hysterical. She couldn't see Bates and Branson but she assumed they were calmer, men like them always were.

To her right O'Brien was maintaining her steely expression and on her left Mary was looking a little pale but quite controlled. Edith would have preferred to appeal to the maid, but she had a feeling the room might be swayed by the Countess' opinion more. She rolled her eyes and once again turned to Mary. Her elder sister seemed to have agreed with her so far, perhaps her luck wouldn't desert her?

"Look, I think some idiot has taken the bare bones of the truth and added their own sick theories. I married Evelyn and then he died. Papa fell down the stairs. Mr Carson died. Mama had a fall getting out of the bath tub. There's no denying that they happened but there's no reason to think there's anything sinister about them is there?"

Mary inclined her head in agreement and Edith gazed around the people assembled, pleased to have finally been listened to. It was nonsense after all, were any of those here really capable of the things they had been accused of doing?

"I agree. Some of those accusations were absolutely absurd!"

But a niggling voice at the back of Edith's mind spoke up – not all of them were beyond the realms of possibility were they?

VII.

Mary never thought she'd live to see the day that she agreed with Edith twice in the space of mere minutes but she had also never expected that particular scandal to rear its head again. The funny thing was, she thought as she looked around the pale and shaken looking faces, it was not a question of which of them knew about the Pamuk affair, but who didn't.

Her Mama and Anna had been there of course and she'd told Matthew herself. Her husband had long been of the opinion that Thomas knew something too; apparently there had been the odd comment in the trenches that had sounded rather ominously like he might be preparing to reveal the truth to the future Earl. Mary had a feeling that between Mama and Thomas' gossiping tongues there was very little chance that O'Brien didn't know and Edith's knowledge about the affair had nearly led to her ruin. Anna might have even told Bates by now if husband and wife shared their secrets. That left Sybil and Branson. Mary didn't really think they were capable of a joke as morbid as this, even if they had known about Pamuk, so she momentarily crossed them off her mental list of potential perpetrators.

But even if plenty of them knew about that, only one of them knew what had happened afterwards, the consequences of a moment's foolishness that meant her husband had been obliged to spend a decade being sympathetic towards his wife's inability to conceive. It would be exceedingly cruel of them to bring it up now though! And in public too!

"Perhaps we should forget about it? Write it off as a stupid joke and continue with our evening and if somebody wants to confess later on we'll deal with them then."

She closed her mouth aghast. Why had she used those particular words? Confess. After the crimes had been listed she supposed confession should come next and she knew, as surely as she knew it
was wishful thinking to hope they could just forget about the elephant in the room, that she had opened a substantial can of worms.

VIII.

Anna licked her dry lips and looked down the table to Mary. She'd known the Countess long enough now to know the look on her face meant she was annoyed with herself and Anna could quite understand why. Confess indeed. Who was going to confess to a sick joke like this? They'd be thrown out of the house before they'd finished speaking, unless it happened to be the Countess herself, or his lordship. Things being as they were she doubted even the Dowager Countess would get away with it now, even if Cora had been the sort of woman inclined towards such practical jokes – quite frankly Anna would sooner believe it of the previous Dowager Countess.

But they were such terrible things to joke about! The death of so many people they had known and cared about, it was all so horrible and personal and she hated the thought of Thomas killing kindly old Mr Carson, or Lady Edith feeding poison to charming Mr Napier, or O'Brien forcing anyone to suffer a miscarriage, let alone someone who had been in her care.

She looked across the dining table to her husband catching his eye and speaking as plainly as she ever did.

"I don't think it's a joke. But I don't think I'd like to believe anyone here is a murderer."

IX.

Bates smiled softly at his wife and reached across the table to take her hand. Two seats down from him and completely out of his line of sight he swore he could feel Miss O'Brien rolling her eyes but he ignored everyone else in the room. They could cope with it themselves, he wished there was something he could say to reassure Anna.

"I don't want to think that either."

There was silent 'but' at the end of his sentence that kept anyone else from speaking. Instead they leant forwards, eager to hear what he had to say. He took a deep breath and wondered if he could possible say anything that would go down worse, but perhaps it needed to be said to break this awful tension? If somebody admitted their guilt, or even that they might be guilty, then the accusations wouldn't have half the power over them as they had now. Not all of them could possibly be true surely, but then again…

"But then I don't think some of these accusations are so improbable…Mr Branson for example. I'm sorry to have to say it, but you could have hit someone in the dark and never realised. I don't mean you did it on purpose of course but I suppose if you had been drinking…"

There were some murmurs of ascent and soon every eye was on Branson, who'd been so quiet till now, waiting for him to defend himself. Bates felt he had done the young man a great disservice but he himself knew only too well what a man was capable of when he had buried himself in the bottle and he hoped that of all of them, Branson would be able to withstand their accusing looks the best.

X.

Branson reached for his drink and knocked back the contents pointedly. How dare they accuse him when there were plenty of others round the table who were just as likely to be guilty! He'd never driven drunk in his entire life, had NOT been driving drunk the day…
He shot out of his seat.
"I've had enough of this. I'm sorry to be rude m'lord but I'm going to have to leave."
Sybil mirrored his action and looked aghast.
"Tom-"
"Come with me Sybil."
She smiled and shook her head.
"I would, but Tom, the fog. It's been gathering all evening and now it's dark, it'd be too dangerous."
"Yeah," Thomas chimed in, "You might hit someone."
Edith laughed gleefully and reached for her own drink. Branson scowled at them both and looked back to Sybil, leaning on his hands half across the table to speak to her in a way that seemed intimate, but for the fact another eight people could hear them both and were staring at them with carrying levels of shock.
"I can manage. I drive for a living, we'll be fine. Come with me."
Sybil hesitated and instinctively looked to her Mother, but the Dowager Countess was looking at her with a watery smile and nodded her head once almost imperceptibly.
"Alright…"
Tom smiled and Sybil returned it and it felt to her like the moment was frozen – it was the beginning of something entirely new and they could do exactly as they pleased. After a moment Sybil's smile fell though and she felt a great tug in her heart that made her cry out.
"Oh god…Tom!"
The panicked look had come into his eye so quickly no one but Sybil had seen it but he soon took a stumbling step back, crashing into his chair with a force that could not be controlled. His mouth opened slightly and he seemed to be struggling for air if the convulsive movements of his limbs were to be believed.
Either side of him O'Brien and Bates both laid hands on him, shaking him and calling his name but to no avail. There was an exhalation of air from limp lips and Tom Branson moved no more.
Chapter Four:

I.

It felt to Sybil like the scream was coming from miles away but when she finally managed to drag her eyes momentarily away from the body it was her Mother that had her mouth open. She wondered whether she should be indignant that O'Brien had immediately left her seat besides Tom to race around the table and begin calming down the Dowager Countess. But really was it worth it? There was nothing *she* could do for Tom because O'Brien was not a nurse but she damn well was!

Mirroring the older woman's movements almost exactly Sybil ran around the table as quickly as her feet could carry her until she had her hands on Tom's skin. She moved them frantically over his body, her years of skills deserting her for a second to be replaced by shuddering panic raging through her. Finally she moved her fingers to his neck and let out a sob at what she felt there.

"No…"

She moved again to take his wrist to feel desperately for what she knew wasn't there. His eyes were open and glassy and there was no reaction from him no matter how many times she shook him and whispered his named.

Bates was on his feet too, with a hand on Branson's shoulder and reaching out the other to squeeze Sybil's.

"He's gone m'lady."

"No! He can't be! He was fine a second ago…"

She spun around immediately to cast her eyes over the table before she saw it. His glass.

"Was…there must have been something that killed him! He was *fine*." 

She picked up his discarded glass and stared inside it, willing it to reveal the secret of the death behind her.

"He was fine…"

II.

Cora clutched at her maid's hand frantically and, when Mary vacated her seat, she allowed her own chair to be turned around slightly and O'Brien slid unconcernedly into the Countess'. The younger woman leaned forwards and took her hands tighter, speaking low and quiet and clearly trying to distract her attention. Cora was grateful for the attempt but with her youngest beginning to sob she didn't know how successful *anyone* could ever be at taking her mind off the activity around her.

"Is there anything I can get for you m'lady?"

"Get for me?" She nearly laughed and knew she would have done had the thought of how it could be misconstrued not restrained her. She squeezed O'Brien's fingers harder, desperate to stop the trembling in her arms. "No O'Brien, there's nothing you can get for me."
How could that young man be dead? Sybil was right, he'd been absolutely fine moments before, the very picture of health and then...he was just gone. It didn't seem possible and the abrupt removal of a soul from around their table reminded Cora all too much of the past. A past she would much rather was not revisited. She spoke in a quiet voice, not wanting to distress anyone else further.

"Sarah? Do you think we'll have to have the police here again?"

There hadn't been police since the accident with Robert. Accident.

She had forced herself to use that word for the last four years. It helped that whether her maid knew the truth or not - and Cora thought she did - O'Brien had never asked any questions and had always stressed the word accident whenever they spoke about it. But even Cora wasn't sure whether it really had been or not.

They'd been arguing. Again. They always seemed to be arguing leading up to the fall and they'd been at the top of the stairs without Cora even realising and she'd lashed out without meaning to, standing still with horror as he fell. The noise had been the worst thing. He seemed to roll a hundred times and hit every step and he'd cried out, not to Cora's ears with terror or pain but it had seemed to be sadness. And she knew she was the cause and she'd stood there, tears falling down her face, until O'Brien had appeared out of the shadows seemingly and been propping her up before she felt her knees buckle.

And now they were here again with O'Brien holding her hand and the fear of the police arriving about another death, although at least they would be spared having to force themselves through the rest of the weekend. A death was just the tip of the iceberg after that terrible recording and the horrible poem. There had been talk of possible guilt for some people – poor Branson, maybe if Bates hadn't accused him he would never have died? – and Cora had thought about what her elder two daughters might be capable of and indeed the rather well-timed deaths of Carson and Vera Bates, but she could never think her maid capable of anything like that.

How could anyone be cruel enough to blame poor O'Brien for something Cora knew she couldn't possibly have done? It had been an accident and goddamnit, she should know! She squeezed the woman's hands tighter.

"I expect so m'lady. Mr Bates has just gone to telephone for them."

III.

Mary pulled her sister closer. The poor thing was positively shaking with her attempts to control herself and stem the tears but Mary could see her need to cry. She wrapped her arms around Sybil's chilly shoulders and kissed her hair, hoping to reassure her than she could fall apart if she needed to, there were people to put her back together afterwards.

"Shhh, it'll be alright darling. Come away from the body now."

She was surprised by the acquiescence. Sybil was used to bodies now she supposed and given it was Branson, a man they all knew Sybil had harboured something of a torch for, she thought Sybil would fight to stay with him. Instead Mary moved her away easily, shooing O'Brien out of her seat with a look and manoeuvring her youngest sister into the chair. She crouched down as Sybil doubled over, her head resting in her lap and sobs beginning to wrack her body, and Mary wrapped her arms around her once more. Cora's soft hands – showing more and more wrinkles these days Mary couldn't help but notice – were in Sybil's hair, cooing over her and trying to soothe her as only a Mother could. But it was Edith that surprised Mary the most, leaning...
forwards in her chair to rest a tentative hand on Sybil's knee. Mary nodded at her approvingly, but Edith ignored her.

"We're all here darling. It's all going to be alright, it's just been a terrible, terrible accident."

No one had thus far tried to categorise it as an accident but the silence that followed, as more people left their seats to move away from the table, suggested that whilst they were prepared to think it for the time being, not everyone was convinced. They longed to leave the room but no one was prepared to until they were told they might do so. No one wanted to be the first to leave. Mary looked at them all and locked eyes with Matthew, trying to take comfort in his steady gaze, wondering whether the evening could go any worse.

She had no way of knowing, as she gently cradled her crying sister and kissed her crown tenderly, that things were going to be considerably worse before the clock struck midnight.

**IV.**

Bates returned to the dining room with grave news he did not feel at all like passing on. Several sets of eyes turned to him when he entered the room, the notable exceptions being the gaggle of women at the far end of the table who were being hovered over by O'Brien's almost ghostly presence. His own gaze fell inevitably upon the body of Tom Branson - someone had thought to close his eyes and lay one of the spare table clothes over him. He expected it was Thomas and looked up to see the younger man stood next to the Earl smoking furiously.

He took a deep breath and wished, for the first time in many years, that he could have a drink. A calming glass of whiskey would steady his nerves admirably for what he had to tell them all – maybe once everyone else knew there might be brandy offered around? Perhaps just this once he could indulge.

"That was quick Bates."

"I'm afraid I have some troubling news m'lord..."

"Don't tell me they can't make it out here tonight?"

"They won't be coming no, but it's not because they can't. I think the phone line must have been disconnected by the weather m'lord."

Matthew nodded, satisfied with the reason. It had happened before after all, albeit never at quite such a critical moment. Bates thought quite differently. When he had picked up the phone there had been something distinctly odd – the thin sheen of dust that might have covered the phone since the last time someone had been known to use it four days ago was gone. The wind had howled three days ago and though he was prepared to allow the others to believe that it had been knocked out then he knew better. The phone looked as though it had been used today.

"Well, that's unfortunate..."

Every person in the room thought it was something of an understatement but there was little that could be done about the situation now. Matthew looked to Thomas and the two men shared a look and couldn't help but think "Now we are two".

"We should carry him upstairs. Put him somewhere comfortable until tomorrow morning and we can get to the village and ring for the police."

**V.**
Bloody Bates, Thomas thought as he heaved Branson's torso higher in his arms, you could always rely on him to conveniently not be able to do something that needed doing. The older valet had not been able to carry the body due to his cane – Thomas could not pretend this was a new complaint – leaving him and the bleedin' Earl of Grantham to lug the man up to his room in the bachelor's corridor.

They both stared at the room they had walked to and Thomas knew his instincts must be going barmy in his old age, or perhaps it was the stress of the evening finally getting to him? It wouldn't be difficult to give him a fit of nerves these days after all. He sighed – this was the room he had found the body of Kemal Pamuk in over ten years ago. He locked eyes with the other man and knew, in the moment of awkward understanding that went between them, that both of them would act as though there was nothing sinister about the room, even though they both knew better. What exactly had possessed him to put Branson in this room of all rooms god only knew. Then again, without the presence of death, it was a room like any other and Branson had not been expected to bloody well die!

"In here I think Thomas. He'll be nice and out of the way up here, there's no one else staying in the bachelor's corridor after all. It's nothing personal against Branson, but remembering the way the bodies in the trenches smelt...I don't think it's something we need to expose the ladies to."

Thomas nodded and kicked open the door. He agreed for the most part, the stench of the trenches was not an olfactory experience he would inflict upon anyone, but he still thought one or two of the women downstairs probably had stronger stomachs than either of them. Together he and Matthew carried the body over to the bed, lowering him as gently as they could before standing up straight, looking at each other as they stood either side of another fallen comrade. They both remembered doing this more often than they would have liked years ago, moving bodies from one place to another in the vain hope that they might be able to give them a decent burial. Tom Branson would get a decent burial, the Earl would see to that, but it seemed such an utter waste of a life that he should survive all those years in hellish conditions only to drop dead here and now. There was nothing dangerous here after all.

Thomas wondered what the cause might be. He hadn't thought it anything sinister himself but the room at large had been so silent that it was clear they thought there was foul-play at work. His brief glance at O'Brien had seen her looking thoughtful and Thomas made a mental note to have a word with her. It was pathetic he supposed, he was in his bloody forties now after all, yet he still felt that deferring to O'Brien's judgement was usually his best bet. He'd not thought about it all too much himself – a weird poem, a recording from Hughes that was probably a practical joke, and then an unfortunate and sudden death. All three were things that he had they happened independently of each other would have been dismissed as unusual, unpleasant or unfortunate. All three together and suddenly you'd think they were all about to be picked off one by one!

"I'll go down and tell everyone they may as well go to bed now m'lord."

"Thank you Thomas. Tell Mary I'll stay awake for her if she wants to stay with Sybil for a while."

Thomas nodded and turned to leave the room.

"And Thomas?"

"Yes m'lord?"

For a moment Thomas thought he might say something terrible dramatic and meaningful, but instead his lordship moved to follow him out of the room, clapping a hand on his back.

"At least he went quickly."
It was something they used to say in the war. Something that had been a cold comfort to every soldier when he saw another of his friends die. At least it had been quick…

VI.

Anna took the instruction that they should go to bed with an odd feeling. She met John’s eye and seeing the faintest trace of a smirk playing about his lips she nearly rolled her eyes in amusement – had it not been for the situation she might well have done so. They were amongst friends after all. But she knew precisely what he was thinking and it was her thought too. Despite the awfulness of the evening’s events they both had servitude on their bones by now and Anna hated the thought of leaving the room in such a state of disarray.

Did it make her a despicable person? That she could think about something as practical as tidying up when poor Branson had died here this evening?

Her turmoil must have been plain on her face for John reached for her hand and after they bid a mumbled, subdued "Goodnight" to those around them he began to lead her up the stairs. Had it been any other night she would have been shocked but thrilled to climb the main staircase without carrying anything for anyone. She was going up it as though she was a guest but he could think of nothing quite so trivial this night.

"Poor Branson."

John held her hand tighter, his thumb running over the back of her hand as they moved at a pace he could manage, hearing muffled voice from downstairs as others began to come up to bed too.

"Do you think it really was an accident?"

John froze for a moment but continued on without any fuss.

"Of course it was."

Anna found his face unreadable and cursed him for being so controlled.

"But what if it wasn't? What if someone did it on purpose? I mean…I know you were on one side of him but, well, it was Miss O'Brien on the other side wasn't it?"

His brow furrowed and neither of them said anything until they were safely in their bedroom, well away from prying ears. Anna didn't know what had prompted her to say it really. She supposed it was just wishful thinking on her part that somebody had to be responsible for a death like that. They’d all heard the recording after all; it seemed almost just that after Branson had been accused he would be judged and sent to his death. But that was terribly morbid wasn't it?

John took a pointed breath and sat on the bed looking up at her. Worlds passed between them and Anna still couldn't manage to smile, even slightly. It was just badly timed wasn't it? That the recording should play just before Branson died?

"Do you honestly think Miss O'Brien would …what? Poison Branson?"

"I don't know do I!"

She reached up to pull the pins out of her hair, turning away from him for a moment, looking at herself in the mirror and wishing she could see the woman she had been ten years ago.

"Why would she? Why would anyone? None of us have seen Branson for years."
Anna sighed herself, feeling utterly defeated, but too much entangled in keeping secrets to disregard the secret Branson might have kept.

"What if he did run someone over?"

"And you think he was…You think someone killed him for it?"

"I don't know."

Anna had a feeling that they were going to have to get through a rather long night before they even got close to knowing what had happened this evening.

VII.

Edith pulled her dressing gown tighter around her thin frame with one hand and tapped her cigarette with the other; she sat on the ledge underneath the window, the glass swung wide open to let the air in and tried in vain to see anything. She couldn't even make out her car and she had a terrible sinking feeling that the fog would have grown enough by tomorrow that they'd either had to stumble to the village or wait with the body.

She shuddered slightly at the thought. Knowing she was in the house with a dead body was not an experience she had wanted to repeat and the worst of it was she was stuck in her old damned bedroom feeling like a child again. She tapped the cigarette off again and heard someone moving about on the gravel – there was no possible way she could see them – and she considered calling out, but knew it would be foolish.

It was probably just Thomas fetching some more firewood in case the fog was worse tomorrow. Or maybe O'Brien popping out for a cigarette? Edith knew the other woman didn't have the advantage of being able to be insolent if she was caught.

Her mind was consumed with thoughts of the recording. There had always been suspicions about her Papa's death and now Edith felt like the accusations she had made against her Mother at the time had considerably more clout. Honestly, why did no one ever listen to her?

But why on earth had Evelyn come up? It had been rather widely accepted at the time that his death had been the result of leftover troubles from the war – he'd poisoned himself had been the general verdict and she didn't understand who might think otherwise. No one had ever thought she'd killed him. They'd thought it was disgraceful how unemotional she'd been after the death, but no one had EVER accused her of being anything other than a bitch.

Murderer was a bit steep wasn't it?

VIII.

Sarah smoothed down Cora's nightgown with deft and experienced hands and stepped away from her, allowing the Dowager Countess a moment to observe herself in the mirror. Precisely why Cora liked to look at herself in such detail before she retired for the night Sarah never bothered to ask - she was long since past the point of asking questions.

It had been the longest night she'd lived through in a good long while. The Dower House was hardly a riot of activity at the best of times and she'd grown unused to the rapidity of life at Downton: even sitting in the kitchen earlier had felt foreign to her and having so many people sat around her as she ate had been uncomfortable. She felt old and pathetic and could only imagine how Cora was feeling; her nerves were fraught at the best of times.

"Do you think the police will question us all alone?"
Sarah looked briefly out of the window and immediately thought that the likelihood of the police being able to get through the gathering fog was quite thin, especially if they’d have to get to the village first to raise the alarm. But she knew it wasn't the practical side of things that was causing Cora concern and precisely *when* she had to speak to the police rather it was the very fact itself that she would have to at some point. She placed her hand gently on Cora's shoulder.

"I'm sure they won't insist on it m'lady. It's not like we all saw something different after all. They might even be satisfied with his lordship's account of what happened."

Cora seemed momentarily mollified and Sarah met her eye in the mirror and saw the unshed tears in the blue orbs. She squeezed Cora's shoulder and, taking her arm, led her slowly over to the bed. Cora's hand clutched for hers as it had done earlier and Sarah found herself sat on the bed next to her employer.

"Sarah…I did something…terrible."

She seemed on the verge of tears once again and Sarah wrapped an arm around her shoulders and allowed Cora to rest her head on her shoulder. It wasn't an uncommon position anymore. Twenty-two years of service, the last four of them spent mostly isolated, and Cora's deteriorating state, had changed the way they were with each other. Sarah thought it morbidly ironic that after the accident she had caused to cling onto her job as lady's maid had changed her role anyway. She was no longer a mere maid but had become a friend and confidant. Largely, she knew, because there was no one else left.

"I know you did. But don't worry m'lady," she rubbed her shoulder and pretended she couldn't feel the tears falling onto her neck. "I don't think anyone else saw it."

IX.

Matthew smiled softly at his wife when she sunk into bed with a sigh and immediately curled up beside him. He wrapped his arms around her thin frame and pulled her closer, gently laying a kiss on her temple.

"Is Sybil feeling better?"

Mary nodded against his chest and Matthew felt her exhaustion in the small movement. He'd grown accustomed to every single thing his wife did by now and he loved being able to claim he knew her so well. So well in fact that he had spotted something at dinner that others had not. He spoke in casual tones but kept his eyes fixed on her face, waiting to see whether there would be another telling flicker in her eyes.

"And you? It must have been very trying for you."

Mary pushed herself up onto her elbows and frowned at him. She'd become guarded, he could tell that whether he knew her well or not, and he anticipated this being considerably more tricky than he had wanted it to be.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you cannot possibly be entirely unaffected by the evenings events. Nothing more than that…unless there is something I don't know about?"

Mary relaxed. He saw the tension leave her body – she thought she was safe. He *hated* being forced to think like this. Assessing Mary's reactions had been a joy over the previous ten years, learning what made her smile, what made her quiet, what made her laugh and cry and cling to him.
and now to use his expertise in a way that felt against her. She'd told him everything about Pamuk – well, she'd said it was everything – so why was the doubt and wariness when it came to his wife's truthfulness rearing its head again after so many years.

He held her close and closed his eyes.

"There's nothing darling. Of course I'm affected. A death in our house at the dinner table...I daren't tell Mrs Patmore, she'll think it was the crumble and go into hysterics!"

She smiled vaguely and he did the same. It was entirely inappropriate but it didn't seem to matter behind closed doors. He kissed her forehead again and breathed in the soft scent of her hair, thinking bleakly that the evening could have ended so much worse. Branson's death had been a terrible and unfortunate incident – he was no closer to being able to guess what had caused it and for the time being repeated the general consensus that it was a fluke accident – but the hand of death could have reached out to any of them couldn't it?

Matthew pulled Mary closer and thought of poor Sybil and how she must be feeling in the wake of someone she cared for dying. The pain of someone you loved being struck down didn't bare thinking about.

X.

Later yet, when the lights were low and the house finally quiet a lone figure crept into the dining room, treading carefully so as to make no noise. It wouldn't do to wake up those sleeping upstairs.

A hand reached out and carefully plucked a candle from the holder. When they had placed it there earlier there had been ten slim white candles protruding from the polished silver and now the hand removed one deftly, breaking it in half easily and placing it in a pocket. It would be fitting to take it upstairs and leave it with Mr Branson.

After a moment the hand reached back and took another one, not snapping this one just yet. The figure turned away from the table and glanced at the mantelpiece that held the poem; it was so dark in the dining room it was impossible to see the words, but the lines recited themselves in their memory.

*One overslept himself and then there were eight.*

With careful steps they ascended the stairs for the second time that night, this time with a different bedroom in mind...
The Second Body and the Missing Candle

Chapter Five:

I.

There was barely any light at all in the kitchen the following morning when Anna entered the room to get the stove fires going. It really shouldn't have been her job but with Daisy away and Mrs Patmore presumably stuck in the village due to the fog – Anna had a feeling the cook wouldn't exactly be devastated by her impromptu holiday – it had to be one of them. John couldn't get down to do it, Thomas probably wouldn't know how and Miss O'Brien would sooner starve than lower herself to doing something so menial.

The fog had closed around the house like a hand gripping a tiny stone. Anna peered out of the window and could see nothing but dreary fog for miles and she knew that they would all be trapped at Downton for the foreseeable future. Normally this wouldn't pose a problem, they were well-stocked with food and it would soon pass, but with the body upstairs…Anna couldn't claim to know a great deal about bodies. How long would it take before it began to smell? She shook her head to stop the morbid thought and instead curled her body down further so her hand could touch the match to the half-burnt wood. They would need to restock the wood later on.

Matthew Crawley had installed electricity throughout the house, even the kitchen and Anna had to admit the previous Lord Grantham had been wrong not to do so before, but his lordship was yet to get around to gas. So they kept the wood-stove and went through the laborious lighting and cleaning of it still – secretly she thought the Earl was too frightened of upsetting Mrs Patmore to attempt to instigate change. She got to her feet and wished the cook was there – apart from anything else she was going to end up cooking for the whole weekend for all ten-

Nine. Nine of us, she thought with a shudder.

Anna repeated to herself that it had been an accident. John had finally managed to make it sound true last night and Anna clung to that brief moment she had believed him but she couldn't shake the feeling that there was more tragedy to come.

II.

Mary left her bedroom bereft of the same feeling of dread that plagued many others in the household. She had other things to worry about after all as her morning toilette had attested to. She felt somewhat grateful that Mrs Patmore wasn't here as any breakfast Anna produced was likely to be considerably simpler and more palatable to those feeling a bit delicate than the usual gourmet fare the cook laid on. Matthew was forever telling her that it wouldn't exactly be difficult for her to speak to the cook and ask for things to change but he had gone quiet when Mary had said she'd face the irascible woman over the food when he did over the installation of gas. The subject had soon been dropped.

She ignored her own aches and pains though, what did they matter as long as her heart was strong and as long as Matthew loved her she knew it always would be. Instead she resolved to spare her strength for Sybil, her younger sister would need her now more than ever before now and Mary was determined that after ten years of only minimal contact between the sisters, she would be there for her now. She knocked gently on the door and received no reply. Sybil must be in a deep sleep, she'd been so distraught when Mary had put her to bed the previous evening and Mary had given her a small sedative to see her through the night. They did tend to make one groggy in the morning.
She knocked again and rather than turning away, as she knew Edith might, she opened the door and slipped inside. The room was dark, the curtains still drawn and she could see Sybil underneath the sheets, the poor dear had probably cried herself silly before the sedative had kicked in – the world and his wife knew that there was unfinished business between the youngest Crawley daughter and the Irishman.

"Sybil darling, you should come downstairs and have some food."

Mary took several quick steps through the room to pull open the curtains and turned back to her sister, her next imploration dying on her lips as she took in the sight before her. Sybil was a pale purple colour, her eyes open with fear and already sinking horrible into her head, and her white lips were open. She looked like she had been frozen mid-scream and before she could control herself Mary supplied the scream Sybil was unable to give.

III.

O'Brien, coming as she was from Lady Mary's old room, was closest to the source of the noise and on the scene before anyone else. She looked to the bed, the only possible source of the Countess' distress in the room, and let out a shuddering breath of shock.

"Christ almighty…"

Before she could continue Mary cut across her.

"I just found her! I didn't-"

"I know."

Mary's tears were immediate but O'Brien didn't move. Instead she stared at the girl she had known on the bed with utter despair. As if finding the body of a girl you had known from her childhood wasn't a bad enough start to the morning there was now no denying that something sinister might be afoot. She had not believed for a second that Branson had died accidentally and now…well now there was another body wasn't there?

But perhaps it was circumstance?

Had someone else lain dead this morning she would not have allowed herself a single moment of doubt, but the poor girl had been distraught last night hadn't she? Was it really impossible to surmise that their affair, such as it was or at least as much as anyone knew about it, had been love? Could Sybil have taken her own life in the night? It was possible…but then…

She looked like she was screaming.

O'Brien raised her eyes to Mary again, as though for a moment the Countess had been invisible, and moved towards.

"Come away now m'lady."

She took hold of Mary's arm and began to gently lead her out of the room.

"Your Mother'll need you."

"Oh god, Mama…"

"Shhh," she purposefully kept herself looking at the body, forcing Mary to turn her back and look
away. "She'll want you with 'er an'...well one of us is going to 'ave to tell 'er."

Mary looked, if possible, even more aghast at the thought and Sarah had to concede she didn't exactly relish the thought herself. She supposed she should be concerned with the worrying implications of another death so soon or how the rest of the family would take it, but all she thought when she finally managed to pull Mary from the room and close the door before the Earl could see inside too, was that this might just kill Cora.

IV.

Matthew guessed before he needed to ask. One look at Mary's tearful face was enough and he pulled her into an embrace without the need of confirmation from her: instead he glanced over his wife's shoulder and met the maid's pale face.

"Is she?"

O'Brien nodded and Matthew closed his eyes in despair. He hadn't exactly anticipated this, but somehow he was not as surprised as he perhaps should have been. He felt sick with himself. Was death really so run of the mill for him now?

"And did she? That is...was there any sign that..."

The maid shook her head and moved away. He burned to put the questions to someone who was not as distraught as his wife but it seemed he was to be denied; O'Brien stopped a few feet away from them, looking as though she were guarding the door. Against what he had no idea and he closed his eyes once more, blocking her out as he lifted a hand to cradle his wife's head as it rested against his shoulder. He tried to shush her, tried to comfort her but nothing could. Had she been hysterical, as Sybil had been the night before, then he might have stood a chance, instead her relatively quiet devastation was unbearable.

"Mary? Was she-?"

A cry quite unlike anything he has ever heard in his life interrupts him and he turns in time to see O'Brien throw an arm around Cora's waist from behind her, preventing her from opening the door. The maid was smaller than his Mother-in-law but held her still with relative ease. He didn't imagine Cora was hard to keep still at the best of times but now it seemed all the energy she had been desperately clinging to since Robert died had seeped from her. The tears stained her cheeks, both uglier and more beautifully real than Matthew had ever seen her and she looked as though rather than being held back she was being propped up.

Mary left his arms with a small smile for him and went to her Mother. He watched her cup her remaining parent's face with more tenderness than he thought she was capable of showing anyone that wasn't him and press her forehead against one the same size and shape as her own. He thought it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen her do and the perfectionist in him wished O'Brien would leave the scene to allow this perfect image of their love to remain, but she remained as he knew she had to. Mary was offering her Mother comfort, love, anything to try and make the tears subside, but as one hand clung to her daughter's shoulder, the other sought out O'Brien's.

They looked like a bizarre interconnected trio of statues displaying the grief of women. He waited until he saw Bates approach and nodded towards him in mournful greeting —his valet didn't yet know what had happened but he soon would — and waited for the three women to depart.

It was his duty to face another body.
V.

Cora had been hustled downstairs by her eldest daughter and maid before she could see the body of her youngest.

Oh god…

The very thought of her beautiful little Sybil as a body! Cora sobbed without any semblance of control, quite frankly she'd have felt ashamed of herself if she hadn't been able to cry like this, and she supposed crying was all she was going to be permitted to do now. They'd kept her from the room and settled her in a seat, Sarah had thrust a rather large glass of brandy into her hand and Cora immediately recognised the small white fizz around the top of the liquid that told her she was being given a sedative of her own. She didn't want to take it, not now, not whilst they were all muttering that it had been the very thing to kill Sybil. How could she…?

Mary lifted the glass to her lips for her, as though she were a child, and Cora gave in, sipping the liquid and feeling sick that the strong alcohol completely obliterated any taste of the drug. Had Sybil even known? The warmth spread through her throat and into her empty stomach like rapid fire and she pressed her lips together to keep the drink down and try to cease her sobs.

Someone in this room had done that to her little girl. Handed her a drink laced with a lethal dose of something and left her to die alone and scared and sad and without her Mother or her lover to hold her and Cora scanned the room back and forth and back and forth and back and forth wondering which of them it could be.

Mary stood behind her but Cora didn't bother to include her, she knew how frugal her maid was with the sedatives, but Mary had re-joined the others. Cora couldn't quite shake the feeling that it was just as well and she hated herself for it, crying anew that the strength of her love for Mary simply wasn't enough anymore.

VI.

John watched as the Earl gently closed Sybil's eyes and pulled the sheet over the body. There was no need to carry this one to their bedroom after all so Bates didn't feel quite as useless this time.

"Perhaps I should try to get to the village m'lord? I think the need for the police is a little more pressing than we thought it was."

Matthew looked at him wryly and nodded once in agreement to the notion. John knew him well enough now to know that he wouldn't allow his valet to go out in this kind of dangerous weather though, not when he himself was a considerably more able bodied man.

"I think you're right but I'm reluctant to leave everyone here Bates. There's clearly someone behind this and if I leave…"

The silent meaning hit Bates like a tonne of bricks. He himself had considered the possibility that there might be someone either in their midst or an unknown intruder that was responsible but he had not thought to fall under suspicion himself. He found he couldn't, in all good conscience, be too insulted by the implication.

"You don't think there's any possibility that Lady Sybil-"

"Killed herself?"

He nodded, quite unable to vocalise the accusation that a member of the aristocracy could have taken their own life.
"I've seen suicide before. Too many," his eyes never wavered from Sybil as he took his last looks at her before pulling the sheet over her head. "But Sybil of all people! I don't think so Bates."

He glanced out of the window feeling far too weary to continue with the train of thought that if Sybil hadn't killed herself in the night that left two possibilities. Something was happening at Downton or there had now been two terrible accidents. He knew which he hoped for but either way…it had been Mary to give Sybil the sedative last night hadn't it?

"I don't think anyone's going very far Bates. The fog's far too thick and it's much too far to traipse to the village. I rather think we're stuck here for the time being."

VII.

Edith sat in the same seat she had occupied the previous night and smoked obsessively. She had thought that this weekend would lead to her Mother and sisters continually telling her to desist in her now chronic habit and herself rolling her eyes in irritation. She desperately wished that had been all that had happened. She choked a sob as she lit another with the remains of the previous one and would have given anything to hear Sybil's voice chastising her.

Of all the people in this house, why had it been Sybil? Little Sybil who had been so sweet and Edith couldn't imagine ever having done anything that would deserve to be killed like that. Because there was no question of it now. The unfortunate death of a young and perfectly healthy man one could just about convince themselves was an anomaly. Two, and in such a short space of time, was somewhat more and sinister.

Across from her the Dowager Countess looked numb and for the briefest of moment Edith thought spitefully that it served her right, but even she couldn't maintain the anger to continue despising a woman who had just lost a child. Mary was being held by Matthew and O'Brien was hovering around behind her Mother unable to do too much in the presence of the family so Edith left her seat to come around the table, handing her cigarette to O'Brien and gently placed her arms around her Mother's thin shoulders.

"Shhhh, it'll be alright Mama."

Her Mother's reaction was immediate. For a fraction of a second Edith thought she might have pulled away in disgust – they were hardly on the best of terms after all – but instead Cora clung to her desperately. Edith allowed herself to be used as a prop for Cora to pull herself to her feet before she wrapped her arms around her most estranged daughter, pulling her so tight Edith thought she might cease to breathe herself.

"Oh darling…my darling girl..." There were soft kisses on her cheek and slightly clammy cool skin brushed against her own and Edith allowed herself to be coddled, ignoring the black part of her heart that thought she was only being accepted as a substitute for Sybil. She knew several pairs of eyes were on them but she ignored them and stared over her Mother's shoulder with a small smile that she knew was entirely inappropriate for the situation but she couldn't help but feel when her Mother muttered she loved her.

She was pointedly ignoring the faintly revolted look on Mary's face – god she looked like she was going to be sick, surely she didn't begrudge her that much? – and her eyes fell on the candleholder once more. Her mouth fell open and she blinked her eyes, certain they must be deceiving her. But no, it was absurd and simply had to be a coincidence. And yet...

She sought the man who had also been looking at the silver with such interest the previous night and found his pale drawn face looking directly at her already.
"Have you seen it yet Mr Barrow?"

VIII.

Thomas followed her gaze to the dining table, still in the same state they had left it last night – it annoyed him to think that despite two deaths and a miniscule staff, Mr Carson would probably still have had the room in a pristine condition – and he spotted what Edith meant immediately. He furrowed his brow and looked back up to her.

"Bloody hell, you've got to be joking?"

He regretted the outburst the moment it left his lips. The shaken expressions of everyone in the room began to look panicked on top of everything else and as Thomas glanced around them all only Lady Edith and O'Brien didn't look as though they were about to be sick. Edith he knew was already aware what he was talking about. O'Brien he assumed had some preternatural senses that prevented her ever being taken off guard by anything.

"Well," the Countess demanded. "What is it?"

Thomas felt distinctly awkward, it seemed so foolish really, but it was unquestionable.

"There're only eight candles left. Yesterday there were ten."
Chapter Six:

I.

Matthew looked at the candleholder with a furrowed brow. Thomas was right of course and there were in fact two candles missing from the silver frame but whatever he was suggesting was absurd surely? This was some sinister machination of a sick mind but it was nothing to worry about – since they had returned from war Matthew knew Thomas' nerves had not been what they once were so his opinion on the matter was undoubtedly skewered. No doubt he thought there were ghosts in the old house. He'd heard the other man muttering to himself on more than one occasion and had been sure that Carson's name had come up – no doubt the poor chap thought the former Butler had cleared away the candles!

But whatever Thomas' mental state it didn't change the fact that someone had taken the candles and two people were dead. One could certainly be an accident – even if it was a rather unlikely accident – but a second…and a death that looked self-inflicted purposefully led him to think something more nefarious was afoot. Sybil would never do such a thing to herself…

He glanced around the room. It had to one of them. There was no one else here, unless someone had arrived last night before they'd sat down to dinner, before Branson had died, before the fog had set in.

He thought of the dead phone line and the impenetrable weather outside and knew they were alone with a murderer. The remaining candles flickered and Matthew felt distinctly unsettled – their little world, secluded as it was, seemed to be being invaded by some unknown evil and he feared what might come next.

II.

Mary met her husband's eye and, seeing the lack of surety, was at his side in moments, her hand slipping into his and her face, wet with tears, finally beginning to compose itself once more. It seemed that as he began to struggle with the events around them she was able to be strong once more and carry the mantle of their seat. The candles held little interest for her, beyond the fact that everyone else was entranced: whatever they meant it surely wasn't as serious as the fact that there were two dead bodies upstairs, one of which was her darling little sister, and they were alone? Sometimes she wondered what the matter with people was when they became so focussed on something so pointless and trivial. She glanced around the room and saw only two other sets of eyes focussed elsewhere and felt irritated that she once again had no allies other than Edith and O'Brien!

"Honestly! Does it matter if there are eight, ten or a hundred candles? Sybil is dead and so is Branson and…" She reached a hand up to rub her aching temples, still trying to assume the role of the consummate hostess even when the world felt like it was falling down around her. It was what her Mama would have wanted although one look at the Dowager Countess was enough to show how little of her control the older woman was managing to hold onto. "And someone did something to them."

It felt utterly unreal. The idea that anyone would slip into Sybil's room in the middle of the night and kill her was absurd. Who could possibly have a quarrel with Sybil? Mary looked around the room again and couldn't begin to fathom who might be the culprit. Branson…perhaps there had been some unrest below stairs she had never been aware of but Sybil? What on earth could Sybil
have done to any of the people here to lead to her death?

The silence was oppressive and she grew irritated, squeezing Matthew's hand to try to drag a response from him and finding him still staring.

"Oh for god's sake will somebody say something!"

III.

Bates, although fairly convinced that the candles must be some kind of joke on Thomas or even O'Brien's part, was prepared to oblige the Countess. What could be done he didn't know but he understood her sorrow and concern: he may not have lost a loved one but with a glance at Anna he couldn't help but conjure up the thought of how painful it could be. To lose someone you loved to such a horrible death...he could honestly say he'd never experienced such a thing before and, god willing, he wouldn't have to.

Perhaps that was it? Love. Maybe after their years of being apart Branson and Sybil had settled on a lover's pact and died within hours of each other purposefully...No, that was nonsense, of course it was. There was no getting around the fact that someone here must know something. Who had the room closest to Lady Sybil?

His eyes found Lady Edith across the room and he quickly looked away when the sharp girl noticed him. She was a great deal altered from when he had last seen her, perhaps there was something in that?

"I agree with you that the candles don't matter m'lady, but I think we can all agree that there's something no right going on."

"I should think that was bloody obvious Bates!"

Edith was silenced by a look from her remaining sister and Matthew gestured for his valet to carry on.

"What isn't obvious is whether we're alone or not here. Someone else could be here without us even knowing about it, or there could be something in the house we overlooked."

"So what are you suggesting?"

"I think we need to have a search."

IV.

"He's right." To say that Mr Bates was surprised his support came from the lips of Sarah O'Brien would have been an understatement but at the moment, he would take what he could get. "We've been sat 'ere glarin' at each other and it mightn't even be one of us."

Despite not wanting to leave Cora's side for a minute O'Brien was damned if she was just going to sit idly by whilst Bates did everything and, ever the conscientious worker, she was quickly upright again and moving towards the fireplace reaching for matchsticks.

"We'll have to split up though, it'll take forever if we all stick together. Shall we draw lots to see who goes with who?"

Before the words had even left her mouth Mary and Anna had visibly reached for their husbands arms and Sarah rolled her eyes, wondering why she bothered to try and be helpful.
"I want to go with you."

Despite everything, Cora, it seemed to the others gathered, was still incapable of thinking the worst of her maid. More than one of them thought she had been foolish to remain so reliant in the past but now several of them looked at the aging Countess with concern. Their looks did not go unnoticed by O'Brien though and she stalked away from the fireplace and back to her lady's side, gently placing a comforting, and somewhat possessive hand it seemed to the others assembled, hand on her shoulder.

"Certainly m'lady."

Sarah smiled softly at her mistress and no one argued. What would be the point anyway? The last person O'Brien would ever harm – no matter what the recording had suggested – would be Cora Crawley. She would be safe wouldn't she?

V.

Pair by pair they stood together, Anna and Bates; Mary and Matthew; O'Brien and Cora; and Thomas and Edith making an unlikely, but oddly formidable pair stood skulking by the fireplace, both smoking.

"Edith, darling, must you?"

Edith rolled her eyes at her Mother, but felt oddly glad she had regained some of her nagging spirit. She found it oddly humorous that now Sybil was dead – oh god, poor innocent, little Sybil, who she could never believe had hurt anyone intentionally – all of their Mother's disappointment at her two younger daughters was now focussed entirely on her. She decided not to reply for both their sakes, they had made some progress after all, and instead addressed Thomas. There was something about a Butler, no matter if she did remember him as a Footman a scarce few years older than her, which she found oddly comforting and his cynicism certainly fitted the mood at the moment.

"Who shall go where?"

"Why're you asking me? 'm 'ardly the authority on searchin' an house."

Edith shrugged vaguely and looked at the others.

"You were in the trenches: I thought you'd keep your head in a crisis the best."

Thomas seemed to except her reasoning and sucked on his cigarette furiously, looking around the group and assuming the role Edith had thrust upon him. His suggestions were all taken quickly and pair by pair they trooped out of the dining room. They looked at each other nervously and for a moment Thomas thought O'Brien was going to say something to him but the muscles in her face twitched and she turned to follow Cora. He watched them go for a moment before a sharp tap on the shoulder regained his attention.

"Come on. You decided we should go outside, we might as well get it over with."

VI.

Anna walked cautiously behind her husband. She was fairly sure that they weren't going to find anything in the kitchen but it never hurt to be on one's guard and she couldn't pretend she didn't feel sick to her stomach that she now felt like she had to be on her guard around people who had been her friends and colleagues for so many years now. She could no more believe Lady Mary to be a murderer than she could believe her capable of swimming the English Channel!
But people, Anna had learnt in her life, had a horrible habit of surprising you sometimes. O'Brien might be trouble – she'd certainly been it before – but try as she might Anna couldn't think why her victims would be Lady Sybil and Mr Branson. Had it been John she might be more suspicious. Things had been worse than ever between the staff since the death of Lord Grantham: with Anna back in the house no one had envied the Butler obliged to keep the peace and though Carson had made a valiant effort the older maid had not taken kindly to suddenly being obliged to share her privileged position below stairs with a previous subordinate. Bates pointing out the fact that Sarah was now the maid of the Dowager hadn't helped and the bad feeling between them had never abated. Only the distance between the Dowager House and Downton had ensured that no blood was spilt but now... Was it her own prejudice or common sense that was telling her O'Brien might well have blood on her hands?

"I don't think there's anything here."

"I'm not surprised," she managed a small, sad smile. "If I was a killer I don't think I'd hide in Mrs Patmore's pantry."

He smiled softly at her and reached for her hand.

"Wait here, I'll look in the yard and be right back."

For a moment Anna knew she should object but the feeling soon passed. It would take minutes at most and though she didn't much relish the thought of being on her own it would hardly be forever would it? She watched him go and looked around the familiar surroundings again, quite safe in the knowledge that there was nothing to find.

VII.

Cora sat awkwardly in the seat closest to the window in the drawing room and wished her hearing was a bit more reliable. She could hear O'Brien, at least she thought she could, but it would be a great deal more reassuring if she could honestly say she knew where the other woman was. Once away from everyone else O'Brien had steered her into a seat in the first room they entered and told her to stay seated and rest while she looked around the rooms on the ground floor Thomas had told them to check. Cora couldn't honestly say she was disappointed – she hardly wanted to search like everyone else, good god what if she actually found something! – and she'd nodded along when O'Brien had said it would be for the best if she didn't mention their splitting up to anyone else, but she felt rather pathetic. She wasn't even capable of looking for her own daughter's murderer for god's sake!

She sighed and closed her eyes against the headache she could feel coming on and felt another flurry of tears begin to form. Years ago she would have moved the earth for her girls but now she couldn't even summon the energy and all she could do was sit and wait.

"O'Brien?" She called out behind her, turning in her seat and staring at the closed door, as though expecting her maid to be able to hear her through solid wood. Where on earth had O'Brien gone anyway? Surely it couldn't take this long to look around a small library! She turned back to the window and her brow furrowed at what she saw, or thought she saw, moving around in the fog. Thankfully, there was nothing wrong with her eyes...

VIII.

Matthew closed the door to his bedroom behind him silently and looked around the corridor, trying to discern where Mary had gotten to. They'd been trying to decide the likelihood of the
servant's green baize door being the key to how whoever it was had managed to avoid making noise on the main staircase in the middle of the night when he presumably ran away, but Matthew had struck upon an idea and left his wife's side briefly to head to his room alone.

It felt a bit excessive to carry a gun in one's own home but it couldn't hurt to be prepared could it? And it wasn't as though he was planning to show off about it, everyone else would hardly remain calm if they knew that he had a weapon! He stuck his head around the door of his mother-in-law's bedroom and saw no sign of Mary. She couldn't have gone far, he had only been gone for a few minutes.

He closed the door to Cora's bedroom and for a moment thought he was imagining things. But sure enough he could hear a scream and like lightening he began to run down the stairs, hearing other footsteps and other doors opening and slamming shut in haste. At the bottom of the stairs he jumped when the front door flew open and Thomas came barrelling through it, quite alone.

"Did you hear that?"

"Of course I bleedin' did. Who was it?"

"Don't know. Where's Edith?"

"We got separated-"

Cora and O'Brien appeared out of the drawing room looking pale and confused at the same moment Bates appeared in the doorframe, standing out against the foggy background.

"Matthew! There you are."

Mary was rapidly making her way down the stairs and Matthew quickly looked over everyone.

"We're missing Edith-"

"No you're not."

Edith came through the baize door that led to the servant's staircase and Matthew frowned: wasn't she supposed to be outside? He turned to his valet with a horrified expression, forgetting about Edith temporarily.

"And Anna."
Chapter Seven:

I.

Thomas, much to his own surprise, led the way down to the kitchen with a sinking feeling in his stomach. There was no one else in the house and there had definitely been a scream: it had to have been Anna but it seemed impossible to his mind that Anna, who had always been so strong and irritatingly present, could have fallen prey to this killer. He was half-hoping to find her there having apprehended this mystery person single-handed and looking at them all like they were daft for not being as efficient.

The kitchens were the last place she had been seen according to Bates and only his bad leg prevented the valet from barrelling down the stairs in the lead. Instead Thomas was the quickest, closely followed by Lady Mary, and with every step he felt more despair at what he might find there.

He burst into the kitchen and immediately stumbled backwards into Lady Mary with a muted cry. Anna had a belt looped around her neck and from the buckle she was strung up on one of the hooks that usually held the herbs: her hands were tied behind her back and she was completely still.

"Jesus Christ almighty!"

II.

John didn't quite know how he was functioning at the moment. They'd cut Anna down and she'd still felt warm in his arms as he held her close, unwilling to let anyone else touch her until his leg had become unbearably painful and Matthew and Thomas had both reached forwards to help him. He wished he was able to push the pain away but his leg felt weak underneath him and, without saying a word, Thomas had scooped her up and walked at John's pace as they took her up the stairs to Lady Sybil's bedroom. They couldn't very well put her in their marital bed and it made sense to keep the bodies together he supposed and in a strange way, it was comforting to think that she wasn't alone.

They left him alone in the room and for that he was grateful. He could sit at her bedside, with the outline of Lady Sybil's body underneath a sheet next to her, and…and what? Make sure nothing else happened to her? What more could happen now? He reached for her hand and squeezed it gently and despairingly, knowing there was no chance of her responding but foolishly wishing the impossible could happen.

"You'll go mad if you stay here Mr Bates."

Lady Edith was in the doorway, looking more sympathetic than he had thought she ever could, and edging into the room awkwardly. He saw her eyes flicker to the bulge in the bed where her sister lay before she looked away quickly and came to his side, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"There's nothing you can do for her now, you should come downstairs with the rest of us. There's no point just sitting here."

"I left her."
"I'm sure she didn't see it like that. And I'm sure she'd rather you were downstairs with us, trying to work this out, rather than sitting here moping."

He didn't look convinced but Edith would not take no for an answer and, taking hold of his arm, she pulled him to his feet and led him downstairs, getting no resistance.

Good, she thought. God knows how she'd have got him away if he'd put up a fight and the very last thing she needed at the moment was for him to spend too much time looking over the bodies…

III.

Mary couldn't take her eyes away from the poem on the wall and couldn't quite fathom how she had been so stupid before when it was glaringly obvious to her now what was happening. The door to the dining room opened behind her and without even bothering to see who it was she immediately began to speak, eager to share her finding.

"It's the poem. Look," she spun around briefly to make sure she was been paid attention to. It had been O'Brien to open the door but now the others were trooping into the room and she pointed at the poem. "Branson choked himself. Sybil didn't wake up and Anna stayed where she was last seen."

Perhaps she was imagining the connection? It seemed too outlandish to be believable and she was half-hoping that someone would tell her it was nonsense and stop her foolish train of thought, but it fit didn't it? It fit all too well. She turned to glance around the faces, seeing various levels of confusion and unable to stop herself noticing that there was yet another candle gone from the gleaming silver holder.

"So you reckon that the next one might be someone choppin' themselves in 'alf?"

O'Brien's disbelief comforted her but other than Thomas smirking at his friend no one else looked especially convinced that the improbably means of death meant the poem was unconnected.

Matthew was poring over it and her Mother had immediately sunk into the nearest chair looking pale. Edith and Mr Bates appeared in the doorway and Mary soon informed them of her theory, noticing the red-rimmed eyes of the valet with a pang in her heart. She couldn't think about grief yet. Something very dangerous seemed to be going on and she would mourn her sister and her friend when she and her family were safe from harm.

"So, whoever's doing this has a sick sense of humour?"

Mary nodded at her sister's words and glanced over the poem once more.

"And they know us well. I've been thinking about it and Sybil would never give herself a sedative so someone must have given it to her and she would never drink anything unless she knew the person that gave it to her…"

IV.

"So we're leaning back towards it been one of us?"

Matthew steeled himself for the ripple that would inevitably go around the room and pulled his jacket tighter around him, glad for the comforting press of the gun against his stomach. Even if he never used it he certainly felt a damn sight safer knowing that if anyone came near his wife he would have a way of defending her and himself. But it still seemed impossible that it was one of the other five people here; perhaps their villain was better at hiding than they were at searching?
"I must say Mary darling, I'm not entirely convinced."

"Do you imagine for a moment that I want it to be one of us?"

"Of course not, but I don't think we've exhausted the possibilities of there being someone else here yet. I just can't fathom how anyone in this room could be a killer.

"Well," Edith piped up. "According to that recording, we're all killers."

V.

Cora cried out, quite unable to stop herself at the reminder of the horrible recording. Mrs Hughes' scratchy voice had haunted her all through the night and it was only through O'Brien's liberal measures of brandy and a small sedative that she had managed to get any sleep at all. But after her poor, darling Sybil this morning and then seeing Anna hanging in the kitchen – O'Brien and Matthew had tried to stop her getting a look but she'd pushed past them – she doubted she was ever going to be able to sleep again!

"Must we keep talking about that?"

"I think it's fairly relevant Mama!"

Cora looked up at her middle daughter with watering eyes. This was not the girl she'd raised and loved, all cold words and with no softness to her anymore: what on earth had happened to her little girl to make her like this? The loss of their Father had hit all the girls hard but Mary and Sybil had managed not to lose all the love in them; dear god, what had she done to her girls! She wrapped her arms around herself, feeling the cold she had been unable to shake since last night setting in again.

"Relevant or not, it's still unpleasant."

"Mama enough," Mary spoke as imperiously as her grandmother before her and Cora suddenly wished passionately that Violet Crawley was here. No one would dare die under her watchful eye.

"I think we should carry on looking for a little while. At least make sure that all the doors and windows are locked…” Matthew looked out of the window at the still dark sky. The fog was preventing the natural light from getting through and at the moment it was a thick as ever, whoever was here, whether they had been invited or not, were certainly not going anywhere now.

VI.

Edith sat quite awkwardly with her Mother, wondering why she, who was one of the fitter more able people, had been consigned to watch her Mama when Bates could scarcely walk and was fairly addled with grief! She heaved a sigh and finally met the Dowager's eye.

"Go ahead Mama, ask the question, I can see you're dying to."

"Is it true?"

Edith was a little taken aback at the speed with which her Mother spoke, on Cora's current form she had expected a great deal more dithering before they got to the point.

"I didn't poison him Mama."

"Oh? So he survived the war and had no wounds that might have killed him, but after seven months of marriage to you he simply dropped down dead. Are you honestly going to look me in
"I said I didn't poison him Mama…I don't deny killing him."

Edith thought the admission was worth the shock on her Mother's face. She'd been hiding the secret for so long now and had no great intention of sharing it with anyone, but here and now, with people dropping like flies around them, she felt like confessing and if it pained her Mother, the Mother that had never cared and abandoned her as soon as she could, then it was worth it. She felt her lips curl into a smirk. What did it matter anyway? The inquest had ruled that he'd died of natural causes brought on by his sustained injuries and it would be incredibly difficult for her Mother to try and overthrow the ruling of a court. Especially when Edith knew for a fact her Mother had a great fear of courts these days, following all the unpleasantness that had followed her Father's death.

"Oh Edith…you can't have…not my…oh my darling, what did you do?"

She hadn't expected an out and out question like that but Edith bought herself some time busying her hands with finding and lighting a cigarette. She exhaled at length and met her Mother’s blue, shining eyes. She couldn't help but notice the lines around them though, the last few years had been hard on Cora Crawley and she was most definitely not the woman she had been. Edith was sure that even if this phantom killer didn't get her this weekend then her nerves would, her heart simply couldn't take any more.

"Can't you guess Mama? I simply copied Aunt Rosamund, I always did take after her, you all said."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"You never knew?" She genuinely froze at that. There had been a time that Mama and Aunt Rosamund had been each other's greatest friend and to think that this had been the one secret they hadn't shared made her feel oddly powerful.

"Aunt Rosamund smothered Uncle Marmaduke with a pillow in his sleep."

"Edith, how dare yo-!"

"I saw her Mama. I was four and I wasn't supposed to be wandering around but you and Papa were always busy and he was the only one who read to me when we were in London. I wanted a story and went to see him and when the door opened I saw her, as plainly as I see you now, holding a pillow over his face."

Cora shook her head, tears forming and falling in her eyes and Edith felt a pang of guilt that was quite unlike anything she had ever felt over Evelyn. The very last thing her Mama needed was to learn her oldest and greatest friend had liberated herself from her marriage in such a way, but weren't they all guilty of the same thing? She and Aunt Rosamund by way of pillow and Mama with the aid of a staircase and a maid who looked the other way.

"She would have said something to me. All those years we were friends-"

"Of course she wouldn't Mama. You know what she was like, the life of the party! She killed him and went back to hosting her own party Mama, cool as anything. Even when I was four I understood."

"I do not understand why you're telling me this."

Edith shrugged and reached for another cigarette.
"Why not? Three down," she looked at the diminishing candles. "Seven to go."

**VII.**

Sarah struck her match and held it first to her cigarette and then to Thomas'. In the dimness of the fog she could see his outline and the glow of the cigarette and not a lot else.

"I've never seen it this bad before."

"'S'Yorkshire for you."

"I s'pose. There's just somethin' odd about this fog though, creepy like. I grew up on a farm in the middle of Lancashire, I know bleedin' fog, but this…it's like it's trappin' us in."

He drew deeply on the cigarette and pondered her words. It was unusual for O'Brien to be quite so talkative at the best of times but now her voice was tinged with fear he thought he'd never hear from her. He couldn't blame her: he couldn't pretend he wasn't scared stiff himself.

"I know what you mean. S'like somethin' out of a gothic novel. 'm 'alf expecting the others to have been bumped off by vampires."

Sarah tapped off ash and managed a small smirk despite the situation.

"If bleedin' only."

"You got any ideas? I reckon 'is lordship's right y'know? There's bound to be some nutter hiding in the attic or somethin'. 'e'll 'ave escaped from somewhere or other and decided to-"

"To what? Stage an elaborate and personal series of murders? Be sensible lad, whoever it is knows us and they know about the things we've done."

He was silent for a moment and she realised quite what she had said.

"You did yours then?"

"You 'eard what I said. Don't make me say it again."

"I always wondered y'know? Why you were so bothered about her all of a sudden: all makes sense now."

"Don't tell anyone."

"Course I bloody won't. What do you take me for Miss O'Brien? You're the last person in the world I'd shop."

"Thanks. I don't deserve it, but thanks all the same."

"Do any of us deserve it?"

"Forgiveness?"

"No. All this. Maybe someone's doing it to punish us."

"So did you do yours?"

"Old Carson?"
She lit another cigarette with the remains of the first and wondered whether she really wanted to know the answer.

"Yeah. Gave 'im the wrong medicine. Was an accident really but that's not 'ow whoever killed Anna and Branson and Lady Sybil sees it I reckon."

"If I leave you alone you're not goin' to go an' chop yourself in 'alf are you?"

He smirked at her, revelling in the familiarity: if nothing else, they always had this to fall back on.

**VIII.**

He would have to be next. There was no getting around it, he was the most fitting and he would be alone in mere moments. And the bastard would get no mercy now, trying to justify his actions as though there was anything he could say that would stop him being a murderer!

**IX.**

Sarah stubbed out her cigarette and reached out to lay a hand on Thomas’ shoulder, squeezing it gently and looking at him in the same way she had before he went off to war. The look had unnerved him then and now made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

"Don't be too long."

"You worried about me out 'ere on my own Miss O'Brien?"

She rolled her eyes and removed her hand swiftly.

"Am I 'eck as like! If Cora's cold I won't 'ear the end of it till there's a fire roaring in the grate. Be quick."

She went back into the house without another word leaving Thomas to wonder how long it had been Cora. It the nearly twenty years he’d known the lady’s maid he didn't think he'd ever heard her call the Countess by her first name: there had been a fair few less than complimentary names, but never her Christian one. He shook his head with bemusement and started to look for the axe at the edge of the yard. He could barely see his hand in front of his face but he knew where it was supposed to be well enough and edged carefully towards it.

There was only a space where the axe should have been resting and he furrowed his brow as he ran a hand along the wall, checking he hadn't moved it further along without remembering. Nothing. Someone must have moved it.

He stood up straight again and was contemplating whether he could use one of the carving knives to get some firewood for the Dowager Countess when he turned around and saw something shiny and sharp heading straight for his head…

**X.**

The blood trickled unseen across the yard, some splattered, some oozing but all of it a stark, dirty red that mingled in with the mud and embers from the braziers and might have been a trench but for the hand carefully replacing the axe to where it had stood before, feeling the weight of another candle in their pocket.
Chapter Eight:

I.

John tried to pay attention to what was being said around him but was utterly unable to focus. They were all back in the drawing room now – still without a fire though O'Brien insisted that Thomas was coming with the wood – and they'd made no further discoveries. He didn't much care anymore. There was nothing they could find now that would make this horrible situation any better or worse. Anna was dead, what was there left now?

Still, he might as well try and listen if for no other reason than to try and keep busy. It was what he was used to after all: he'd damaged his leg and kept working and then there was all that business with Vera. He wondered idly whether a body had ever been found after all…as far as a lot of the world was concerned Vera might well still be alive and well somewhere: but whoever had made that recording – had it been Mrs Hughes herself? Might she have known more than she was letting on – definitely thought Vera was dead.

He wanted to talk to someone about it all but the only other person in the world who'd known was Anna; at least he had always thought she was the only one, clearly there had to be another. Someone knew what had happened that night, someone other than him, Anna and Vera herself…

He caught O'Brien watching him and shifted in his seat, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. Even she wouldn't start accusing him again now surely? His wife was dead and even she wasn't so unsympathetic as to accuse a bereaved man-

"What're you lookin' so shifty about?"

"Miss O'Brien," Matthew spoke up, closing his eyes in frustrated tiredness. "Leave him alone."

Bates got to his feet as quickly as he could.

"I'll go and see if Thomas needs any help if you don't mind m'lord? He seems to be taking his time and the Dowager Countess still looks cold."

He risked a glance at Cora Crawley and was unsurprised, if a little disheartened, to see the same dislike in her eyes that had been there since the day he'd first come to Downton Abbey. He'd always put it down to O'Brien's influence and even now Cora's maid was hovering behind her like a dark spectre that would never be gone: what he had done to upset either of them he would never know but the opinion of two women he had little to do with anymore didn't matter to him. Only one thing had ever mattered and now she was gone.

He left them all to it and headed down the servant's staircase, slipping along the passage that led to the yard and stepping out into the cold and dense air, pulling his coat closer around him to protect against the chill.

"Thomas?"

He couldn't see much but he was fairly sure that if the younger man was here then he'd be able to make him out, fog or no fog. Well, if he wasn't here then where on earth was he?

"Thomas, are you here?"
He took a step further and felt something squelch under his shoe. Confused he looked down and shuffled his foot back and forth a few times experimentally. It slipped and slid through something that he couldn't quite make out and he furrowed his brow trying to focus through the fog. There was a definite smell in the yard too…something oddly familiar that reminded him of his war days.

Another step further and his foot connecting with something that made everything fall into place.

II.

Never in all the years she had known him had Sarah O'Brien even seen John Bates looking quite so pale. Even finding his wife that morning had not prompted the same sickened look and before he even opened his mouth, before the others had even noticed his presence, she knew what must have happened. Something snapped inside her: it was ridiculous! If Lady Mary's theory was right then someone was supposed to chop themselves in half and Thomas had hardly been in the grips of elaborate suicidal despair when she'd left him half an hour ago.

"Where is he?"

Bates seemed unable to speak and as everyone else grew aware of him in the doorway they began to look curious and concerned, muttering about the possible absence of Thomas as though it was a piece of the bloody puzzle! She hated them all more than she ever remembered doing so before and even when Cora's hand reached for hers she shook it off and advanced on Bates with desperate fury in her eyes.

"Where the bloody hell is he? What've you done with 'im?"

"Miss O'Brien, can't you see he's distressed?"

She ignored the Earl. She'd ignored the last one well enough and wasn't about to start being deferential to the new bleeding one! Quite without warning Matthew Crawley grabbed her upper arm and tugged her backwards and for a moment she thought he was going as mad as she felt, or else he was this mystery killer and had decided his next victim was to be a public affair. She struggled fruitlessly for a second before jumping back into his body to get out of the way when Bates leaned forwards and heaved.

III.

Edith scrunched up her nose at the man now leaning out of the window for want of somewhere else to rid himself of the bile that had built up all morning. She didn't fully understand how bad it could be…it was another body and that was far from pleasant but it was hardly going to be worse than Sybil turning a funny colour or Branson choking and poor Anna hanging there was it?

"What's happened to him? Is he hung too?"

"Edith for god's sake!"

She rolled her eyes and glanced at her Mama.

"What? There's no need to beat around the bush now is there? We're all dropping like flies—"

"Edith, that's enough! Your Mother's in enough of a state as it is."

Wriggling free from Matthew with complete ease O'Brien was by her mistresses' side in moments and reaching for her hand. Edith rolled her eyes at the display – good grief, the two of them had clearly been locked away in the Dower House for too long! They were clearly getting funny these days and any suspicions about her Mama's mental state were now being confirmed. Ten years ago
her Mother had been strong enough to carry a body the length of the house for Mary and she'd had the courage to run her nice house as a convalescent home for Sybil to work in. Edith snorted and reached into her pocket for her cigarette case, lighting it up to cover the despondency she was feeling at the thought that despite how strong and proud the former Countess of Grantham had been she hadn't lifted a finger for her middle child once.

"She’ll live," she settled into a seat by the fire that Anna must have lit this morning before her demise and chuckled unpleasantly. "Or maybe not the way things are going?"

"Oh look on the bright side," Mary said, archly. "You might be next and then at least we'll all be rid of your sunny presence. To think that you outlived Sybil…"

IV.

Cora's cries were renewed at that particular reminder and through her teary lashes she could see O'Brien first glaring at her daughters and then getting to her feet and advancing on the. She had never fully understood why O'Brien was as loyal as she was: in all their years it had been nothing but a blessing and she didn't understand what she had done to warrant such devotion.

After the accident O'Brien had never left her side – she still refused point blank to believe anything that had been said on that ridiculous tape – and then Robert…O'Brien must have seen her. She'd always suspected as much but they'd never talked about it and her maid had been there to guard her against the police through all their questioning. When they'd been waiting for someone else to arrive O'Brien had said she herself had had a disagreement with the Earl and Cora had nodded along with this, not realising it for the story it clearly was, but when the police had arrived it had been in vain and Cora had immediately and tearfully blurted out that she'd tried to catch him.

"Will both of you give it a rest? Lady Mary, if you say anything like that again you'll be bleedin' next and it won't be any mystery. And Edith, stop talking like all this is nothin'. And light me one an' all."

Cora felt a dip in the sofa next to her and an arm go around her shoulders that she sunk into. Her body was shaking and she couldn't stop the tears but there was something grounding here in the familiar warmth and smell of Sarah O'Brien and even when the other woman moved to take the offered cigarette and that aroma hit her too, Cora still couldn't move. She could hear them speaking above her but wasn't aware of which voice was speaking – were they all speaking over each other? There were only five of them now, how could it possibly be that difficult for her to hear individual voices?

"I killed your Father…"

Everyone went silent and Cora took a breath, ceasing to care anymore and somewhat numb with the knowledge that this could all be over in a matter of hours. All this pain and suffering and guilt, but only if the killer struck again…

"At least I want the killer to think so now, so whichever one of you it is please do listen…I pushed him and he fell. I didn't mean to – Sarah, you saw me, you saw I didn't mean to-"

"I know you didn't. M'lady, you don't have to."

"I think I do. I want to. I want it over now."

There was some movement across the room and O'Brien was suddenly pressing a glass to her lips.
"Cora, drink this…it'll make you feel better."

V.

Mary watched with a fixed expression as O'Brien fed brandy to her Mother to make her sleep, only keeping quiet due to the maid's furious expression every time she looked around the room. It was such a contrast to the softness of her voice as she spoke to Cora that had she not known better Mary would have sworn it was a different woman. She should chastise her for being so rude to her and Edith she supposed but it felt hollow. The sort of thing the Countess of Grantham might have done a week ago when her household was not been depleted by the hour.

"Will she be alright?"

O'Brien carefully stroked Cora's hair out of her teary face and lowered the Dowager Countess down onto the chaise lounge with practiced ease that spoke of the sort of life the two women had lived together in the near-confinement to the Dower House. She reached for a nearby blanket and draped it over Cora carefully before bothering to acknowledge anyone else in the room.

"I hope so. I think she got into the sedatives the Doctor prescribes her last night. There were more missing than there should have been and I daren't let her take them as she pleases normally."

She took in the concerned looks on the faces of Cora's children and picked her cigarette back up from where it had dropped swiftly.

"Listen, she'll be fine. She's done this before and the best thing for her is to sleep it off."

"Very well," Matthew, having ascertained that Bates was finally fit, cut across the maid and his wife. "Then I think you should stay with her O'Brien. Bates and I can go and fetch Thomas…"

He took in his valet's pasty face and grimaced internally, telling himself desperately that it was very unlikely he hadn't seen worse in the trenches. "I know it's not pleasant but better us than the ladies."

Bates nodded and straightened up, unwilling to see the mangled body again but recognising that other than himself and Matthew, there was no one else suitable.

Or at least not to his mind because Edith got to her feet too, making her intentions quite clear.

"I'm coming too."

"No you're not Edith-"

"I don't see why I should have to stay here!"

"We're all shocked and scared but I think we're going to need some food at some point. If O'Brien's watching Cora and we're getting the body I think you and Mary should find whatever you can and bring it here."

To say that the sisters were not especially thrilled with this idea would have been something of an understatement, but recognising the commanding tones of a Captain they didn't put up too much of a fight.

"No one should be left on their own."

No one could argue with that assertion, no matter how much they may want to and four of them left the drawing room with uneasy nerves, leaving a sleeping woman in the care of her maid.
Edith had to admit, even in a crisis situation Mary was a model of composure and dignity that she surely must have learnt from their Mother years before the Dowager Countess began to deteriorate. She was holding her emotions in admirably and Edith tried not to make it too obvious she was staring from her perch on the kitchen table as Mary rummaged through unfamiliar shelves.

"I wish Matthew had thought to ask one of the servants where to look – they know much better than I do where things are kept."

Edith tossed the match she had just used to light another cigarette into the sink wondering whether she would run out before the fog went away and they were able to escape. She took a thoughtful drag, ignoring her sister's wrinkled nose as the sudden smell and purposefully blowing the smoke towards her.

"Would it really be fair to make Bates come back down here? To the scene of his wife's hanging?"

Mary closed her eyes for a moment as the image assaulted her again. Anna, who had always been such a kind and loyal friend, had certainly not deserved to die like that and the image of her stiff swinging body would haunt her for as long as she lived. She steadied her nerves and turned to Edith, feeling sickened by the smirk on her sister's face: did she not understand that this wasn't a joke?

"Of course it isn't. But none of this is fair is it?"

"I don't know," Edith mused carefully. "I'm sure there's someone here that thinks it's all very fair. How else do you execute killers if not by hanging and beheading?"

"We don't know that he was beheaded…" She sighed and stood up straight, feeling a twinge in her back that was becoming something of a continuous complaint and placed her hand against her stomach conscious of the weight she had been putting on lately. "And I don't know how you can think Anna of all people was guilty of those terrible things."

"Why not?" Edith shrugged unconcernedly and dragged the back of her heel against the leg of the table in a nervous gesture. "Mama's confessed, Branson taught me to drive and I'm apparently too reckless so he might well have run someone over-"

"And you?"

"Well I don't want to give anything away," Edith slid off the table and tapped the ash of her cigarette into the sink, watching it vanish in the trickle of water coming from the tap. "I've learnt my lesson about telling truths these days."

She smirked unpleasantly and began opening cupboards at random, kicking the oven door shut as she passed it. Watching her crash around the kitchen now Mary wondered, not for the first time, whether the letter really had been the beginning of the end for them or whether the seeds had been sown long before either of them had ever known. They'd never been all that close, even as girls, and by the time they were old enough to harm each other there had been so much bile between them that the terrible fall-out for them both had been inevitable. She supposed she should be grateful. Things had worked out for her in the end and here she was with Matthew – perhaps not in the cordiality she had once hoped for, returning from the war he had never quite been the same as the bright young man she'd once known – but she was here. After years of growing more distant and irritable Edith had married Evelyn Napier under odd circumstances and become his
widow under even odder ones. Was it possible she had killed him to escape from a marriage she'd blindly walked into? Or had she married him with the intention of killing him all along?

"You never used to learn lessons very well."

"It's very difficult not to learn when things are shoved down your throat sister dear."

Edith tossed the cigarette towards the sink and missed. She left it smouldering on the floor unconcerned and pulled a loaf of bread towards her along with the butter she had found elsewhere. Sighing Mary walked over and pressed the toe of her own boots against the smouldering stick and folded her arms protectively across her chest.

"Have you been happy? Wherever you've been in London…I hope you've been happy."

"That's very big of you Mary," Edith didn't turn to look at her and instead began slicing the bread with a rather meticulous precision that Mary couldn't take her eyes away from. "I dread to think what's humbled you so much."

"It's hardly humbling to wish a sister well."

"If you say so," Edith snorted. "I rather think I'd have to have a gun to my head before I wished you the same."

Mary shook her head with frustration. Some things never changed it seemed and she was damned if she was going to be the one to reason with Edith when things were so terrible. What she wouldn't give to have Anna, steady, sweet Anna, rather than her waspish, estranged sister on this day of all days.

"I wouldn't say that too loudly, someone might think you mean it."

"Oh you know me Mary," Edith looked at her slyly and put on a high-pitched and melodramatic voice, the outright inappropriateness of which made Mary's stomach turn with dislike. "You should never listen to the things I say."

Her hand snapped out before she could stop it and Mary found herself improbably faced not with an outraged sister having just being slapped but rather a smirking Edith who was running her fingers over the growing red mark.

"Can't you take anything seriously? For god's sake, people we have known and loved have died."

"Loved?" Edith shoved the knife rather aggressively into the lump of butter with rather worrying enjoyment sparkling in her eyes. "I don't think there's a soul in this house I could claim to love anymore."

Edith turned away from her sister for the final time and left the kitchen, leaving Mary curling and unfurling her fingers like a cat who was considering scratching someone and watching her remaining sibling with more dislike and despondency than she thought she had ever felt towards Edith before.

VII.

Matthew couldn't bring himself to say it aloud or even think it, but this body was significantly worse than any he had ever encountered in the trenches. Oddly enough, it wasn't that the man he was carrying the upper part of had been a friend: he had the top half because it was the most precariously hanging together part and he didn't think Bates would be able to cope if a head came away from the neck in his own hands. Thomas had been his comrade in arms and the last
reminder of the things that had happened in France – not always a good thing he supposed but a source of comfort – and now he was gone but it wasn't so much that. The body wasn't even the worse he had ever seen but somehow it was still terrible.

He supposed it must be the simple fact that someone had done this intentionally. They'd put a coat over Thomas for the carrying itself but he could still feel the blood seeping through his butler's shirt onto his hands and he was reasonably sure they'd left a trail of droplet. He'd have to clear that up later on.

"Not in with the women…we'll put him in Branson's room."

Obediently, and clearly with a little gratitude, Bates followed his change in direction until they reached the bachelor's corridor and carefully edged into Branson's bedroom. Gently they lay the body down next to the sheet on the bed that was covering Branson: it hadn't been a full day yet and Matthew was already beginning to think that the smell resembled the one he had lived with for years in the trenches and it was not something that he was eager to experience again.

Bates breathed heavily and sat down in the nearest chair.

"Are you alright Bates?"

His valet looked up at him wryly and Matthew shook his head at his own naivety.

"Stupid question. Never mind."

"If you don't mind I think I'll go and sit with Anna for a while. At least until I'm needed."

"There's no good in it now Bates."

"I know that but I'd still like to be with her. There's not much else to be getting on with anyway."

Matthew didn't protest any further and instead patted his valet on the back and let him go. There was nothing for it. The man wouldn't rest unless he was with her anyway.

VIII.

Sarah stepped into the empty dining room with irritation. They'd all agreed to meet back here but it seemed she was the first and it was bloody typical that it would be her when she was supposed to be keeping an eye on Cora. The last thing she'd wanted was to leave her charge but needs must and Cora was so out of it, it was very unlikely she'd manage to get herself into trouble. Even so, Sarah had made a point of locking the doors to the drawing room and pocketing the keys. Assuming Cora didn't fall over and crack her head open – unlikely, even if Sarah had always been half-convinced Cora's clumsiness would be her undoing – she would be safe in there.

She took a seat at the dining table and reached into her pocket for her cigarettes lighting one off the candles she assumed had been lit before they left. She slumped back in the seat and tried to think. In the past thinking had been her escape: trapped in a life that demanded she keep her opinions to herself being able to think about things and simply know what was going on had been something of a comfort but now she was as ignorant as the next idiot and she didn't like it one bloody bit. She didn't much like Thomas being dead either but that was something she couldn't let herself think about for too long.

Behind her she heard footsteps and reached immediately for the knife on the table, spinning around quickly and finding herself face to face with Matthew. He looked between her and the butter knife with something approaching amusement and for the first time since all this nonsense had begun Sarah felt swept along with the absurdity of it all and felt a sudden laugh bubble out.
"Sorry, s'not very fitting."

"No it's not. But I know what you mean."

"There's another one there," she nodded towards the table and lowered her practically blunt weapon. "If it makes you feel safer."

Matthew eyed the knife for a moment before smiling slightly and taking the seat next to the one she had slumped back into, stroking invisible dust off the front of his jacket consciously. Her eyes followed his hand surreptitiously and noticed the slight bulge around his chest. Ah, so the good Earl already had a weapon then. She filed that away and felt a tiny bit better. She knew something that others didn't. It was a start.

"You're level-headed O'Brien, any thoughts about all this?"

"Yeah, if I'm next I won't go down without a fight," she gestured at the poem that still hung over the mantelpiece. "Can't start bees at the best of times. Her ladyship got it into 'er head to start keeping them a while back and I 'ad to talk her out of it."

"She told me she hated honey."

"I think she liked the 'at more than anythin' to be perfectly honest."

They fell silent for a moment, waiting for others to arrive but the clock ticked onwards and they remained alone.

"Have things been terrible at the Dower House? When Robert died you both would have been quite welcome to stay h-"

"It wouldn't have been right m'lord."

"Not according to that tape."

O'Brien stubbed out her cigarette and didn't speak.

"And her own words."

"So just because some sick joke 'as convinced her she killed someone you think it's true? It was an accident. I saw it."

"If you say so. Who knows what you saw. We've all seen-"

"Matthew! Oh thank god, I've been looking all over upstairs for you."

Mary joined them in the room and placed a hand immediately on her husband's shoulder, ending the conversation effectively and curling her nose at the lingering smell of tobacco.

"Honestly, I thought this was still my house but you two are scattering cigarettes all over the place. They're even in Edith's bedroom…"

She realised what she had said a moment too late but neither O'Brien nor Matthew were likely to press her and she consoled herself that she had spoken to people who would mull rather than confront her. Edith herself appeared a moment later, pink-cheeked and a little breathless, followed by Bates a minute later. The silence overwhelmed them for a while until O'Brien couldn't stand it anymore and got to her feet.
"I'll go and fetch her ladyship," she reached forward and took hold of the bottle in the centre of the table where she had left it. "We should all of us be here."

Bates looked whiter than ever and yet somehow like something was burning inside him and had Sarah given the slightest damn about him she might have been inclined to ask what was wrong now. As it was she instead sneered in his direction and left the room, returning to Cora with the brandy bottle that she would surely ask for again when she awoke.

IX.

Sarah unlocked the door with a swift click and stepped inside the dimness of the drawing room in the settling late afternoon gloom, leaving the door ajar and the warmer light from the hallway lightening the room and just missing Cora on the sofa. It was a shame to disturb her really, her nerves were nowhere near what they had been and it was kinder to let her sleep but it wouldn't do her any good to shy away, not now anyway.

"M'lady, you need to wake up."

She placed the bottle of brandy down and approached Cora quietly, noting that she had at least stirred enough to turn onto her side, facing away from the door. Perhaps the noise had been disturbing her?

"Cora," she spoke softer and crouched down onto her knees to place a hand on a thin shoulder. "You've got to eat somethin'."

There was a muffled noise from the Countess that told Sarah – who after all had spent a lifetime memorising every mood of Cora's – that she was not quite ready to awake yet but she had no choice in the matter. Sarah brought her other hand up to stroke the hair out of Cora's face and saw, to her surprise, that her eyes were not entirely closed. It must be a bad dream. Cora got them rather frequently these days and between the noises and the shaking it had to be that. Being as careful as she could Sarah gripped Cora's shoulder and pulled her over until she was on her back.

"It's all alright, I'm here now."

She let out a cry that couldn't help but have reached the others at the sight of what could only be the hilt of a knife sticking out of Cora's chest with a clear black and yellow print

X.

In the far off distance Cora could hear something that sounded very much like O'Brien's voice shouting. But why should she be shouting? She sounded sad and the very last thing Cora wanted was for Sarah to be sad and there was a familiar hand in hers that she squeezed limply. It was all alright…Cora felt as though she'd been prodding a nest of bees for years now and they were finally beginning to swarm over her body making her tireder than she had ever been before but being oddly comforting.

This was her end, it had to be her end. She'd known it would come this weekend and here it was and she wasn't scared anymore which she found rather abstractly wonderful! What was the need in being scared when it was all going to be over in moments? She couldn't even feel any pain and she dearly hoped that Sybil had gone painlessly too…

If it was painless then it could only be one person and she thought about the peaceful sleep she had experienced this afternoon with new eyes and tried harder to squeeze the hand in hers, feeling something that felt very much like tears on her face. Were they hers? Did it matter?
She could feel some kind of pain in her chest but she thought nothing of it. She'd had so many pains in the last few years that one more didn't matter and it mattered even less now…For a split second in which she could hear nothing but rumbling her mind cleared and one very concrete thought was all she could focus upon.

"Not…not…Sybil."

It was really quite extraordinary that in a moment when the whole world seemed to be growing fuzzier by the second everything else was becoming so clear. She managed to furrow her brow, open her eyes ever so slightly and saw Sarah hovering over her. They must have been in it together all along but she was grateful that she got to see the woman who had made it so peaceful for her now.

"Thank you Sarah."

Mary's voice was the loudest amongst the others that seemed to have appeared in the room like magic but they were nothing but fleeting sounds now and, feeling rather more warm and loved than she'd thought she would, Cora closed her eyes a final time.
Chapter Nine:

I.

Sarah could feel the chilling of Cora's fingers in her own a great deal quicker than she had ever wanted to. She had entertained a foolish notion in the last few years that had seemed like more and more of a possibility as the months had dragged on without many people coming to see them: she and Cora were probably going to grow old together and die in that house, probably within weeks of each other and probably without anyone else noticing for an embarrassing amount of time. It was daft and maudlin but the sentimental idea of being with her lady till the end had appealed for her and felt rather fitting. For ten years she had gotten to know every last thing about this woman and in the last twelve she had loved every single one of them and now she felt the same horrified anguish that had accompanied Cora's fall.

Under her very fingers Cora going cold and there were two crying women she had known since girlhood either side of her. Was she crying? She couldn't think at the moment and knew nothing but the simple fact that Cora was dead and that the knife in her chest looked like it hurt. She reached out without thinking and wrapped her free hand around the handle, pulling it until it easily slid out of Cora's chest. The blade was small and narrow and very sharp. God, she thought as the bile rose in her throat, it must have slid in her poor lady like bloody butter...at least she wouldn't have felt much.

"O'Brien, you needn't do that."

"I'd like to all the same. It looks better. And it's not like it'll make a difference to her is it m'lord?"

Matthew argued no further and Sarah was grateful for that. She stroked the hair carefully into place around Cora's face with the same precision she had used for over two decades now and allowed herself the slightest smile. Her ladyship looked more peaceful than any of the others had which was a small mercy and it was certainly better than the image she had in her head of Thomas in pieces. And she hadn't been alone: Sarah didn't think she could have borne the thought of Cora in this room on her own, expiring in the darkness with anyone to hold her hand. It was better than nothing and nothing was all either of them had come to expect from the world.

Sarah felt her whole body shaking but didn't let it get the best of her as she lifted a cool, soft hand with her warm, rough one – the only bit of her that wasn't shaking – and pressed a gentle kiss to the knuckles. She'd done her best, in the end she'd done all she could and that might not have been enough, but it had been something.

II.

Matthew waited until O'Brien looked like she was finished to come closer. He'd loved Cora and after sharing a look with Bates he saw his own sorrow mirrored on his valet's face but it was nothing compared to the grief of the three women on the floor around the late Dowager Countess. He never claimed to understand the bonds between women but here there was something undefined being said between them as they tucked Cora's hands against her stomach and stroked her hair.

"Here, I'll take her upstairs."

They moved out of the way rather more easily than he had expected them to and Matthew took
the knife from O'Brien's hand gently, pocketing it and unsure where he could put it. When this nightmare was over there would be police and he didn't want to make it more difficult for them by hiding a weapon, but it would not do to leave it in plain sight as a horrible reminder. He closed his eyes for a horrified moment and tried not to grab hold of Mary desperately, hoping against all hopes that if – no when – this terrible weekend was over, he would still be around to assist the police. Whoever was doing this, and his eyes flickered traitorously towards Edith, he was determined to make sure they were punished for their crimes. He slipped his arms underneath Cora and lifted her thin body easily: for this alone someone deserved to hang.

Had Cora really killed Robert? And if so was it intentional? Matthew had been wondering about people's relative levels of guilt as they had fallen and had already come to the conclusion that whoever was behind this had a very warped view of justice. Robert's death had been an accident, Branson would never willingly hurt anyone and neither would Sybil unless she thought there was no other way, Anna had stood by her husband and Thomas…he didn't know about Thomas. He would never have wished such a death on anyone, let alone someone who he had stood shoulder to shoulder with in the trenches, but could he honestly say he knew without question that Thomas wouldn't kill to get something he wanted?

Could he say that about any of the people left? He looked around the room and, with a lurching feeling in his stomach, realised he could not. Edith had a sharpness about her now that perturbed him, Bates was a well of secrets, O'Brien's mind calculating and her conscience when it pertained to anything other than Cora had always seemed questionable. And Mary…No, he could not in all good conscience exonerate his wife from guilt. She may not be a killer but if it was a question of who had the intelligence and vision for something like this…well, it could be any of them.

"I'll put her with the other women. It sounds a little foolish I know but I don't like the idea of her being left alone even now."

He began to move towards the door but caught Bates' eye for a moment and halted.

"Bates? What is it?"

"Nothing much m'lord, just…well, she did say not to put her with Lady Sybil didn't she?"

Had that been what she said? He'd been a bit too far away, letting the girls get closer to their Mother without getting in the way, but he'd been sure he must have misheard. Why would Cora not want to be put with her own child? Was there any point in questioning it now?

"Put her with the boys," O'Brien looked like she was regaining herself with a great deal more speed than Matthew had thought she would and when she roughly brushed a tear away from her cheek she looked almost like herself again. "She liked Thomas and Branson."

"Branson's starting to…well, you can imagine. And with the state of Thomas it doesn't seem right-"

"With respect m'lord, I don't think her ladyship's in a position to mind anymore."

O'Brien came forwards with the blanket that had been half-covering the Countess when they'd found her and draped it carefully over the woman in Matthew's arms, tucking it in with more care than was strictly needed but Matthew let her do it. It seemed to be a catharsis of sorts and he was not the kind of man to deny anyone anything that made them feel better.

When she was finished he shared a look with Mary, managing a small, rueful smile, before leaving to lay Cora's still-warm body upstairs.
III.

Mary felt a hand slip into hers as they left the drawing room. Quite apart from the fact that she could see Bates, Matthew was gone upstairs and O'Brien wouldn't bother, she knew it was Edith from the feel of her skin. It was the same hand she'd held when they were children and Mama liked to parade them in front of Papa in new dresses. Hers had always had a red ribbon and Edith's a green one to complement their colouring and for a moment all she could focus on was how odd it was that she was wearing purple and Edith black and white.

"At least she was smiling when she died…she didn't seem to be in any pain."

Mary's nodded vaguely and pulled them both into the dining room. She was drawn into the room and to the candles still standing in the middle of the table and behind her she heard Edith let out a humourless laugh at what was there. Or rather, what wasn't there.

"I suppose we should have expected that."

There were five left. How many had there been before? When she'd found Matthew sitting here with O'Brien and her husband had been speaking altogether too freely had there been five already? Or were there still six? The killer must have slipped in when they were all missing…he'd killed their Mother and then run back to enact the next stage of this sick joke and the frivolity of this flourish made Mary's blood boil more than anything.

"What do we do now?"

"I don't know," Mary muttered. "I just…I don't know."

"What are we all supposed to do now? First Sybil, now Mama and half the staff into the bargain-"

"Edith. I don't know."

Edith looked like she was going to respond for a moment but wisely chose not to when O'Brien and Bates joined them in the dining room. The older woman placed a hand on the oldest girl's shoulder and squeezed it gently.

"I'm sorry m'lady."

Mary managed a small smile in reply and reached her free hand up to wrap her fingers around O'Brien's.

"As am I…I know the two of you have been close in that house-"

"Yes…there's no need."

She sunk into the shadows of the room rather impressively, although Mary didn't think she'd ever seen anyone look less they were trying to impress, and there she remained whilst the other three looked uncomfortably between each other with increasingly defeated eyes. Mary observed Bates, she was sick of seeing Edith's red-rimmed eyes and O'Brien was giving off the impression that looking at her for a prolonged period of time might turn one to stone: so Bates it was because Bates was safe.

When Matthew had first come back from the war he'd worn a similar expression, that of a man that had seen too much and with no hope for the horror ending; with a future that had nothing but bleakness and grief. Matthew had soon lost the look and only acquired it occasionally now but Bates…Mary knew in that moment that whatever the valet was feeling, it would never leave him now and the haunted look about his features would never leave her.
Matthew slipped back into the dining room to find a subdued crowd. It was hardly unexpected but after delivering Cora to the dead upstairs it would have been a better balm on his soul to find someone with something to say. But what was there to say now? It seemed no matter what they did people were dropping – three today alone! – and there was nothing they could do so what could there possibly be to say?

He looked out of the window at the dark sky with a sinking stomach. The loss of light was hardly going to make things better was it and he only hoped the generator held up with its usual vigour: the way things were going tonight it would probably break and the last thing he wanted was a trip to the cellar to fix it.

"Perhaps we shouldn't separate for the time being?"

There was an unenthusiastic murmur of assent from the assembled group and Matthew sunk into the chair the other side of Mary. Under any other circumstance, and knowing as he did the nature of their history together, he would have been surprised to see her clutching Edith's hand quite so tightly but today how could she be doing anything but?

"I'll want to go up an' check on 'er ladyship at some point."

For a moment Matthew thought he must have misheard O'Brien or at least understood her meaning but he boggled at her.

"You can't be serious."

"I'm perfectly serious."

"She's dead O'Brien," next to him he felt Mary sink without her even moving the slightest of muscles. "She doesn't need you now."

O'Brien, to his surprise, although perhaps it was a trick of the shadows she was currently cocooning herself in, almost looked like she was smiling.

"Nothin' to do with her needin' me."

"If you must then at least wait until the morning, we need to stick together tonight."

"You wouldn't be makin' such a fuss if Bates wanted to go an' sit with Anna!"

No, she was right about that at least but…how did she know about what had happened earlier? Where had O'Brien been at the time or at least where was she supposed to have been? She was lighting up a cigarette in her corner of the room and the illumination from the match showed that she was smiling, or at least as much as O'Brien had ever smiled in the years he had known her, and his curious gaze began to wonder from the sister-in-law who had changed to the maid who was oddly as she ever was.

They sat in silence for what felt to all of them hours and for all they knew it might well have been. Some of them were still habitually checking the clock but found that they couldn't remember what it had been the last time they looked – had hours gone by or mere minutes?

To Edith it felt like days and she reached into her pocket to reach for another cigarette, rummaging
round until she found the remains of her packet and pulled the last one free. She contemplated it for a moment before lighting it with the solid silver device that had been her first purchase after she'd inherited Evelyn's money. It was funny, she so scarcely thought about him these days, in fact her thoughts leading up to this weekend had concerned her late aunt, which she supposed was a sort of thinking about her late husband. But Evelyn had been the furthest thing from her mind when she'd set out this weekend with every intention of being the disagreeable element at the table and making everyone else uncomfortable. Now it seemed that everything was making her think about him.

"The funny thing is," Edith dragged deeply on her cigarette and looked around the room at large, letting go of Mary's hand before her older sister could do it for her. "Is that, other than Mama and I, no one else has said whether they were guilty or not."

"What did you say?" Mary gaze, sharp and searching as ever, cut through her.

"I told Mama the truth."

"Which is?"

"Sadly she took it to her grave," she blew smoke in the direction of her sister who suddenly looked like she was going green. What was the problem with her a smoke these days? Even Mary had indulged in one or two during the war and now she was acting as though she was allergic to the smell when it had barely been ten years since all the downstairs rooms in Downton had reeked of the soldier's ration of nicotine. "But what about the rest of you? What did the recording say again-" As though any of them could forget! "An abortion," she gestured to Mary, "An unjust execution, a murder and killing the heir of Downton?"

Edith looked around expectantly, settling her gaze on Matthew as the most likely to speak at the moment.

"Matthew?"

VI.

He took a deep breath and his eyes looked hollow, almost as they had after Lavinia had died and she wondered whether that still weighed heavily upon him? To her knowledge he never mentioned her these days but on her way to the house yesterday she had stopped by the little church to see the place where her Father was buried and had caught sight of the still neat little grave amongst so many others. It had struck her as odd when she'd stood in front of her the late Lord Grantham's grave to see to her left the small, well-tended plot of the woman who should have been the Countess and to the right, an equally well-looked after spot that belonged to William Mason. There could only be one man in the area that would tend to them bother and Edith softened her features towards her brother-in-law.

"If it helps I did mine."

He closed his eyes and looked, for a second, almost as though he was going to chortle with amusement but it was soon suppressed and Edith felt her sister shift away from her and knew it would be the last time she was ever so close to Mary again. Even if they survived this terrible weekend Evelyn had been a favourite of hers hadn't he – had that not been half the reasons she had wanted him? – and it seemed to be the straw that broke her sister's affection for her for good.

"In the war I sent a man to his death. I didn't have him shot, whatever that recording said it was lying … but I did let him go back into battle and he, well, he must have had shell-shock."
In the corner of the room O'Brien twitched rather violently but didn't move. Edith contemplated the man before her with new eyes and a smirk.

"Poor boy," she blew out a puff of smoke and turned her attention to Bates, forgetting about the fate of a single soldier in a war that had claimed so many. "What about you Mr Bates? Your wife did vanish rather conveniently."

"Edith!" Matthew cut her off and got to his feet, displaying for the first time the passionate responses that all of them had been unable to conjure up.

"My wife died…I can't claim to be an innocent man but-" Edith rolled her eyes and cut him off.

"It's never simple with you is it Bates?"

"I…all these things that are happening, there's something not right-"

"Oh for god's sake!" Edith laughed and her eyes darted around the room with flickers of something that could almost be called nerves. "Nothing about this is right!"

She got to her feet to match Matthew's stance but before anyone could advance any further the lights flickered and went out.

VII.

With the absence of any light but the candles there was a sudden chill felt right around the room that none of them could pretend not to be disturbed by. The darkness had well and truly fallen outside and between five flickering candles and two cigarettes with dying embers – both of which were soon dropped from hands limp with shock and fear – there was very little to see with.

Matthew felt Mary next to him, holding his arm tightly and so close he could feel her breath on his cheek. He rested an arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer, looking down in the faint glow to see her other arm was wrapped quite suddenly and rather oddly around her stomach. A thought occurred to him and it made the chill in the room feel all the deeper in his body.

"It'll be alright. It'll just be the generator going," he laughed humourlessly. "I was half expecting this the way things have been today."

He reached blindly into the middle of the table and found the expected box of matches, turning to light the old gas-lamps on the side-table that he suddenly thought Thomas had been rather wise to recommend were kept in every room just in case. The eerie glow of the gaslight did little to make the room appear less sinister, with the poem still on the wall and the terrible thought that here they had all sat last night and here had been where Branson had died.

Mary's eyes glowed in the light and he could see tears beginning to form in them and he looked around the others in the room and stopped caring about their safety for a moment. There was one person he needed to worry about more after all and looking back up at them he took Mary's hand tightly.

"I'll go and fix it. It won't take long, it's just a switch, and I'll be back so you lot better stay here."

Without hesitation and not bothering to justify himself he led Mary out into the hallway, holding the light between them and the glow just about engulfed them both, leaving nothing but darkness around them. He smiled as much as he could in the circumstances and reached up to stroke her hair briefly with his free hand and pulling her in for an embrace.

"There's something you're not telling me darling."
"I… I don’t know quite how to put it."

He cut her off with a kiss, hardly fitting given the circumstances, but when had they ever been and all he’d been able to think of through these terrible hours was the peace that he knew he would be able to find in her arms. The softness of her lips against his wasn’t quite the balm he had hoped it would be but it was certainly better than the clawing desperation he had felt before when he’d carried Cora upstairs.

He stroked his hand through her hair again, kissing her temple and inhaling the scent of her and almost crying with the longing to just know what on earth was going on and how they were supposed to live through it all.

"Go back in Mary, I don’t want you out here in the dark."

She objected for just a moment but soon talked her into it, even after she had followed him down the hall a little. He turned away from his wife, pleased she was going back to the others where it was safe, and headed to the cellar where the generator was housed: it wouldn’t do to take her down there with him, she didn’t care for the noise at the best of times and now – if he was right in his suspicions – he didn’t want to make her uncomfortable.

He looked back and saw a shadow vanish back along the hallway and he assumed it must be Mary, he’d have surely heard anyone else, even if she couldn’t see them?

VIII.

If Bates had been forced to put money on whose nerves would hold up the longest in a situation like this he would have put every penny he had on Sarah O’Brien but, not for the first time in the horribly long time they had known each other now, the lady’s maid surprised him.

"I’m goin’ up to see Cora."

It had occurred to him earlier but he hadn’t voiced his suspicions and now the notion that O’Brien might have actually lost her mind was rearing its head again.

"His lordship said we should stay here-"

"Do I look as though I care about what ’e says?"

She was marching towards the door as though the bells had just rung in the servant's dining room and she was needed upstairs and Bates wasn't sure if it was just his imagination but there was something rather urgent in her movements that belied what was actually taking place. He shared a glance with Edith but as far as he could tell she either wasn't interested enough to find it odd or wasn't perturbed enough to be interested.

"Maybe you should wait until he gets back? Then we can all go together."

"No! I need to go now."

Neither of them knew quite what to say but before Edith and Bates could begin to object O’Brien ran from the room, slamming the door behind her in a crash that didn't begin to match the previous bang.

They looked at each other for a moment before rushing for the door. Edith got there first and burst in the hallway, finding no sight of O’Brien or Mary: before Bates could join her she fled off, not wanting to be left alone with anyone…but where the hell was she supposed to go now?
IX.

BANG!

The hammer hit the nail into the metal with more force than was perhaps reasonable given how weary of all this they were now but still…

BANG!

Nail two went in, pinning the rope tighter to the machine and making the body move in a macabre way that made it look like a marionette. There were tears falling that did nothing to stop them and instead boots kicked up and splashed more water around the floor.

BANG!

Must be quick now. After three bangs someone was bound to have heard and was surely coming running. It didn't matter: not as long as they could run faster.

BANG!

The ropes were tied so tightly that the nails made no difference but it made for an interesting sight at least and it was done in a rather slapdash way. The other idiots upstairs were rather bothersome and had been holding this killing off with their nonsense talk.

Wrapping a hand around the switch it was pulled down easily and the electricity came immediately back on.

X.

The lights came back on, and immediately flickered again, before settling.

Four people, wherever they were in the house, couldn't help but hear the noises and come running towards the sounds. The lights made things easier but things something seemed all the more terrifying for the suddenly starkly lit, empty corridors and echoing ceilings as their feet hit the ground.

Downstairs! She ran, boots hitting the ground and seeing one, two, three others arriving all looking as baffled as she was…which meant it could only be one person.
Chapter Ten:

I.

Mary found that, though she'd known from the second she'd seen the others, that her husband simply had to be the next victim, seeing his body was still a shock the like of which she didn't think she'd ever quite get over. Perhaps she wasn't supposed to? She'd seen bodies before of course, both before and after the war and of loved ones and people she'd barely known alike, but the manner of his…she could only call it an execution, made her gag.

He was tied up to the bulk of the generator, ropes crossing over his body so many times that they almost engulfed him and he would have been quite unable to move. What the banging had been she couldn't say but…

"He's still moving!"

Mary tried to take a step forwards but Bates reached forwards and pulled her straight back.

"Don't. Look."

He nodded towards the floor where there was a small puddle of water around Matthew's immersed feet where there were several power lines lying in the water. The lights continues to flicker but didn't seem connected to the lines themselves and quite apart from the horror of seeing his second Earl dead Bates' immediate thought was that whoever was doing this had enjoyed a great deal of time to set it all up.

"Oh don't be absurd, you can't electrocute somebody like this."

"Yes m'lady, you can."

She didn't believe it, didn't want to believe it, but there horrible, horrifying proof was here before her and there was nothing she could do. Minutes ago he had been with her in the dark, kissing her softly and momentarily things hadn't been quite so horrific and now there were other people around her but they may as well have been phantoms for all the impact they made on her. There was a strong hand on her arm, gently moving her away from the sight of her husband.

"Come upstairs m'lady, you shouldn't be here."

She didn't understand where else she was supposed to be but she could close her eyes for a million and years and still be able to see Matthew in the cellar so she let Bates lead her up the stairs, leaving O'Brien and Edith to deal with it all presumably. Although what they were supposed to do she didn't know, and found she didn't much mind.

"I'm surprise Bates, I'd have thought you'd be eager to help."

"Someone smaller is one thing but I wouldn't be able to carry the body of a grown man the length of this house."

She didn't smile, didn't think she'd ever smile again, but there was a bitter feeling of amusement that made the corners of her lips twitch as the two of them made their way back upstairs.

"I've been told that before."
Edith stared at the body with a curling lip. It wasn't like any other body she had seen before, half-alive still and twitching from the electricity that was presumably still surging invisibly through him but somehow odder and more horrible that she could have imagined someone looking after they'd died this way. She'd read about the electric chair in America of course – who hadn't? – during the period after Evelyn's inquest had ruled it was suicide and she'd been fascinated with the punishments for murder. And this was as close to that as possible wasn't it? His body was tied down and someone had run electricity through him, what could be closer?

"These aren't **murders** are they?"

Sarah O'Brien looked, quite suddenly, every single one of the years Edith imagined she had: she'd never been too sure, O'Brien had existed in that great undefined middle-age that Hughes, Carson, Bates and her parents had filled when she was growing up and she really wasn't sure, for all she knew O'Brien was as old as Granny! O'Brien didn't speak, but instead sighed and used a nearby broom to poke the wires out of the water. She wasn't quite sure what good it was going to do but Bates had assured them that it was the best thing to do before they carried him upstairs. The idea that a woman in her fifties and woman who was admittedly young, but both of whom were made slow by their cigarette consumption, would be able to carry a man as big and bulky as Matthew Crawley was frankly absurd but they had really gone past that point now hadn't they?

Between the two of them they managed to ascertain that it wouldn't kill them to touch him – although neither of them had a particular interest in being **safe** anymore – and untangled the ropes carefully, making sure not to let him fall to the ground. There was an odd smell about him, different to the decay of the other bodies, and instead the air was charged and disconcerting. They could almost taste the enjoyment the killer had taken in strapping him up and flipping the switch and they could certainly taste the copper of blood trickling from his nose and electricity in the air.

"You take the feet."


Sarah couldn't begrudge her the irritation, sheer bloody indignation was all they had left in the face of all this confusion and horror. She hoisted Matthew's top half, nearly dropping him immediately and wanting to sit down and cry with how unlikely she and Edith were to be able to do this.

"God almighty! D'you think we're next an' the murder weapon's goin' to be coughin' up a lung?"

Edith smiled sardonically and lifted more from her end, easing the burden on Sarah's side a little and beginning to edge upstairs. They managed in more or less silence for a while, occasionally speaking to each other with advice on how to turn or with general encouragement until they reached the top of the main staircase. They were nearly there but they stopped for a moment to catch their breath, carefully placing Matthew on the floor for the time being. Edith reached instinctively into her pocket for a cigarette before remembering she had smoked her last one earlier.

"Bloody 'ell, even me an' Thomas in the middle of the war weren't as bad as you."

They leant against the nearest wall, taking deep breaths and trying to ignore the body on the ground in front of them.

"I thought it was Mary."

O'Brien reached into her pocket instead of answering, she knew what Edith was talking about. 
after all so what was the point of asking, and she brought out a cigarette of her own. What did it matter? They might both be dead by this time tomorrow so rationing them was hardly going to be worth it in the end.

"When Branson choked – and I don't know about you but I didn't believe for a second that a healthy young man would just drop down – I thought it was Mary. She'd always hated him the most after everything that happened with Sybil."

"She never 'ated Sybil though did she?"

"No…but it makes it look less like Branson was the target doesn't it?"

O'Brien scrunched up her face and didn't look especially convinced as she passed the lit cigarette to her companion.

"But why would Anna be 'er target an' all? They've been thick as thieves for years."

Edith's eyes flickered around the dark corridor with sudden unease.

"But other than her…she's had problems with Mama for years."

"You all 'ave."

Even in the dark Edith could feel O'Brien's gaze boring into her and she left that train of thought: she could hardly dispute that she and Sybil were also guilty of leaving their Mama to her own devices in the Dower House.

"And she never 'ad nothin' against Thomas did she?"

"Alright then, what do you think?"

III.

Sarah thought this was bordering on ridiculous and the only thing she could hope for now was that she was going to be shaken awake any minute by Cora, who would have had a similarly bad dream and was in need of some company. They'd both had so many bad dreams over the last five years and each other's company had been all that they could cling to for comfort and at Edith's question she closed her eyes tightly, praying that the first thing she'd see when she opened them would be Cora looking tired and scared, but alive and well.

All she saw was Lady Edith and beyond that was Matthew's body. She sighed, it was hardly comforting. She took the cigarette back between her fingers and drew on it deeply, taking it down to the end and tossing it on the floor to put it out. If they lived she could always come back and clean it up then.

"I don't really care anymore. Whoever's doin' this they're welcome to me next."

She made a move to return to the task at hand but Edith's hand was quickly in hers and drawing her attention back.

"I'm serious. I've always thought well of your opinion, who do you think it is?"

Sarah furrowed her brow: they were all on edge but this was a bit much wasn't it? Why on earth was she so desperate to find out her opinion and why wait until they were alone to ask it…unless she really was convinced Mary was behind all this but Sarah could as well imagine the Countess she'd never had a great deal of time for organising something like this as she could see Thomas
declaring his love for Bates. Which left the valet himself who wouldn't have strung up the wife he's killed for and...well, Lady Edith. Which was a possibility she hadn't really considered yet.

She managed a small smirk and pulled her hand back carefully.

"Like I said, I don't much care an' I don't want to be 'ere anymore so...well..."

"Well what?"

"I'm really 'opin' it's you love."

They said no more after that and immediately returned to Matthew, lifting him up with the knowledge that there wasn't much further to go now, and Sarah immediately started guiding them towards the nearest bedroom.

"No," Edith stopped. "Not with Sybil and Anna. We'll put him with Mama and the men."

"But there's already three of them in there, they'll be more space with the girls."

"I just...I want to see Mama alright? Please."

Sarah acquiesced, she could hardly claim that she didn't want to see Cora again herself, and soon enough they were kicking open the door to what had been Branson's rooms. She studiously ignored the other covered figures on the bed until Matthew was set down, as neatly as they could manage, in the last gap on the bed, in between the two other men. Cora was set a little apart from them, on the end of the bed, still covered with the blankey from the drawing room; Thomas was under cover of the tablecloth, the first thing Matthew had been able to find to cover up the grisly sight that Sarah didn't think she'd be able to stand looking at and Branson was under the bedcovers.

"We should put something over him."

Edith sniffed and looked like she immediately regretted the gesture.

"They'll be somethin' in the cupboard I expect."

Edith nodded and went to stand in the doorway whilst Sarah pulled out a spare sheet and tossed it over the Earl to give them some respite from the fear in his blue eyes. The job finally done she wrapped her fingers around the top of the blanket and pulled it down, revealing the already whitening face of her Countess. She smiled softly and brushed a lock of hair that must have been dislodged when Matthew carried her back into place before putting the blanket back in place.

"Come on then, we best get back downstairs. If it is Lady Mary we might not find much of Bates left."

Sarah knew it was inappropriate when even Edith looked a little disturbed by the thought but what the hell did it matter anymore? Two things had mattered to her in the world and they were both lying on that bed and she wasn't and all that was left was for her to take the slower route to join them.

IV.

"I still think we should do what his lordship said."

Three faces looked at him with varying degrees of agreement on their faces. O'Brien didn't look much like she cared which Bates couldn't pretend he didn't understand; Mary might not have
heard him but was nodding vaguely but Edith immediately shook her head.

"No. I want to lock myself in my bedroom and stand a chance of waking up in the morning."

She took O'Brien's cigarette from her fingers and wondered off with it, despite the scowls from the older woman. Whatever lasting regard for O'Brien she'd ever had it had completely disappeared after their conversation: she'd thought she might have found an ally but as usual she had been let down. Oh well, she thought, there was always the back-up.

Before anyone could cut her off she gestured towards the candles.

"We left it alone for all of five minutes and another one's vanished," they were indeed down to four now. "Unless we want it to go down to three we're better off locking ourselves in alone and seeing another dawn."

Bates wasn't convinced it was the best solution. He wasn't sure why Edith was so insistent but some part of him, some deep rooted instinct for survival that he hadn't truly felt rear its head since the war, was telling him that staying here was the best bet.

The women didn't seem to agree and, with Mary following the other two rather distractedly, they all trooped out and Bates, with an increased sense of dread, leant over the table and blew out the remaining candles. It was one thing for them to vanish suspiciously, but if they all burnt down then it's only cause panic. He followed the women with a final look back at the poem on the wall – whoever was going to get swallowed up next he didn't like to think.

V.

It was colder that night than any of them remembered although it could have been the warmest night of the year for all that it made the night easier to endure. They all tossed and turned and any sleep that was actually achieved was entirely by chance.

Silence reigned throughout the house and every creak on the staircase would have been heard had the night-time wonderer not taken the simple measure of removing their shoes. One step at a time they reached the bottom of the stairs and wondered quietly towards the door, knowing what they were supposed to do next for it to work. It still seemed a bit of a strange idea but it was the only thing to do.

Having picked up the easiest shoes for the occasion they slipped them back on and opened the door, slipping outside quietly until the last minute when they slammed it loudly and ran.

Three people unlocked their doors and were immediately on the staircase staring at each other in shock and fear. Without passing a word all their eyes turned to the fourth door, a door that was wide open but quite clearly didn't contain its former occupant...
Chapter Eleven:

I.

Mary sighed and stepped back into the corridor where Bates and O'Brien were waiting without too much curiosity for what she actually had to say. She had been waiting for something like this from the moment Branson had died – who else hated him so much apart from her? – right up until Matthew…but she couldn't think about him at the moment and concern for the safety of the little bit of Matthew she still had was all that had kept her from going to the room the other women had lain him in.

"She's gone. Her things are still there but there's no sign of her and her car keys aren't on the side any more either."

"Which might mean someone dragged her off?"

O'Brien was heading down the stairs before the other two could reply and they heard the door open as they too began to climb down the stairs.

"Is there anything?"

"Nothin' except this bleedin' fog. If she is out there I can't bloody see 'er."

"She's not."

The two servants – although Mary couldn't remember the last time her Papa and then husband's valet and her Mama's maid had been mere servants to the family – looked at her with quizzical expressions.

"Come on, don't you see? It was Edith all along."

The two looked at each other in what Mary could only assume was disbelief, it was rather dark still, but she pushed on, quite desperate that someone else had to see the truth. She counted things out on her fingers as she spoke.

"Sybil would have drunk something Edith gave her, she was the last back when Anna died, and god knows where she was when Thomas was killed."

"'m sorry," O'Brien cut her off as she shut the door again and purposefully pushed the bolt across. "But do you actually think your sister would have picked up an axe and swung it at Thomas, a man twice her bloody size?"

"And with half her nerve! She left me in the kitchen just before Mama died and we were all separated when Matthew…she's probably the fittest and quickest of us all too so she'd be able to get from place to place easily enough. And now she's driven off in the night."

"And what about Mr Branson? She wasn't sat next to him at the dining table m'lady."

"'e's right," O'Brien stalked back up the stairs, meeting them at the top and Mary could see the disbelief etched on her face still. "I was sat in between them an' I'd 'ave seen 'er put anythin' in 'is glass so that does scupper your theory a bit."
"Or," Bates interjected, leading the two of them back down the corridor towards their rooms. "It might mean it's still worth locking our doors." He turned back around and caught Mary's eye for a moment that made her shudder with how oddly impressive and grave he seemed. "There's no proof Lady Edith did anything and there's even less that she did it all alone."

And with that pronouncement he closed his door, leaving the two women alone and decidedly wary of each other. In silence they slipped back into their rooms, sharing one last look before they locked themselves back in, waiting for the dawn.

II.

Sarah O'Brien sat on her bed, not sleeping and doubting very much whether anyone else in this house was managing to do so other than those that would never wake now. She fiddled with her fingers and smoked through the remaining cigarettes in her packet, making sure to leave the cupboard doors open to reassure herself that there was no one hiding in them and sitting on her windowsill – or what should have been Cora's windowsill before they'd decided it would be better for them to all sleep in close rooms and she'd moved in here – staring out of the window.

The fog was as thick as ever and she could barely see anything on the horizon, no matter how closer the dawn was creeping and she wrapped her arms around herself in an attempt to keep out the chill. She had no intention of actually moving so the remaining warmth of her body would have to do for the time being.

She wanted more cigarettes. Would there be any in the house? She had a stash at the Dower House but that was hidden away in the fog and she'd never make it there on her own and in the dark: and there was no guarantee she wouldn't end up never coming back. Maybe Edith had gone for cigarettes? It was a possibility wasn't it and one that didn't necessarily mean the the girl who had always been her favourite was a murderer.

She got to her feet and paced the room, stretching her neck from side to side to try and rid it of the ache that had settled in last night and been reluctant to leave her even since. Smoking helped but now the anxiety of not even having that crutch helped.

Thomas would have been her best bet but he was dead and she-

Wait. He'd still have had his fags on him wouldn't he?

She lit a candle and carefully opened her door, slipping her head out first to make sure there was no one around before edging out of the room as quietly as she could. The last bloody thing she needed was to have to explain to people who apparently thought she was Lady Edith's accomplice that she was out of her room because she hadn't been able to contain her nicotine addiction until morning. She walked through the house until she was on the guest side and slipped into the room they had placed Matthew earlier. She began to rethink her bravado when the smell of the room hit her and she realised she was there with four dead bodies. She took comfort in the fact that one of them was Cora and focussed on her ladyship and the promise of cigarettes to keep going.

She gritted her teeth and moved forwards, trying to keep her hand from shaking as she pulled the tablecloth aside and was glad that she'd only uncovered the body – she didn't think she'd be able to cope with his face. She slipped her hand into his jacket pocket and found nothing. She tried his trouser pockets and had more success and repositioning the cloth she was about to run from the room when another thought occurred to her and she managed to stay rooted to the spot.

There had been something in Matthew's pocket earlier when they'd spoken in the dining room, she was sure of it. When she and Edith had moved the body earlier there would have been no opportunity to check even if she'd remembered and she reached her hand under the bed sheet
gingerly, running her hand across his chest and patting the space in his jacket where something should have been. This wasn't right, there had definitely been something, or else every instinct she'd honed over the year had failed her. She put the candle down and removed the sheet, ignoring his face and rummaging in his jacket with urgency. There had to be something!

But there was nothing there and looking into his fearful face she felt the chill of whatever he'd seen before his death and trying to regulate her breathing she tossed the sheet back over him. Grabbing her candle as she backed away she all but ran from the room, through the corridor and back to her own bedroom. As she pulled it shut she could have sworn she heard another door open nearby but she ignored it and turned the key in her lock.

Sitting on the bed and breaking into the stolen packet of cigarettes she only hoped to God Matthew Crawley's weapon had been a figment of her imagination.

III.

Bates looked between the two doors and tried to decide which of them was more likely to have been recently opened. His senses weren't quite what they used to be and he wasn't sure which direction it had come from and how important it was either way.

Well, he was outside now wasn't he and whilst he was here he might as well do what he'd been thinking about all afternoon and night. What he'd seen… it was utterly impossible wasn't it? Or else it led to one very definite conclusion that he didn't want to think about at all and he walked as quickly and quietly as he could down the corridor to Lady Sybil's room. He slipped inside and came closer to the bed, reaching out a hand towards the undisturbed pair on the bed and pulling back the cover they had lain over Anna earlier. He'd been here already today of course but he felt as though there was no point in leaving this room now but he had to, it was the only way for all this to end.

As much as he wanted to curl up next to his wife and fall into blissful oblivion if he did that then none of this would end the way it had it. It was alright though; he knew what he had to do.

He leant down and pressed a kiss to Anna's forehead.

"I'm so sorry. This is all my fault."

IV.

The car had been moved for the last act and with keys dangling from fingers chilled by the misty night they headed back to the house. Everything was in place now: it felt like the last year, since the moment Hughes had made the recording under duress just before her death, had been leading up to this exact moment and, taking a moment to breathe the air and revel in the end being near. The dawn was coming and in the house they would be rising soon.

They'd been a restless bunch through the night: moving hither and yon through the house and making things difficult even now. But it would soon be over and that was the important thing: then they could all rest.

V.

By the time the light had filled the corridor sufficiently enough to call it morning the three remaining inhabitants of Downton Abbey reconvened outside their doors with depleted spirits. They all had eyes dark with tiredness and fear but none of them had dared sleep.

"What do we do now then? We can't just stay 'ere indefinitely an' wait for the fog to go away."
"Why not?" Mary closed her bedroom door behind her, determining not to bother keeping the key with her. She had no intention of sleeping in this house another night so she didn't need to worry about being able to lock her door. "Edith's gone, so I'd say we're safe now."

"You're still determined to think it was 'er?"

"Who else?"

Bates sighed and cut between them, heading towards the staircase and ignoring the two of them and their ongoing disagreement about Lady Edith. It had been the last thing they'd spoken of last night and now it seemed they'd both been brooding on it all night and neither of them had budged in their position.

"There are plenty of other people it could 'ave been."

"Or still could be," Bates interjected as he watched O'Brien light a cigarette. "I thought you'd run out."

"I found a new supplier," she said simply as she followed him and he understood immediately that she would say nothing more on the subject. "What're we doin' then? I'm not stoppin' 'ere."

The three of them descended to the ground floor, discussing the meagre possibilities until Mary hit upon the only real option they had now.

"So we're agreed. We start walking until we find something that isn't covered in fog and we alert the police."

"I don't like it. We'll be out in the open and none of us have a weapon."

"I told you, we don't need one! Edith's gone-"

"But if it was 'er – and I'm not sayin' it was mind – why would she suddenly up and leave?"

Mary shrugged.

"How should I know? Maybe she decided to end her reign of terror with my husband."

"You really think that m'lady?" O'Brien asked with a nasty look coming over her face and she pulled the bolt and opened the door: despite her arguments it seemed she was at least in agreement with Mary about what they should do next. "Because if it was 'er I wouldn't think she'd be satisfied as long as you were still about."

Mary tried to ignore the truth of that statement and cling to the belief that it was Edith. What other choice did she have? Either it was Edith, or one of these two were about to turn at any moment.

VI.

It had taken him rather longer than he'd thought it would to talk Lady Mary and O'Brien into leaving him behind but eventually he'd managed to get them to go and he'd settled on the front step, resting his leg and awaiting their return. They weren't killers...well, they weren't this killer and he knew that for a fact and since the early hours of the morning he'd known that this was the only way to end it now. When they came back, as they surely would, they would die as quickly as he intended to. Or at least he hoped it would be quick.

He had no desire to be the only survivor of this madness – he knew that he could be now if he really wanted to be – but it would be altogether neater if he if there wasn't a soul left when they
were all found. He pitied whoever was inevitably going to found them. It would probably be Mrs Patmore and he hoped the sight wouldn't ruin the rest of her life: he thought idly that she would have to find a position somewhere else now, or perhaps there was some provision for remaining servants who had been here as long as she had in the Earl's will.

As trivial as it seemed now here was little else to think about and, knowing he would at least have a few minutes left before the women came running back, he slipped into the house one last time to fetch a cigar from Lord Grantham's stud before settling back on the step. He lit it and breathed deeply, looking around and wondering quite how long he had.

He wanted to enjoy his last moments even if he didn't deserve to.

VII.

For the first five minutes at least they walked in total silence, both of them wary of the other and of the unseen paths beyond them where anyone could be lurking. Mary stepped closer O'Brien as they went on though: if the other woman was the killer then she doubted they'd have gotten this far with her still being alive and if nothing else, she doubted there was a power on this earth that could make Sarah O'Brien kill Cora Crawley. But that wasn't what the recording had said was it…and they had been slowly establishing that the guilt they'd all been accused of was not a false boast.

"You never did say."

"M'lady?"

"When Edith was interrogating everyone in the dining room you didn't say whether it was true. What the recording said."

"Didn't I?"

O'Brien was being purposefully evasive and Mary couldn't really blame her, she didn't exactly like to think about the recording or the incident itself but for some reason she simply had to know now. There were so few of them left that what would it matter who knew what and about who?

"No. Although I can't see you pushing Mama out of the bath somehow."

"It didn't say I pushed her."

"Ah," Mary looked at the ground and smirked, pleased she had gotten somewhere. "So at least you remember the accusation."

"I'd never 'ave pushed her."

"I know…but it said you made her miscarry and I don't see how you could have done that to be honest unless you made the bath red hot and force-fed her a bottle of gin."

Something at the corner of O'Brien's eye twitched and Mary had the distinct feeling that another truth had just fallen into place for the maid, something she had been trying to piece together. Mary sighed and closed her eyes for a moment, feeling somewhat relieved that at long last someone else knew.

"And before you say it, yes…yes, what the recording said. I didn't kill him, but I did kill-"

"The child. I was wonderin', because I was still 'ere then an' I wondered 'ow you could 'ave managed it without anyone noticin'."
"Well, I didn't do it entirely alone..."

Mary's brow furrowed as a thought occurred to her. Yes, it was the only possible way anyone could know: at least it explained how her secret came to have been on the recording if not who they had told.

"I moved the soap."

The phrase sounded so odd that Mary thought O'Brien's mind must be going after the weekend but after a moment it made sense. Her Mama had slipped on the soap at the side of her bath, soap that had no right being there unless it had been put there by someone with intent. She thought of all the years O'Brien had been with her Mother now, more years after the accident that apparently hadn't been an accident at all than before it, and thought about how terrible it would have been to live with Mr Pamuk for so many years knowing what she had done. Matthew's disappointment in her inability to conceive had been bad enough, if he'd known the reason then it would have been unbearable. At least her Mama had lived in ignorance with O'Brien, always seeing nothing but a friend and maid who took wonderful care of her, Matthew had known there was something and sometimes when he'd looked at her Mary would have sworn blind he had guessed.

"Then neither of us really deserves to be here. And yet we are and Matthew and Mama are not."

"Maybe they're better off without us-"

"O'Brien…can you see that?"

VIII.

In the very near distance it emerged and with every step they took it gained more clarity. Edith's car, something that had not been where it was supposed to be when they'd checked earlier, was looming like a great shining beacon amidst the nearly overwhelming gloom of the fog. With tiny, tentative steps they walked closer to the vehicle, barely daring to breathe at the thought of what they might find there.

If it was Edith, and the car was here, then did that mean they'd stumbled across her resting or was she unable to go any further with the weather?

Slowly her sister came into view, sitting quite still in the driving seat and with a sinking feeling it occurred to Mary that was really rather remarkably still…

"Oh god…" O'Brien got there first and from the tenderness with which she brushed a hand over Edith's face – presumably closing her eyes – there was only one possible conclusion to draw. "Poor girl."

Mary came closer, biting her lip to stem the tears that she'd been trying to keep in for hours now. Edith looked paler than ever and yet she stood out amongst the mist – red hair and green coat looking stylishly garish together – but she was still and there was no movement. In the dimness Mary couldn't quite see what must have killed her but there was no doubt in her mind that Edith was dead as a doornail and she…oh god, she'd been accusing her all morning!

She lowered her gaze to keep the tears at bay and saw something standing out against the flesh of Edith's hand.

"What's this?"

There was a note and Mary carefully extracted it from between her fingers, turning it over and her
mouth dropping open at what she read, her heart stopping at what it must mean.

_I'm sorry Sarah._

"Oh my god. It was you, both of you."

Sarah didn't quite know what was happening for a moment before she grabbed the note from Lady Mary's hand and stared down at it with quite the same confusion.

"I don't-"

But before she could manage to think of anything to say Lady Mary shook her head and ran, faster than Sarah thought she'd ever seen anyone move, into the all-consuming fog.
Chapter Twelve:

I.

Mary ran for all she was worth and wondered how on earth she could have been so stupid. Of course Edith must have had an accomplice, it would have been impossible for one woman to do all this alone and the most logical person – the only other person as bitter and twisted as she was – was clearly O'Brien and oh god she should have known and now she could do nothing but run and pray that she got back to Downton and the relative safety of being with Bates before O'Brien got to him. If there was one thing she knew she could rely on it was that Bates would never ally himself with O'Brien and she clung to that fact with utter desperation.

Where was she? She could barely see her hand in front of her face and she wanted to shout out for Bates, beg him to respond and follow the sound of his voice but if she couldn't see in this fog then neither could O'Brien and the last thing she wanted was to alert the other woman as to her whereabouts. And she'd just admitted her guilt to her! Just as Matthew had done to Edith moments before his death – how could she have been so stupid to let her guard down!

She stopped for a moment to catch her breath and tried to adjust her eyes, there had to be something, something she could see or hear or feel if she had to use something as ridiculous as instinct to save her life. But there was nothing, nothing but the all-engulfing fog and the silence around her and the pounding of her heart which felt as though it were in her throat. She wrapped her arms protectively around her stomach as had become her habit of late and stared around in the faint hope of getting her bearings.

The roar of a car – did O'Brien drive? – and then a loud cry made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end when she realised that they could only be the last noises of John Bates. They were close by and to her left without shadow of a doubt…she must be close to the house now, she could practically smell the petrol in the air from the recently moved vehicle and she knew without question that it was nearly over. She was alone out here with O'Brien.

The only chance she had now was to get back to the house – it was too far to get away to the village and she was closer to the house anyway – and get upstairs to the master bedroom. Matthew had a gun in the drawer and unless he had taken it from there – which wasn't beyond the realms of possibility – then it would still be there. And even if it wasn't it would be in his pocket. No one else knew about that gun, at least no one living. Some of the servants must know she supposed but O'Brien had never lived at Downton during Matthew's span as Earl. She couldn't know.

With that one grasping thought Mary turned towards where the noise had come from and began to slowly walk back to the house. There was no point in running, she'd only be heard, and now it wasn't a race to get away, but a test of who could kill the other first.

II.

Sarah heard the car and the scream from her position still standing a sort of guard over the body of Lady Edith. She supposed Mary must have used Branson's car and taken out her penultimate obstacle on her way back to the house.

She could keep running, keep trying to get to the village and then maybe all this would be over and she'd be able to sleep again…no, that was no good. She'd never be able to enjoy anything in life again so what was the point of fighting for her life now? The best she could hope for was that
she would at least be able to die well and she refused to do that years from now as the last survivor of this sick game it was clear to her now had been the orchestration all along of Lady Mary. Of course it was; who else? There was no one else cold and calculating enough to engineer all of this and she was the one who'd had the time to set it all up.

God, she must have been laughing behind her fake bloody tears through every single death. The thought enraged her and with nothing on her mind but the pieces of Thomas, the unfair accusation of Lady Edith and the confused sorrow of her dear ladyship O'Brien made her choice.

She leaned into the car over Edith, strangely untouched by the thought of being this close to a body again – what did it matter when she was so close to the end, when she might as well have been dead herself? – and flicked a switch she hoped would bring on the headlights. They shone out brightly, a great deal brighter than she had imagined they would, and lit a path towards the house. She couldn't see it clearly, but she knew the direction well and the little bit of light made her more sure.

She was about to straighten herself up when she spotted something else on the passenger seat that nearly made her laugh out loud. She hadn't been going mad after all…

She pocketed the weapon and followed the beam of the car back towards Downton Abbey, determined in her tired bones that this had to end.

III.

The first thing Sarah saw as she reached the house was that Branson's car, as she had imagined it would be, had been moved. She followed the track on the ground with her eyes, not wanting to walk the path, and saw the back of the shiny bonnet clearly and underneath it-

The lights inside the house flared on and cast enough illumination outside that Sarah could suddenly see quite clearly the legs underneath the car, jammed just in front of the back wheel with the clear outline of a body underneath the car. She didn't want to see any closer than this but she could well imagine that the mess underneath the car bonnet was not a pretty sight and, despite everything, she spared a sad thought for Bates. He hadn't deserved to die like this, the final victim of a madwoman none of them had suspected.

And the light had put more than that into stark focus.

There was a crunch on the gravel and Sarah spun around to see Mary looking at her with wide eyes and her hands up as though she were dealing with a wild animal. The Countess didn't speak for a moment as she too took in the body underneath the car and a terrified, grim look came over her face.

"You're mad."

"Me? You're the one who bumped of your whole bloody family."

"Is that what you're going to tell them?" Mary laughed a little hysterically. "I suppose I should have guessed that much…and now you're going to kill me?"

"I've got to, there's no other way now. I'm sorry, but there's just not."

"You could just kill yourself…"

O'Brien snorted. "Maybe I will…but not yet."

"I'm pregnant O'Brien!"
Sarah thought it was the last cry of a desperate woman and steeled herself, gritting her teeth and looking Mary directly in the eye. The plea in them was genuine, she was sure of that, but she was also sure that she was right and shook as she spoke. It felt like the whole world was coming to an end and what did anything matter if there was nothing left? Even if she shot herself now Mary would hang for these crimes. Perhaps her plan had been to plead her belly all along but for murder on this scale Sarah knew she would never be allowed a complete reprieve – and what kind of life for a child! She bit the inside of her lip till she felt blood on her tongue and shook her head at the young woman sadly, feeling the tears running down her cheeks but not caring to prevent them anymore.

"It didn't stop me last time."

With an immediacy that nearly made her cry out Sarah brought the gun she had plucked from Lady Edith's passenger seat out her pocket and didn't hesitate, didn't allow herself to see the horror and surprise in the deep, dark eyes she had always admired, before she pulled the trigger and shot the woman straight through the chest. She closed her eyes when Mary cried out and it was almost like she was back there, twelve years ago, moving slowly through the mires of her grief and guilt to a time when she had cracked the heart of another Countess of Grantham.
Chapter Thirteen:

I.

Mary Crawley dropped to the ground immediately and in the seconds it took for her eyes to close for the final time Sarah O'Brien felt the world close in around her. Another heir of Grantham dead of her hands but this time there had been nothing else she could have done and now... well now the whole bloody line were gone weren't they?

She held onto the gun idly and stared at the body on the ground and the blood slowly oozing across the gravel until she could stand it no more and she turned to walk into the house. She could move the body she supposed, it would be the decent thing to do, but she'd long since gone past the point of that and with the eerie morning light trying to battle though the fog, and the electric lights in the house Sarah felt for the first time since all this had begun that nothing was being concealed anymore. What was the need when they were nearly all dead?

Who had done this she couldn't begin to say but did it really matter now... there was not a soul left and soon she should be joining the rest of them but first there was one more thing she was going to allow herself. She climbed the stairs, aimlessly dropping the gun in her pocket for safe-keeping – she would need it again soon enough – and walked as though in a trance towards the bedroom where her thoughts had firmly been since yesterday afternoon.

She slipped inside once more and with slow, agonising steps, and unable to quite focus upon the lumps that had been Branson or Matthew Crawley, she instead reached out a hand and pulled away the blanket covering the woman who had been her closest companion for over twenty years and finally, after what felt like years of keeping it in, a sob racked her whole body.

"I'm so sorry," the tears fell free and she stood mere steps away from the bed, looking at a woman who might have been sleeping, unable to prevent the convulsions of her whole body. What did it matter anymore? She was as damned a sinner as any of them – perhaps that was what she was supposed to understand? She reached forwards, her knees catching in her dress and tumbling forwards until her face was pressed against the bedcovers, thankfully in a gap between bodies. She tried to straighten herself out but cried out loudly when she found her face inches away from Thomas' uncovered one. The skin was greying and the blood congealing all over his once beautiful face and she lifted her hand to touch his cheek, unafraid of anything anymore.

What was there left after all but her and these two people who she had loved so much and often despite herself?

With all the strength she could muster she pulled herself up. Hand over hand, feeling the odd grain of the woollen blankets underneath her fingers, the smell of blood and bodies and the slightly hint of electricity still coming from Matthew, until she was hovering over Cora once more.

"I'm sorry."

The words came out as a whisper, her lips sticking together with the moisture on her face and she couldn't find the strength to bring a hand up to wipe the tears away. There was no one left to see her now. She laid a kiss gently on Cora's forehead and held herself still for a moment, willing some unknown assailant to shoot her dead where she was. If she could chose, this is where she wanted to die.
Nothing came and Sarah laid another kiss on her before pushing herself to her feet. She had to keep going – she needed to end it. She kissed Cora once more and reached out a hand to stroke Thomas' hair gently, placing their coverings back in position and leaving them to their rest.

She backed out of the room, unwilling to move her gaze away from Thomas and Cora until the last moment, but she surprised herself by managing to do it but she couldn't quite force herself to close the door. She forced her feet to move, not too sure where she was supposed to go, but certain, as she had never been certain of anything, that there was a plan to all of this and something would surely reveal itself-

Out of the corner of her eye she saw it, a door open that had not been open before and she walked towards it with a deep, bracing breathe. It was Cora's room, or what had been Cora's room for the long years she'd worked at Downton as the Countess' maid, and when she entered the chamber nothing seemed amiss. What was she supposed to find in here? It was Mary's room now and there could be nothing in here…

The bathroom door was open too and with a sudden bark of laughter it made sense. Of course it would be the Countess' bathroom for her! Where else?

She shot a final glance across the landing from the bedroom door, half wishing Cora would be there to smile at her and shoo her into the bathroom to wait for her but instead her heart stopped at what, or rather who she saw. The chill crept up her spine and through her head until she could take the tension and the horror no more and she began to laugh. Laugh as she had not laughed in decades with utter mad understanding and the sound, foreign to her ears as much as anyone else's echoed and rattled around the empty house.

Sickeningly Cora's last words made sense now. Not...not...Sybil.

She nodded at the figure, sure they had seen her, but feeling the need to reassure them it was alright – as though they deserved any such thing – and she wasn't going to try and run. She pulled the gun from her pocket and tossed it rather unceremoniously on the bed as she turned away from the figure for the final time and walked towards the bathroom with heavy steps.

There, dangling from the beam in the centre of the room, was the noose she had anticipated, swinging menacingly and almost...invitingly.

She stepped onto the chair, reaching up and sparing no single thought for anyone other than her ladyship and the child she had killed as she tightened the knot.

She kicked the chair away herself.

Moments later and as things began to become distant and blissfully hazy she heard the chair being picked up but didn't see a hand carefully putting it back in its place against the wall.
Chapter Fourteen:

"So we've got what? A hysterical cook and other servants who knew nothing."

"And had no way of getting here through the fog. Unless the old lady acts a bluff and she's a secret daredevil on a motorbike."

"Quite," the Inspector sniffed. "That leaves two shot and one ran over, none of them could have done it. The car was moved and both the young ladies were found outside."

"And the gun was inside."

"With the lady's maid, yes. So she shoots them and hangs herself?"

"Could be."

"There's a clear problem with that Bennett…For god's sake man think!"

"Erm..." He surveyed the bathroom in which the ill-fated maid had been found hanging from the ceiling light until his eyes settled on something glaringly obvious. "How did she get up there?"

"Exactly. She must have used a chair and then that was moved." He pointed to a wicker chair by the washstand. "That one I expect. Looks about the right height."

"Then she wasn't the last to die?"

"Unless she came back as a ghost and moved the chair to tidy up."

"But all the others were piled up on the beds, someone must have moved them."

"I know..." The Inspector trailed off, deep in thought, running his fingers over the shadow on the washstand where the gun had been found. The maid must have been the last to have it, but she couldn't have been the last to die. But the two girls must have predeceased her – the shots certainly hadn't been fired from a distance – and going by the sheer amount of fingerprints on the blasted thing it could have been anyone to pull the trigger and this poor woman had just found it...but why else would someone hang themselves? Unless her nerves had been so crushed that there'd seemed like no other option.

"I suppose there could have been someone else sir?"

"What? Oh...but who?"

"Not the cook or the married couple Sir but someone else we don't know about. Someone who hid here before the fog set in and scarpered before the cook got here and found the bodies."

"The Unknown you mean?"

"Yes sir."

"I suppose it's possible. Seems the only thing that could have happened but I don't know...this is personal Bennett. Escaped madmen don't kill with so many different methods and everyone these people knew has an alibi or was miles away."
"So not a madman then?"

"I didn't say that," the Inspector raised his eyebrows pointedly at the Constable and gestured for the younger man to follow him down the corridor away from the bathroom. "I'd say there was more than a hint of calculated lunacy behind all this…Have you heard the recording yet?"

The Constable lowered his head and felt a chill go over him.

"Yes sir. I suppose that makes it undoubtedly personal?"

"Certainly. We asked the cook and apparently the voice is," he checked his pad. "Elsie Hughes. Who was Housekeeper here for well over two decades before she died last year."

"Murdered?"

"Heart attack."

Bennett sniffed and scowled to himself. There was nothing helpful in that.

"Apparently she never had a day's ill health in all the years the cook knew her and she swore blind there was more to it but you know what these old women are like, one of them dies and they cry murder rather than admitting they might not be indestructible."

"Well there's no getting around the fact that this lot were murdered Sir."

The Inspector looked back over his shoulder at the door to the bathroom…yes, that definitely didn't have the look of any suicide he'd ever seen. Although…it was possible she'd stood on the side of the bath to string herself up and swung across, but who would kill themselves like that? Only someone who was so determined to die they also possessed the will-power not to try and save themselves as she must have been able to if she'd jumped from the bath to do it.

"Yes and in some nice, differing ways to make it as confusing as possible. Fair few poisoned…"

"A woman then?"

"Could be…no reason to think it was a man."

"When it comes to poisoning the best thing to do is cherchez la femme Sir."

The Inspector rolled his eyes.

"Yes thank you Bennett, there's no need to make this even more of a murder mystery."

The Constable looked duly chastised but pushed on.

"Out of the poisonings-"

"One was a man and one was a woman. Hardly conclusive proof of anything."

"The Doctor said that the older woman, the Dowager Countess, had poison in her too."

"She also had a bloody great knife wound which can't have hurt."

The Constable sighed anew and followed the Inspector as they went down the hallway, watching the older man look between the two rooms they had found the bodies piled in and down the stairs to the front door. He was thinking and there was no interrupting him when he was thinking… although if there was anything concrete to think about he didn't have any inkling of it himself.
"We'll have to wait for the Doctor's report to get the order of death but by the look of it these six had to have died first and were put in here, judging by the state of them I'd say the Earl and maybe the maid were amongst the last...then again one of them was chopped to buggery and as far as we know the Dowager Countess was just always that pale."

He sighed and ran a hand over his face, trying not to let on that he didn't have the faintest clue. There was nothing here to suggest any of them were more likely to be guilty than any of the others, none of them had a criminal record except for the valet – and one hardly jumped from silver theft to mass murder in one step – and he was crushed under the car so it was impossible to be him. The cook had been entirely unhelpful, but the poor woman had been no use to man nor beast after she'd seen the bodies and if it was indeed true that they were all fairly mild individuals who were unlikely to kill, then what on earth use was she supposed to be?

"So someone unknown shoots the redhead in the car, then comes back and finished off the Countess, runs over the valet, tidies up after the lady's maid," he turned back from facing the front door to looking at the two doors. "And then..."

"Couldn't have dismembered himself Sir."

"Or electrocuted himself. Someone could have poisoned themselves I supposed? And slipped amongst the others."

"And if they dosed themselves up enough it might give them the gall to shove a knife in themselves too."

"True enough, but the knife was left in the other room. So unless she poisoned and stabbed herself and then made her way to the room with the men it seems unlikely."

"When you've eliminated the impossible, whatever remained, however improbably, must be the truth. Sir."

The Inspector rolled his eyes again.

"Yes, thank you Bennett. But if she did do that then there'd have to be blood on the floor and I can't see any, can you?"

The Constable shook his head and he thought again.

"What else was there? The maid I suppose, but her injuries are consistent with hanging and there's a rope on the side in the kitchen that must have been hers. And that one had her wrists tied, they were all bloodied and bruised so she didn't go willingly. No, I'd say it had to be one of the poisonings, it's the only thing the killer could have done to get rid of themselves but then..."

"Sir?"

"Well," he sighed again and pushed back his hair, watching from the upper floor as the coroners trooped out in a line, carrying the bodies away two by two. "According to the Doctor there's no doubt about the fact that those two were dead the longest. They're the most decomposed."

The two men looked at each other in silence before descending the staircase. They'd have to get back to the station and put the word about to keep a look out in the local area for anyone suspicious with anything to do with the house. The fog wasn't quite gone yet so there was no guarantee that the killed could have gotten very far.

It was all they had to go on.
Epilogue

Letter found in the oven sometime after the Downton Murders.

To whom it may concern,

If you are reading this then I am dead. Or at least I hope I am. I deserve to be after what I've done, however, if all has gone to plan I shall have taken a number of sinners along with me. Their crimes were terrible but I can hardly claim to have been a saint in the past but now I've paid for it and I only hope god will forgive me.

I was going to leave it all up to you but honestly I don't see how you could work it out, it was all so well planned after all, so I thought I better help you along a bit.

I arranged for Mrs Patmore's brother to pay a visit to the village to make sure she was out of the way, along with Daisy to be off in Kent with her new husband – I gave them the money for their honeymoon and they were always far too daft and trusting to think of my motives – because none of them deserved any of this torment. They're not perfect I'll grant you, but they're not killers are they? And that's what each and every person here is. Every one of them has a stain on their souls that you can't see and blood on their hands. I could see the stain and the blood and honestly, it's been driving me mad for years now. I had to do something about it because I knew you wouldn't see?

But how did I know about their crimes?

Well most of them were easier to come across than you'd think. No one ever pays attention to someone listening at doors and overhearing people's conversations and confessions. I already knew about a few of them from being there first hand but the rest I came across by chance and luck. Some people told me but then I always did have one of those faces you could trust, or so I was told for most of my life.

As for the murders themselves, well Mr Branson was the easiest. I was sat near him and when Mary and her Mother were distracting everyone down one end of the table I slipped a capsule into his drink. I'm sure you'll have done tests and found out what it was by now but in case you're struggling, it was cyanide. Nice and quick for Mr Branson, he caused someone a quick death so it was only fitting really and I always liked him so I don't think I could have stood and watched him suffer.

You know what? I've already lied to you, sorry about that. But Branson wasn't the easiest, Sybil was actually. All I had to do was break another capsule in a glass of brandy and hand it to her in bed, she knocked it back and went straight away. Only I mucked up a bit. She should have had the cyanide and had it quick too but I gave her strychnine by accident! No one heard her screaming with the pain of it all because it paralyses you quite a bit. But there you go, those two went nice and quick compared to the others, barely had to suffer at all and Sybil probably just thought it was the pain of her heart breaking or some such nonsense.

Incidentally, poisoning really isn't as easy as people say, I don't know why they say it's a woman's weapon. It's easy enough to slip into drinks but then you have to put up with the waiting. Sybil and Branson had quick poisons but I don't know if you've noticed but there should be a lot more barbiturates in the Dowager Countess' body than have any right to be there. I don't much care for O'Brien, never did, but I think it's a bit unfair to let you think it was her dosing her mistress up. No, O'Brien was quite sparing with them actually which made it a lot easier to take the stash she had out of her room and slip it into Lady Grantham's drink. I knew she'd have the brandy. If
nothing else O'Brien was always predictable and I knew that's what she gave her when she was hysterical so it was easy to put them in there and just wait for O'Brien to give her enough to kill her. The knife was a nice touch and I thought I wouldn't manage to get it into her in time when O'Brien locked the door but Mrs Hughes' keys were still in the kitchen and I planned for everything.

Thomas was quite easy too. He wasn't looking after all and after the first few blows he didn't put up much of a fight, I think he was too scared to actually, after the war his nerves were shot to hell so he wasn't as strong as he used to be, I doubt very much I'd have been able to kill the man he used to be, but then again, he didn't deserve it before did he? Killing Carson was a terrible thing to do but I know he did it on purpose. Apart from the fact that I was there at the end too and saw it all, Mr Carson told me before he went that he was sure something was wrong with the medicine.

So that's Thomas, the Dowager Countess, Lady Sybil, Mr Branson, who else? Well his lordship was quite tricky and I had to be very quick but once I'd dazed him with a whack around the head with the broom it was easy enough to gag him and tie him up. You'd be amazing what strength you can find when you need to. After him it gets complicated I know but would it make things easier for you if I told you Lady Edith was in on it. Sort of. She didn't know what I was doing, daft thing, but once I took her to one side the morning they all found Sybil and said I thought it was Lady Mary she was quite eager to help. And so she helped me fake my death so I could move with more ease. She thought I was hunting the killer. I did have to laugh about that but the second I mentioned Mary's name I knew she'd just at the chance to get her.

I lured her out of the house in the night and got her to drive us away a bit so we could get to the police, but...well, I'm sure you know we didn't get there. I shot her with Matthew's gun and left it there for either O'Brien or Mary to find. Oh, that's the other thing. I'm pretty sure John came into Lady Sybil's bedroom and say I wasn't there (the Dowager Countess saw me too by the way) and he knew there was nothing he could do so he let me get on with it. It was only right. I let him get on with strangling his wife and dumping the body so he was only returning the favour.

I've never driven a car before but it wasn't exactly something I had to do with a great deal of precision was it? And I was quite able to just copy what Lady Edith did with her feet without having to worry about things too much and that was the end of John – the look in his eyes was so odd. He'd accepted things and knew and welcomed it a bit I think. I only wish I could have reversed and made the whole thing a lot quicker for him.

The rest was easy. Leave the gun and wait for O'Brien to pick it up. I knew it'd be her, Lady Mary never was very observant and I knew she'd panic and run and from the upstairs window I watched as O'Brien did the last job for me and then came upstairs. After she was dead I took her down – I doubt you'll have guessed this bit so it's just as well I tell you – and I put her with Lady Sybil and hung myself there. Clever I think you'll agree? It was easy enough to scuff up her wrists a bit and then hang myself in her place.

As far as you could tell one maid died in the kitchen and the other in the bathroom. Well actually we both died in the bathroom and it was the easiest thing in the world – we were all murderers so the method of the death didn't matter all that much really. It was just inevitable that we all had to die after what we'd done.

Oh yes! One last thing – the recording! If you listen to that you'll just think I helped John to bundle up Vera and chuck her into the river but I didn't. Let's just say Mrs Hughes' heart was a lot stronger than everyone thought, but it's a better woman than her that can survive being dosed with arsenic every day for a week.

Yours,
Anna Bates.

End.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!