PALLID SUNLIGHT ON DARK DESK, the compulsory motes of dust doing the required dance upon the shafts of light, distant church bells tolling the languid hour from even more distant dreaming spires, a melodic thread of classical music carried through the open window by a zephyr of pleasant air and with it, the delicate faintness of aroma that marked the end of an English summer. Idyllic, really, but that wasn't quite what the man seated behind the desk called it. Boring was the word that sprang to his mind with all the resilience of a yo-yo. Boring, boring, boring. And to make matters worse, the pubs were open, and today was the day that one of his favourite watering holes began selling a brand new ale, one reputed to be the finest brew made since Shakespeare’s day. Hyperbole of course, especially considering the kind of ale Shakespeare and his lot had available to them, but the mere thought of a new ale, carefully nurtured by hands that had sixty years of experience, made his mouth water and his backside hurt from being stuck here sitting too long. He wanted out. Capital O, U, T, out. And a good two hours ago at that.

But instead of skiving off the way he normally would (wonderful things, ongoing investigations and possible-witness interviews), he was still sitting here, one ear cocked for the longed-for sound of the Chief Constable’s car pulling out of the car park like an unwelcome headmaster at the end of term. The Chief had been here over two hours already: surely it couldn’t be long now before everything of any possible interest had been dutifully examined?

Sighing, regretting the fact that he currently inhabited the Chief’s bad books, he licked his forefinger and turned another page, skimming the inelegant typing with half his attention, whilst the other half wondered what the hell had ever possessed him to become a policeman in the first place. Masochism, judging by the way today was going. He sighed again, managing this time to make it sound so truly long-suffering that even Lewis would have been moved to sympathy. But the office was empty apart from himself and those bloody dancing dust motes, so he simply kept on, licking his finger, turning a page, initializing the appropriate dotted line, placing it in his out tray, picking up the next waste of time, licking his finger, and trying very hard not to think about the ale this afternoon nor the opera tonight that he was missing—the same bloody opera, he might add, that he had
missed the night before and every night before that, the entire length of its entire engagement. The best new production in years, the best tenor in years and as for the soprano—well! Heaven on earth, she was. Heaven on earth. Which explained why he felt like Pilgrim’s Progress mired down in Purgatory.

But he had promised himself, not to mention his blood pressure, that he wasn’t going to think about what he was missing. It didn’t matter that tonight was the last night, that the final encore would be the very last time that the best singers in the world sang together. There’d be other operas, other special moments.

“Who am I trying to kid?” he muttered under his breath, slamming a paper down with a very unsatisfying lack of noise. It was a once in a lifetime, never to be repeated experience, the performance tonight the gala to dwarf every other gala event ever imagined, and he hadn’t even been able to see a ticket, never mind buy one.

Stoically, he put thoughts of Dame Vera Milne from his mind—don’t even think about this being her farewell performance in her farewell tour, performed here in Oxford in honour of the opera group who had persuaded her to sing in the first place—and concentrated instead on the papers in front of him. He picked up the next report, licked his finger, scanned the pages, initialled on the dotted line. Picked up the next report, licked his finger, turned the pages, scanned the pages, initialled the pages, and so on, ad nauseam.

Well, at least he still had his Times crossword to look forward to, carefully hoarded for later, when the Chief was gone and he could put his feet up and experience a new ale. In the meantime, there was still the soul-destroying repetition to endure: files. Linæ labor indeed.

It was times like these that the feared boredom of retirement began to look too exciting for words. “Tempus,” he muttered under his breath, reading a two page report that was a supreme waste of time, “should bloody-well hurry up and fugit.” But another glance at his watch showed him that tempus wasn’t fugitting at all: as a matter of fact, it was crawling, very, very slowly. Another report, another scribbling of initials, another lump to add to his out tray.

It was when he looked at his In tray and realised that it was still fuller than his Out tray that he decided to sod the lot of them, the Chief Constable especially, jack it all in and go out for a pint anyway. His local was awash in the new licensing laws and his consolatory new ale. And that, he thought, is where I’m going to be.

By the time he got there, he was delightfully thirsty after having walked the entire distance, and not quite so delightfully bad-tempered at the thought of his other current disaster: his beloved Lancia’s moribund clutch and the ascending bank balance of his mechanic. But at least when he got to the pub, there was hardly another soul there, so he parked himself at his favourite table, the one farthest away from that modern abomination, the juke box. As far as Morse was concerned, this new-fangled thing of having CDs in there for people to waste their money and their hearing on had only made matters worse. After all, now instead of there being thirty or a hundred songs, there were thirty or a hundred CDs in there, and every one of them filled to its tawdry little heart with more and more appalling caterwauling. Dreadful. That’s what it was, he said to himself, bringing out the crossword he had saved to give himself something to look for—and some incentive to actually wade his way through the stultifying boredom of routine paperwork.

Sadly, not even the new ale could distract him from thoughts of the finest soprano in the world performing not half an hour’s distance from here, tonight, when he’d be sitting at home with the news on or some typically stupid BBC production about the private lives of badgers or something equally disgusting. And she’d be singing her heart out, voice soaring up to the vaulted ceiling, and all he’d have would be a can of beer, a Chinese take-away and fornicating badgers. Given the circumstances, it was hardly surprising that all was not well in Morse’s little world. Scowling, he tried to persuade himself that things could be a lot worse; the Chief Constable could walk in looking for him, or he could have tickets for tonight and some stupid twit...
could pick this afternoon to get himself murdered and the Chief Constable could lay it at his doorstep with that disgustingly avuncular grin he had been known to inflict on his victims.

But, as yet unthought of by Morse, there were two things that could make life even more reprehensible, and they both happened together, in perfect unison if not in harmony. Some yobbo fed a fortune into the jukebox and a mindless thumping and wailing ensued, and even as the first off-key screech began, Lewis poked his head in round the door.

Morse tried very hard not to be there. In fact, he leant his head on his hand, face in shadow, turned half away from the door, pulling his paper up to hide any part of his face the shadow might have missed. When the scurrying, squabbling bus-run group came in, he thought he’d been saved, and leant back a bit and had a sip of his wonderful new ale and allowed a small nub of satisfaction to creep in over his dismay about his opera. But then, after a minute, when he looked up a little to read 6 across, he recognised something heaving to at the lip of his table: Lewis’ ubiquitous grey suit.

“Suppose I should buy you one of your flaming orange squashes, then,” he said, nowhere near gracious, really resenting that anyone should come here and spoil his self-pity. “Even better, you can buy me a decent pint as penance for turning up here like the proverbial bad penny.”

“I’m not staying, sir,” Lewis replied, managing to make that simple statement sound like a question. “I’m off to see the wife as soon as I’m finished here. Brought this…ahm…gentleman to see you. Says he’s a friend of yours.”

Morse looked up and his face went as prematurely white as his hair. “Jesus Christ!”

“Cody?” Lewis said, his voice seemingly stuck in that peculiar tone he used when questioning or puzzling. “Oh, I get it,” he went on, now sounding as if he’d cracked the riddle of the Rosetta Stone, “Codey, as in Morse Code.”

Neither of the other two men even glanced at him. “Well, I shall be off home to the wife and the kiddies then, shall I, sir?” Morse didn’t even let on whether or not he’d heard. So, Lewis thought to himself, this strange man turns up out of old Morse’s past and he’s so fascinated he can’t even tell me if he wants help or what! “I’ll get going then,” he tried again, so that his conscience would let him enjoy his eggs and chips in peace. “Taking them all to the cinema tonight. To see the new Walt Disney film. Well, it’s not new, not really, but it’s new to the kids, them not having seen it before…”

It was when he trailed off like that that
Morse seemed to finally notice he was there. Without sparing poor, concerned Lewis a glance, Morse waved him off, saying, “Yes, that’s fine, off you go, see you—whenever it is you’re supposed to pick me up.”

“If you’re sure then?” Last chance, Lewis thought to himself, last chance if you want a hand to deal with whatever someone from your secret past is going to throw at you. Morse’s distracted nod was enough though, to set him on the road home. Morse had been a big boy for too many years, and Lewis wasn’t about to start forcing help where it wasn’t needed, nor passing judgement either.

Morse didn’t even notice him go. The well-bred gentleman sat down at his table, his elbows propped on the edge, leaning forward to whisper conspiratorially, “Codey as in Morse? Oh, I wonder what your good Sergeant would have done if I’d told him it was Cody as in Buffalo Bill Cody, because you had the biggest ‘hump’ any of us had ever seen.” The small gesture of humour fell on absolutely rock-solid ground, Morse not so much as lowering his scowl a notch or two. “It’s been too long, hasn’t it?” the Honourable William Symington said, picking up Morse’s glass and taking a sip from it in seductive intimacy. “But surely, even if you don’t feel like indulging in a protracted session of catching-up, you could certainly see your way to at least saying hello to me?”

“Hello, Symie,” Morse said, “Goodbye, Symie.” And he went back to his crossword, although his fingers were shaking almost as much as his brain, so even if he had been able to come up with one of the solutions, he couldn’t have written it down. But still, it gave him something to do, something apart from drowning in green eyes he had adored more than half his life, or thinking beyond the numbing shock of seeing Symington after all this time. After all this pain, and suffering, and rage—

“Oh, come now, come now! Goodbye so soon? When you’ve not said more than half a dozen words to me? And not,” his voice became a paragon of disbelief and his smile twinkled seductively, “before you’ve wangled at least one drink out of me? And certainly not before you’ve agreed to spend the evening with me?”

Morse, never one to be pushed where he didn’t want to go, pursed his lips and continued, pen making neat blue marks against the completed clues, to defeat the crossword, and, he was pleased to see, defeating the strong allure of this old friend of his.

“Now this really does take me back a few years, Morse. Me, having sinned against you, and you sitting there, primmer than the Virgin Mary herself, sulking. And I,” he said, getting to his feet with the fluid grace men half his age would envy, “know how to cure that, don’t I?”

When he left, Morse heaved a sigh of relief, wiping his forehead with trembling fingertips, paying attention to the fact that the almost ethereal elegance of the clues had just been trod upon by bovver boots, not one single answer filled in with enough care or coherency to even come close to fitting in. Still, mis-doing a crossword was better than actually facing W. Michael Symington. He could resist the voice, he could resist the handsomeness that had improved with age, he could even resist the lure of a nostalgic rewriting of the past. But he knew, knew in his bones, that even after this many years—especially after this many years—that one glance of lost and lonely needing from that man, and he’d be in like Flynn, whilst making a complete fool of himself. Man is, he thought to himself, destined to repeat his past. And if he let himself look at Symie, he’d end up redoing his past bloody verbatim. Ave, Symington, morituri te salutant.

“There,” a satisfied voice said to the top of his head, “that should put a smile back on your face. Or at least, it should lessen the scowl a trifle?”

Morse, needless to say, thought it wisest to neither answer nor actually look at Symington. “Oh, come on, Pagan,” the melodic voice poured over him like cream, twice as rich and three times as smooth, and delicious enough to make Morse want to lick his lips. Or lick Symington’s lips. “Don’t be like this! I’ve come a long way to see you, and—”

“No-one asked you to.”

Mistake that, he told himself. Shouldn’t have spoken to him at all, freeze him out,
that’s the only way. Give him an inch and it won’t be a yard he’ll take—it’ll be one of our beloved Chief Superintendent Rennie’s lang Scots miles. Or kilometres, probably. Symie always had been one for the latest and the newest and the smartest. And in distracting himself enough to not hear Symington’s answer, he had managed to fill in ‘lover’ to a clue that seemed to have something to do with fishes and bread…

But Symie was still talking, irresistibly, although the man was always so persuasive that before you knew where you were, you’d find yourself doing what he had wanted in the first place whilst taking credit for the idea yourself. And enjoying it to boot.

“Look, Pagan, I know you’ve got every reason in the world to cold-shoulder me, I really don’t blame you one ounce. But not even looking at me and not talking to me isn’t the most helpful thing you can do, now is it? Why don’t you come out with me tonight, and give me the chance to talk to you?”

The sincerity in that made Morse bite his inner lip to keep his mouth shut and Symie out of his life.

“The simple fact of the matter is this: there’ve been too many years of silence between us,” a pause, but Morse did nothing to alleviate the silence, so Symington went on, the strain cracking into the plumminess of his voice, “and I think it’s time that you let me make up to you for what I did when we were both a hell of a lot younger and I was infinitely more foolish.”

“Bury the hatchet?” he heard himself say. “Only if it’s right in the middle of your forehead.”

That shut them both up, for all of thirty seconds, until Symington neatly stepped over the hostility of Morse’s defensiveness. “You know,” and Morse felt that affectionate, forgiving whimsicalness right down to his toes, “bitterness doesn’t become you nearly so well as the white hair does, does it, Cody old chum?”

“Oh, compliments and insults and old-fashioned nick-names all in the one sentence? Mr. Dowling will be so disappointed that you still overdo the dramatic bit so badly.”

“What’s wrong with old nicknames—Bunny?”

And to his horror, Morse felt himself blush for the first time in years, as images and memories almost tactile in their brilliance flooded him.

“Remember that?” Symington was speaking as quietly as humanly possible while still being heard above the giant-label pseudo Indie music on the CD. “We used to lie together in the quiet and make up stories about Raffles and Bunny, and you always insisted that I play Raffles because you said I sounded just the way you imagined him. The adventures we used to have! Don’t you remember the thrill of it, Pagan? Lying there together like that, and you would have smuggled your torch in with you and we’d turn the bed into a perfectly wonderful little tent. And—” another second, and another flash-flood of memories, coloured by the squirming embarrassment of the adult coming across his excessively youthful self. “—Uncas. You used to love being Uncas.” Morse learned that Symington hadn’t forgotten a single trick of the debating society when he began declaiming, “Man of mystery and integrity, the civilised savage. And you would make me La Longue Carabine, although I always said that you were much better fitted to the name. You’d always blush then, and d’you remember what you’d do then?”

Newspaper held up high in front of his red face, Morse remembered it all too, too well. Second adolescence, behaving like thirteen-year-olds instead of the nineteen-going-on-ninety that a Classics scholar was supposed to be.

Symington seemed to be completely undeterred by either the embarrassment of the past or the paper battlements of the present. “I remember, I remember it very well. I’d always get a kiss for saying that. So tell me, ma chère Longue Carabine, would I still get a kiss were I to call you that today?”

“You’d get a kick up the behind, that’s what you’d get.”

It was supposed to come out as a flat statement of uncompromising fact, but he was horrified to hear his own uncertainty bleating from his voice as Symie leaned closer and reminded him of those most precious nights of his life. He had thought they would
last forever and that the two of them would never ever part, not until Death got them. Hephaiston and Alexander, that had always been his secret, private dream, until Symie had found him writing in his diary and seen nothing more than the names. “Hephaiston and Alexander!” he’d almost shouted, the sound carrying out the window and down into the Quad. “Is old Reid letting you study them? Oh, God, I wish I could have been one of them. The ultimate love story, isn’t it, Pagan?” And then he’d dropped to one knee in front of Morse, taken Morse’s hand in his own and simply looked at him, until Morse had been afloat in feeling, in pride, in simple joy. “That’s you and me,” Symie had whispered, “lovers forever, and not even death could keep us apart for long. You know that, don’t you?”

And sitting in that small room with the cacophonous racket of his first year at an all-male College reverberating around him, he had known that. He’d known it enough that he’d put his books on the floor, clearing his bed to pull his lover down to share it with him, love and lust and promise meeting and mixing and forging a bond he’d thought invincible. Until the telegramme. He’d hated the damn things for years afterwards and had been gladder than anyone else in the entire Commonwealth to see the near-demise of the vile things.

“You see, the reason I’m here is that I was sent a telegramme one day, completely unexpectedly. A relation of mine had simply upped and died, heart attack. Here one minute, gone the next. I went to the funeral, of course, and I couldn’t believe how many of my own age group weren’t there any more. And I was appalled by how many of what I would have called my contemporaries were now the respected elders of the family.”

“So because you were feeling old,” Morse said with carefully aimed vitriol, attacking in self-defence and gazing in rapt attention at 26 Down, “you decided to look up an old flame to see if you’d lasted better than he had. Well, you can go home happy now, back to your little wife and your little house and your 2.4 kids and leave me to enjoy my ale in peace.”

That was satisfyingly firm, and in his opinion, he had struck the perfect formula of contempt, dismissiveness and hostility.

Perhaps it was that Bill Symington simply heard with different hearing, but he didn’t seem to have grasped the fineness of Morse’s performance. “My poor Pagan. You must have been in a dreadful state if this is how hurt you still are now. Is that…” For the first time, there was a crack in the perfectly groomed façade, uncertainty and uneasiness peeping out. “Is that why you left the College?”

He almost looked at the oblivious bastard then. Instead of courting disaster—and Symington, which made the two synonymous in Morse’s experience—he ground out, barely keeping it below a shout, “I didn’t so much leave the College as was sent down from it for falling so far below standards that they said there was no point in me continuing. And unless your mind has failed you as much as your ethics in allowing you to come back here to torment me, then you’ll remember that it was because of you that I ended up missing lectures and classes and even an exam or two, if you should happen to recall a certain week spent in a caravan in Wales.”

“I didn’t ask you to stop working,” Symington said in all fairness. And in all fairness still, added, “But I made it damned difficult for you to actually get anything done, didn’t I? At the time, it was just…work seemed so unimportant, compared to—”
“Compared to what? Compared to the fact that unlike me, poor sod that I am, you knew you’d never have to work for a living? Or compared to that wonderful, lifelong romance you convinced me we were having?” He was proud that he managed to say that at all, but prouder still that he hadn’t looked up to see the satisfying moment when the barb drew blood.

“Isn’t it a lifelong romance, Pagan?”

He managed a sound of perfect disbelief, although the words plummeted to the pit of his stomach and his stupid emotions went leaping off in ecstasy.

“If it isn’t, then why do we both still love each other?” Symington was asking him, painfully, clearly, with utter honesty. “Why was it all still there the second we laid eyes on each other again today? Hmm? Go on, you were always exceptional at finding answers—and you’d probably do a better job of it than you are of that crossword!”

That almost—almost—got him, but he knew Symie, oh, how he knew the man. Right up until the moment the bastard had walked out on him to go back to Mater and Pater, he had known him. And a challenge like that from Symington to Morse should have had the latter staring at him in defiance to prove that he didn’t give a damn any more. Which would, of course, have been his downfall. They both knew perfectly well that Morse had never once been able to resist Symie when that expression of helpless longing was turned to bear on him. Morse, with a further sinking in his stomach that had nothing to do with the four pints of real ale he’d just sunk himself, was beginning to feel the path under his feet grow decidedly slippery, and all because of the remembered promise of what had been the happiest time he had ever known.

But he wasn’t going to give in, he told himself, refolding his paper to the letters page, abandoning his cherished and sadly disfigured crossword to its ignoble grave of incompletion. He wasn’t going to give in, he wasn’t going to go through all that again. Absolutely not, not under any conditions. He reminded himself that it was thanks to his affair with Symie, his enrapturement with the man, that he had lost his College and ultimately, his chosen career. Did he really want, the cross of boredom duly taken into consideration, to lose this second choice of career? To need to start all over again, and at his age? Because they might no longer throw you out of the police for being queer and it might no longer stop your promotion chances dead in their tracks—and all due praise going to John Major for what little encouragement towards equality he had given—but they did still throw you out for not doing your job at all. Which is what he was afraid he would end up doing, if Symie came back into his world, with enough love for Morse to throw himself into it completely and enough money on Symington’s side to make the mundanity of work a mere indulgence that wasted time better spent with each other.

No. He liked this life of his, even if it were far from perfect. At least it was his own and independent of anyone else’s whims and needs. And even if he were willing to give it all up for love—oh, yes, definitely, absolutely, immediately! a traitor inside him screamed—then he why the hell would he want to do it with the man who had walked out on him before and left him in tatters? Even if Symie had changed, for whatever reason, and was ready to make a go of it this time… There was still the minor detail of the real world to deal with, and he really didn’t want to have to deal with colleagues asking him what queers actually did in bed and all the other, more major crap that he’d have to put up with. For if he and Symie ended up together again, he’d come out. He wasn’t going to waste half the time skulking around in the dark and pretending. Christ, for starters, he was too old!

And then there was the question of whether or not Symie even wanted anything beyond a fling, and whether or not this bastion of true-blue Toryism would dream of coming out at all. Or if Symie was going to conduct every last bit of their lives in public like this, without so much as a thought for what such public discussion of private homosexuality could do to a career policeman.

Fear faced off with hope, and fear won.

“This is my final word on all this and your so-kind offers to dine,” he said, grating the
last word to shreds whilst humming in the back of his mind his favourite aria from tonight’s opera as some small comforting warmth against throwing this man out of his life. “You may feel that si quis is the way to live your life, but I don’t. So bugger off and leave me alone.”

There was a profound satisfaction in him, the surety that he had just restored his world to perfect order despite the threat of euphoria and despair brought in by Symington and the complexity of emotions that still simmered. The profound satisfaction lasted at least fourteen seconds, and then Morse started thinking about how much it had hurt when Symie had gone running off home simply because they had told him to: Symie, who never gave in without a pitched battle.

“And this,” Symie said softly, faint shuffling noises followed by something vaguely rectangular being waved at Morse out on the fringes of unfocussed vision, “is my last word on the subject.”

Almost against his will, drawn by the glimmering of light on the wavering shapes, Morse narrowed in on what Symie was holdin in front of him. In a V for Victory, there they were. Two tickets. Best seats in the house. For tonight. For his soprano, and his aria, tonight. With Symie.

V for Victory for Symington, and as Morse finally looked up into that warm and affectionate smile, he knew he had lost. And was lost. Absolutely and utterly.

The opera, he decided as they walked along streets glittering with past-fallen rain, was worth it. The ‘it’ in question was the rapid melting of all his resolves, the almost instantaneousness of his complete capitulation to the wit and warmth and pure delight of this man walking beside him, furled umbrella clicking with rhythmic precision on the smooth flags of the pavement. Conversation had never been exactly necessary between them—both of them preferring, with the voracity of youth, the more tactile forms of communication—and they were both quite comfortable with the silence. If only because it delayed the moment of decision, when offers would be made, or not, and accepted, or not. His hand in his pocket fingered the torn perforations of his ticket stub, while the cut-crystal perfection of his Diva’s voice filled his mind with limpid song. A bus lurched past, a sheet of filthy puddle water threatening him, and as he jumped aside, it was Symie’s hand that steadied him—Symie’s hand that made him shiver with the unexpectedness of the pleasure. Christ, but he had got it bad, hadn’t he? Just a touch, and that through leather glove and jacket.

Disconcerted, he turned away from the peculiar gentleness on Symie’s face and discovered, instead, the heady perfume of the gardenia boutonnière that had been given him. “Pity I couldn’t get green,” Symie had muttered, deftly weaving it through Morse’s button hole, the old familiar glint of humour making his eyes wicked. But it was the uncertainty, the near pleading that Morse could neither quite forget nor completely understand. There was something going on here, with Symie, something more than had been admitted thus far. Which was typical of Symie and which meant that there was a secret that Symie was quite sure would either a) upset Morse or b) influence Morse’s decision. And that, naturally, made the hairs of curiosity on the back of his neck stand up in alert attention. He wanted to know what was going on behind the charm and the entertaining anecdotes.

The door of his flat. Both of them, standing there, a toss up to see which one was the more nervous.

“Aren’t you going to invite me in?” Symie asked him, and quite remarkably, Symie was the one who was keeping his face averted, as if it were he who was afraid of succumbing to something in the other person’s eyes.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d want me to.” Symie’s attention snapped on to him, disbelief flushing his face. “Don’t you think I’ve come rather a long way and gone to rather a lot of bother just to say good night at the door and go sloping of into the night, tail between my legs? Pagan, I freely admit I was a proper bastard to you. But that’s why I’m here. I’ve told you: I want to make amends and do something to make you happy.”

It was the perfect moment to tell him to sod
off, and flounce off inside alone to sit in solitary splendour and gloat over his victory. But what he said instead was, "I've got nothing in for supper, but you can have a coffee or another drink if you want it?"

Key turning in lock, opening the door, smelling the familiar, indescribable security of the odours of his own house wisping faintly out to meet him. With a nod, he ushered Symie in, walking past him, doffing his damp jacket as he went, not looking at Symington, not daring, because he needed to keep his wits about him now. Needed to, because if he didn't, he'd end up in bed with the man, rolling about in absolute clover without a thought for anything else: such as his job, his future, his career. Or his past, and why Symie had done what he'd done and why he'd come back.

He needed a beer. Even one of the bottled ones he kept at home in case of emergencies such as these would probably do, so he put Die Walküre on the turn-table as he went past on his way to the kitchen and the cool cupboard where he kept his emergency rations. The old rapport so firmly re-established by one evening of music and the usual amusing repartée they had once indulged in, he didn't even need to ask what Symie would want, carefully pouring both of them their drink. Symie, not surprisingly, had parked himself on the settee, in the precise place and precise sprawl that Morse himself favoured. The table lamp cast luxurious shadows into the light brown hair, highlighting the faint wave, glimmering on the paler blond highlights that had always marked Symie at the end of summer.

Morse sat as far away as was possible on the small sofa, staring into his beer, pondering thoughts and carefully carving theorems.

"It wasn't because I didn't love you," Symie suddenly spoke into the low-volumed fury of Die Walküre throwing away all Morse's expectations of how they would proceed. "I'm serious, if it had been down to love and nothing else, I would have stayed with you without a second thought."

"Let me get this straight," Morse murmured, in a voice Lewis would have recognised as meaning there were going to be at least two hours spent dissecting a question over several pints. "You say that you came back, out the blue without so much as a by-your-leave, because you came face to face with your own mortality. Then you say you came back here to make up to me what you did to me then. What's more, you claim that you loved me then and that we still have the same feelings for each other. Does that mean," he allowed his voice to become as whimsical as barbed wire over exposed flesh, "that I can expect you to deceive me, lie to me, hurt me and then leave me all over again? Or do I have to wait until you've helped me ruin my career first?"

"I deserved that, didn't I?" Symie asked him, an air of self-deprecation surrounding him. "Actually, after what I did, there are those who would say I deserved a lot worse than that."

They were quiet again, that particular round being won, to his own regret, with a points victory going to Symington. The music strutted around them, as unsettled as they themselves were, crescendoing voices mimic to the cresting sense of urgency within.

One of them was going to have to say something, that much was obvious. Morse, acclimatised to asking questions and hearing the meaning behind the answers, was the first to find the lack of knowledge unbearable.

"Why did you come back? And don't give me any crap about telegrams and funerals either," he said, to the books above his stereo. "Because..." and Morse could almost hear the insecurity building, the one thing that could convince him that this time, he was actually going to get the truth. That he might even, after more than half a lifetime, get the truth about what happened that Christmas vac, when all his happinesses had shown themselves up as castles in the air. "Because, if you want to know the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, Pagan my dear, it's that I'm getting old. Because I went to that funeral and there they all were, boring middle-aged men with boring middle-aged wives or empty-headed young floozies on their arms. I could tell with a glance which of them had surrendered to growing old and dying and which of them were trying to pretend that it
wasn’t going to happen, not to them. They were all telling lies too, Morse, absolute whoppers. Sitting around the parlour afterwards, drinking tooth-rotting sherry and silently congratulating themselves that they were lasting better than everyone else there and not thinking a thing about my poor cousin, apart from the occasional moment of gratitude that it was him under all that wet ground and not them…"

Morse could see it in his own mind, could even imagine the faces and the expressions, precisely the kinds of things he was beginning to find in his own life, at funerals, and remarriages and the retirement wakes for colleagues. Even Lewis, young, young Lewis was getting old these days, lines appearing on his face, the first of the insidious grey hairs, that thickening of paunch around his middle…

“And I was there with my middle-aged wife and my elderly father-in-law, and all the relations on that side of the family, and it suddenly dawned on me that I was just exactly the same as all of them. Every last one of them, that was me. Not, you can imagine, a very pleasant thought, hmm, Pagan?”

A brief touch then, the single flutter of a single finger across the back of his hand, brief heat, brief caress, briefer hope mingled with unease and then gone.

“Mean, there I was sitting there, on one of those mahogany seats I swear our grandfathers bought as punishment, you know the kind I mean—"

And Morse did, almost able to feel the carved back digging in between his shoulder-blades and the thin, horse-hair stuffed, leather-bound seats unyielding and lumpy under his buttocks. And the smell, that old smell of pourable furniture polish and bees-wax, of old people, violets and camphor.

“My wife was drawing me veritable daggers because I wasn’t over chatting to dear old Uncle Philip—who is an unmitigated, immoral bastard I would love you to meet, old chap, but only in your official capacity—who is worth a bucket of money and whom we need to...’suck up to’ to make sure we’re well remembered in his will, a much-coveted by-product of which is that dear old Cousin Michael—the strange one, one of the ‘unnaturals’ as my father-in-law calls them—won’t be able to get a finger on a single penny.”

Morse felt pity begin to stir as he, for the very first time, looked past his own bias and imagined what life had actually been like for a man as prone to honesty as Symington but forced to lie about his most basic of truths.

“And, to be perfectly honest, I simply couldn’t take it for another second. I wanted to stand up on the table, just kick the buffet meal right off and shout at all of them.”

A fragment of laughter, and then the voice continued, more sober than before. “One of our nephews would come and stay during term-time—couldn’t bear boarding at school, but it was decreed, of course, that he simply had to go to his father’s old billet—and he used to watch an inordinate amount of television. Some of it rather good, I might add.”

Symington was so engrossed in the telling that Morse dared look at him, quick, caressing glances, then looking away lest he give in to the temptation to gaze in mindless bliss.

“He and I fell into the habit of watching Reginald Perrin together. Perceptive little bastard used to say that I was another Reggie Perrin just waiting to fall.”

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“He and I fell into the habit of watching Reginald Perrin together. Perceptive little bastard used to say that I was another Reggie Perrin just waiting to fall.”

“Hence the desire to leap up onto a table and make a complete spectacle of yourself?”

“Oh, absolutely. You see, I wanted to jump up there, and tell them all, use the dreaded ‘h’ word out in public, shout ‘I am a homosexual’ from the roof-tops. Or the table-top, actually! You know how it is, Morse—everyone knows about Cousin Michael, but no-one ever talks about it. His ‘friends’ are politely ignored and never, ever brought to family gatherings. Interestingly enough, I found out—after the main event, of course, but I’ll get to that in a moment—that he’s had the same ‘friend’ for over seventeen years. Perhaps not longer than all of the family marriages, but I can guarantee that he’s certainly been happier.”

The pause invited comment, but Morse knew Symie too well to fall into the role of asking sympathetic questions. If he did that, he’d soon find himself so far under the blanketing charm that he’d be in bed with Symie and in him before he could blink. That was how it had always been, he thought into the bottom of his beer glass, swirling his
drink around until froth billowed up the sides of the clear crystal. He’d been so deeply in love that nothing else had mattered, but him, and Symie. And look, my lad, he told himself sternly and with all the good intentions in the world, where that led you. A relatively poorly-paid copper when you could have been a Don at the finest University in the world and a visiting lecturer at all the richest. Good intentions, however, are proof against very little, and against temptation least of all, and his own desire to rekindle what had been the halcyon days of his youth nipped at him.

“Went home that night with a wife whom I knew perfectly well I didn’t love and whom I knew didn’t love me and then, I lay in bed, thinking about the one person I had ever loved.” A pause, not entirely for the dramatic effect, then Symington’s hand covered Morse’s, fingers entwining the way they had when they had sat side by side during the fewer and fewer lectures either one of them attended. “You, Morse, my dearest friend. I thought of you.”

Good intentions may not be able to resist temptation, but hurt and distrust can work wonders. Morse had expected rather better than the selfishness of Symington’s mid-life crisis as the reason for this attempt to completely upheave his life. More than that, he needed more than self-centred reasons underlyng the altruism. He pulled his hand free from Symington and erupted to his feet, taking the couple of steps that put him out of harm’s way, changing one record for another. Bach. That was what he needed right now, portentous music with interweaving melodies of the deepest sort, full of pain and the sorrow of the human spirit.

The strains of music commingled with the strain between the two men.

“Well,” Symington finally said, not entirely sure of a silent and subdued Morse, “at least you didn’t simply fell me with your very solid right hook. I half expected that, you know. Either that, or this, your very understandable disbelief. Or if you were to believe me, an unwillingness to chance trusting me again. Well…” he repeated, for once in his life obviously at a loss for words, a fact which Morse found severely amazing. “Well,” once more, and then the fumbling mind apparently stumbled across something to say. Morse listened, stiffening his resolve, knowing the seductive, good-natured persuasiveness of old and knowing how little resort he had against it even now. But it seemed that Symington was full of surprises these days.

“There’s nothing else for me to say then, is there? No point in dragging it all out in front of you in all its sorry little details.”

A cough of laughter, then the shuffle of movement behind him, of jacket being picked up and put on, of leather being eased back on to fingers made damp by the day’s end heat in the room—and perhaps nervousness, Morse thought, suddenly remembering that endearing flaw in an otherwise impenetrable cloak of good breeding and iron-willed good nature.

“I’m sorry that what I did hurt you so badly, Pagan, my—” the endearment was cut off before it could embarrass Morse, swallowed down and stifled. “I apologise if I’ve stirred up a lot of unpleasant memories for you, Morse, but—”

Again, that biting off of a comment. And that, of course, inveigled its way through Morse’s determined, protective disinterest. Symington was hiding something, something that he would sooner walk out of here mis-understood than reveal. Something that made him…vulnerable. Morse wanted, suddenly, fiercely, to find that out; and anyway, why else had he invited his old ‘friend’ up to his flat, if not for that? He carefully stomped on the carnal impulse that leapt up to give answer to what was supposed to be a rhetorical question.

“All right,” he began, using his best policeman’s voice, turning round to stare at Symington with the objective eyes of a policeman, yearning after his lost youth and his lost love with the heart of a fool, “let’s suppose that I believe you. We’ll say that you had this mid-life crisis of yours, and came sneaking down here to see me. Now, you’re telling me that all this is actually motivated by love. If that’s the case, then why are you so quick to give in and go sloping back off to this wife you apparently don’t love enough to have stayed with her—how long is it now?”
There was the slight delay his years in the police had taught him to expect from witness and defendants both, as the decision was taken whether or not to be honest, or whether lying was the better—or at least, less damaging—road to take.

“Twenty years or so. But it wasn’t her I loved, Morse,” and Morse stiffened in expectation of some poorly done Mills & Boon excuse. “It was the acceptance that marriage gave me. And the money, and the position, and the prestige.”

Morse was listening intently now, hearing truth stripped down to the bare bones.

“You know perfectly well that I would have been either cut off from the family if I’d flaunted it or packed off to some obscure job somewhere if they had known for a second that the first-born and heir was a flaming pouf who had neither the desire nor the means to continue the line. Men, in case you’ve forgotten your basic biology, can’t have children with other men. It requires a member of the fairer sex for that.”

“All right, all right, all right,” Morse muttered, made more malleable by reason than anger ever could. “Let’s say I accept all this thus far. Then what.”

No question, simply the command to divulge all pertinent information, and Symington slowly divested himself of his protection against an unsettled summer’s weather, not beginning to speak again until he was sitting on the sofa, glass in hand, black trousers and hunter green shirt setting his colouring off beautifully. Or at least, that’s what Morse thought, so ensnared in cataloguing the handsomeness of this once-upon-a-time lover of his that he missed the first few words that Symington spoke.

“I’m sorry, could you say that again?”

Naturally, Symington gave him one of his patented looks for that, and hesitated, as if unsure of whether or not he should start it all over again. It seemed not only churlish to refuse, but stupid as well, considering what he had given up just to have the chance to start it—his life with Morse—all over again. “I was saying,” he finally went on, voice pitched deep and melodic as always, “that I had reached the point where I simply could not face another day of nothing but lying and pretending and smiling through gritted teeth. We were supposed to spend the weekend at my father-in-law’s country place, and my own parents were joining us there. We were all going to make a long weekend of it, and I knew I’d have hours upon hours of listening to them talk about things that just didn’t matter to me at all any more. You see…it had finally dawned on me that I was going to die. And not some time in the distant future when I was so old I’d be glad to go, but perhaps in a matter of a few years. A heart attack, a stroke, prostate cancer. Any number of things, really, once you’ve seen the other side of forty.”

“So it is mid-life crisis that brought you here. What is it they call it? The male menopause? Some men go out and buy flashy new sports-cars and set themselves up with gorgeous young blondes, but you decided to rekindle your youth another way.”

Genuine laughter, pealing out in that glorious cascade of sound that had always made Morse shiver with the attraction of it. “Rekindle my youth? By going back to places that had changed so much that I found myself having to ask for directions? With a man I remember as in the prime of youth but now gone white-headed? Oh, yes, my ever-fanciful Pagan, always fond of a good story.”

He supposed he should be glad that Symie hadn’t actually mentioned fairy tales, given the other man’s execrable taste in puns and his now-remembered need for levity in the face of adversity. “If it’s not mid-life insanity, then what is it?”
“Why can’t you believe, Morse,” Symington said, sitting round on the sofa to face him, “that it was all because I came to my senses one day? I realised that if I were to die that very day, then I’d go to my grave with more regrets than satisfactions and not a single damned thing I was unequivocally proud of. And that, Pagan, that is a terrible thing to say about a life.”

“Better than some things that could be said.”

“You are referring, I suppose, to what could be said about a man who goes running off, abandoning his lover to his fate, and all because an old lady has fallen ill? I can say two things in my own defence. One is: amare et sapere vix deo concreditur. I was head over heels in love, which naturally precludes any pretence of intelligence, and I confess, I was terrified that you had taken rather a shine to that young Dunn fellow, but...everything else happened so quickly, I had neither the circumstances nor the courage to ask you about it. I desperately needed reassurance, which was, I suppose, why I didn’t dare ask for it. Then to make matters worse, my mother was so ill, we were all certain she was going to die. By the time it was apparent that she was going to outlive us all, then I had...Well, I had sunk into my own moral cowardice and degeneracy. I’d given in, Morse, simply buckled under to family pressure and admitted defeat. I had also,” self-deprecating mockery invited Morse to share in the delicious irony of one’s own human failings and self-loathing thereof, “become re-addicted to money and all the things it can buy.”

“So you gave me up because you couldn’t live without the gold cigarette case with your crest done in precious stones, is that it?”

“Oh, no, nothing so simple. It was so terribly seductive, Pagan old friend, that cloak of security that money offered me. Just think about it: if one is rich enough, no-one can touch one. Least of all...”

“Who was it, Symie?” Morse asked him after the silence had stretched too long, not liking one bit the pain that was etched on his former lover’s face. “Who was it the money protected you from?”

Bitterness in eyes that he best remembered laughing or soft with loving. “Not something you would understand, not fully. Guilt, you see, Pagan my love, good old-fashioned guilt, fed by religion and stoked by parental fire.”

“For being gay, you mean?”

“But we weren’t gay back then, not the way they mean it now, anyway. We didn’t really give ourselves labels then, did we? Not really. That kind of thing all came later, didn’t it? D’you know, I watch some of these people on the television now, and I wish, I wish that we had known what they seem to know. It might have been harder in some ways, I suppose, but at least we would have had something to stand up and say, this is what I am, this is who I am. But all I had was College, because I couldn’t possibly tell them that my special friend was the person I would marry, given a choice.”

Morse was silent for a time, going through to the kitchen for another beer, not bothering to bring one for Symington who had always preferred his alcohol to come in a sweeter, bubblier form and never went beyond the first ale. “You know, you’re really not making very much sense about all this, Symie. First it was money, then it’s guilt, now it’s a lack of identity. You can hardly blame me for not exactly falling for it hook, line and sinker.”

“I suppose I should have had an elegant speech prepared, liberally peppered with quotes from the Latin and Greek—particularly appropriate for the occasion, actually. But...”

He took Morse’s glass, sank a hefty draught, and gave the tumbler back half empty, another
change to make Morse wonder. “But I didn’t think you’d even let me in this far. And I rather thought, knowing what you do for a living these days... Well, I didn’t think a carefully rehearsed statement would help matters much. Foolishly, obviously, I decided to rely on the truth, if you even gave me the chance to explain myself.”

“If this is what you call explaining yourself, then you should get a job writing instructions on programming videos.”

“The reason I’m not making much sense is because the reasons themselves don’t make much sense. Good God, Morse, we neither of us was even half-grown, not really. We were both immature and head over heels in love with someone we both knew, deep inside, that we shouldn’t be doing any of this with in the first place.”

Morse stared at him in mute and sullen defiance.

“Surely you haven’t forgotten that day Mr. Rankin took us for our Greek and made us skip all those passages that dealt with the ‘Greek Vice’? Have you forgotten how dreadful we felt for days after that? It took us both a long time to recover the magic, not that we ever once even mentioned it. Just swept it under the carpet along with everything else. Such as the pointed looks the Chaplain would give me whenever he did a sermon on the ‘unnatural’ vices. Oh, you never saw any of that, of course, did you, Pagan? But I did. And I heard all the not-so-subtle hints from him every time I bumped into him.”

This rising, raw anger was different too, far from the sunniness and sweet-humour that he remembered in minute detail. It was plain, even to someone trying so hard not to fall at this man’s feet all over again, that life had been a bed of roses for Symington: full of pretty flowers covered with thorns and growing in manure.

“And tell me, tell me this, Cody. How could I possibly have come back to College when I found out that my mother’s heart attack had been caused by me? Can’t you just imagine the scene? Pinter would have been proud of it. The dear Chaplain had gone down to visit them because he said he was so concerned that I was falling into ‘the evil ways of the vile flesh’. She almost died, Morse, she was lying there blue around the lips and my father asked me, asked me flat out in front of her if the Chaplain had any cause for his ‘concern’. What would you have done, Pagan? Hmm? What would you have done?”

He didn’t even have to think about that, his own mother treated to a parade of ‘nice’ girls all the time she was alive. “I would have told them the Chaplain was off his chump.”

“Precisely. And then I had to stay on until she was definitely out of the woods, by which time I had lied myself into rather a tight corner. They were all after me, Pagan, every last one of them. Even my insane old grandmother came out of it long enough to pound away at me. I was so upset and so horribly confused... The sixties and all that freedom passed us by, didn’t it? We were cocooned in our respectable schools and in our studies of the Classics. No room for anything else, was there?”

“Would it have made any difference at all if there had been?”

“I don’t suppose it would. But I like to think I would have treated you better if I had had some idea of what life was all about. If I’d had some idea that all the old stories about it being ‘just a phase’ or ‘schoolboy crushes’ were so much tosh. If I’d only known...”

Morse had to ask. “Would it have made any difference?”

“I hope so. That’s the best I can say, Pagan. I’m so different from who I was then. I’m not scared of them finding out any more, because they already know.”

Shock, deep, blinding shock. “You told them?”

“Yes. Just like that, flat out, over the dinner table the morning we went to the country. My father-in-law read something in the paper about AIDS, went into one of his usual witless tirades, and I just...said it. I’d decided I was going to, the night before, but when he started that in the morning, I opened my mouth and said that he had better be sure of what he was saying, because I was one of them and he’d have to stand me up against the wall with all the others and shoot me too.”

He couldn’t help himself: Morse began to chuckle, low and quiet at first, louder as the
imagining of that morning sank in. “Over the kippers and the kidneys, you said it? What the hell did they do?”

“Ah,” said Symington, smiling at him and wagging his finger at him, “that would be telling, wouldn’t it?”

“Oh, go on, Symie,” Morse was falling back into the old patterns of their friendship, “tell me. It must have been—” Reality demanded attention, reminding him that this wasn’t one of Shakespeare’s little farces. “It must have been brutal.”

Brave smile covering the raw weals where the verbal blows had struck him that morning. “I suppose that’s one way of describing it. But it’s over and done with—”

“They cut you off?” Morse demanded, the pieces slotting into place and a picture finally emerging.

“I always knew they would. And not just the money, of course. I’ve been well warned as to what will happen to me if I should darken any of their thresholds again.” Even the excellent Vincent Price impersonation did nothing to hide the pain behind the humour.

“Your wife—?”

“Even as we speak, is employing the legal representation best equipped for sharpness and for shafting me.”

“So,” he said slowly, contemplating the patterns of foam on his beer as his mind untangled the implications that lay behind what had already been said. “It’s all gone. The money, the social status, the family?”

“The main house, the job—can’t possibly have a deviant pervert running the largest private children’s book company in the nation can we. At least, not if he’s actually been so disgusting as to come out and admit it—everything, really, apart from my own investments and savings and the flat in London. And even some of that is looking a trifle dubious, I believe.”

“But surely—”

“None of it was actually mine, not until my father actually died. And he is still alive and well and foaming at the mouth.”

My god, he thought fervently, this man who had been infamous for his refusal to attend services and his contempt for the trappings of what he considered a blind and foolish faith. My god! “Where are you staying?”

“I’ve booked into an hotel. It’s not far from here, it won’t take me long to walk back.”

So no request then, to stay with Morse. No using his loss as an excuse to pander Morse into bed, no attempts as out-and-out seduction. Perversely, humanly, Morse felt cheated. He had been so ready to hear shallow excuses and meet devastating seduction, and instead he had been offered honesty and a few unadorned facts, not one of them milked for effect. No demands, no emotional coercion, nothing. Native suspicion, as would be expected, rose at that point. “What do you want?” he asked, staring into Symington’s eyes, determined to catch him in a lie if lie were offered.

A shrug, then, “I’m not even sure of that. Oh, I know I want to start all over again with you. I want a chance to love you properly this time. I never stopped feeling like that about you, but I…there were so many reasons that seemed so reasonable and right at the time. Why I never came back to you is as complicated as what I want from you now.”

“Why don’t you give me the simplified, abridged version to start with?”

“As I said, I want the opportunity to love you the way we both deserve. I don’t want an affaire with you, I want something that’s going to last a lot longer than that. I want…”

Morse saw that familiar expression fill the other man’s eyes and felt his own knees go weak. He had never been able to resist that, never, never, never. Especially, he admitted, when he didn’t want to resist. And what was wrong with going to bed with Symie? They were neither one of them virgins, although his list of conquests was singularly brief for this modern era. Even if he decided not to continue, to cut Symington off tomorrow and send him packing, what was wrong with a one-night-stand? A brief encounter, temporary pleasure, that would give him some clue if what he remembered still existed, or if all this so-called love was nothing more than rose-tinted memories and lust.

And what did any of it matter, when his balls were thinking for his brain, sending frantic messages, filling him with millions of sperm that were simply desperate to leave
home. And what did any of it matter when he looked at Symie and all the loneliness that had set in his bones lifted from him? What point was there in reasoning and analysis, when standing there right in front of him was the one cure he had ever found for the dissatisfaction of mere life. One look from Symie and he was a quivering, young man again, with vitality and vivacity flowing through him instead of the heavy thrump, thrump, thrump of his blood. For another minute, he simply looked at Symington, thinking about all of this, while Symington stood there, a monument to patience.

He could say goodnight, goodbye and good riddance, and tomorrow, when Lewis came to pick him up, he could go on with his life, precisely as it had been for eons now, as if nothing at all had changed, and he could pretend that he hadn't turned down this second chance—this second risk, this second taste of happiness before he shuffled off this mortal coil. He could, he knew he could. He had his music, and his books. Good ale and a good job. Friends, of a distant sort—although, he recognised with something akin to shock, with a bare few exceptions, all of them dated from his University days, the days when he had been basking in the reflected popularity of Symington and had been glowing with his own potential. But he could still say goodnight and goodbye.

But he couldn’t say good riddance. For all the pain this man had caused him, he had also caused his greatest happiness. For all he had changed the path of his life, cutting certain avenues—and perhaps, certain self-truths?—off forever, the new path he had finally chosen had been a good one, and one he felt was ultimately more useful. And when all was said and done, he had never, not even in his own lies, stopped loving this man.

So it came down to that. Love versus caution. Risk versus the rut. The Epiphany versus his own personal Dark Ages. Ironic, doubtless, for a man nicknamed Pagan, but he had always loved it when Symie spoke like a gutter. He suddenly pictured them locked in sweaty, straining embrace, Symie’s mouth aspate like the gutter after rain, his cock so beautiful and hard, and—

But the consequences...

He stared into what little was left of his beer and thought, for a moment, about consequences, good, bad and indifferent. And thought about whether or not tonight would change his life, whether it would be a beginning, a middle or an end.

“I don’t know,” he heard himself say and felt an involuntary start jump through Symie. “I simply don’t know whether or not to believe your story—or which part of your story. I don’t know if I want to never see your face again.”

He saw those words hit home, saw eyes darken and upper lip stiffen, saw pain barricaded behind well-bred manners and the utter refusal to be bowed by a blow. “But by the same token, Symie, I also don’t know if I want to wake up looking at your face beside me in bed every morning.”

The hope rippled, spreading like shock waves from a pebble in a pool, so small a thing to cause such large repercussions.

“Then,” Symington smiled his wonderful smile and came closer and closer still to Morse, pressing both his advantage and Morse’s knee, “why don’t we agree to start all over again? Take the best of what we had, and take what we can learn from it, and simply wipe the slate clean. A fresh beginning. I can court you, Pagan, with wine and flowers—” a sudden incandescence in the smile— “and opera, and you can put me on probation and let me prove myself to you, the way you would any stranger. Or—"

The hand moved, sliding along the muscle of his inner thigh, sliding right into his heart. “Or?” he asked, embarrassingly breathless from so little stimulation.

“Or, we could go to bed right now, and you could let me make love to you. You know, actually show you how I feel about you. And the third ‘or’, Pagan my old love, is that you could take me to bed right this very instant and fuck my brains out.”

He had always loved it when Symie spoke like a gutter. He suddenly pictured them locked in sweaty, straining embrace, Symie’s mouth aspate like the gutter after rain, his cock so beautiful and hard, and—

He hauled Symie in to ravage his mouth with his own, feeding on him in voracious
carnality, devouring, consuming, punishing even, his body hard and demanding, insistent, dominant, Symie melting into fire before him, returning passion for passion and—

Love. Oh, god, there it was, filling him, overwhelming him, being thrust into him with aching tenderness, strong arms pulling him in as if to meld them into one single body with everything shared, everything partnered, all of it together. It was more than it had been before, bolstered and buttressed by adult knowledge of what life was, if this were denied. There was desperation there, the visceral fear of losing this all over again, the gnawing horror of it all going wrong again.

But the love bandaged all that, leaving a tingle of healing where it touched, shooshing fear back into the realms of the rational to sit quietly until its turn came again. Somewhere along the line, Morse’s trousers had been undone, the zip gaping open, his cock still trapped inside the whiteness of his underwear, Symington’s hand burrowing in to find him, Symington’s tongue burrowing into his mouth to know every cell of him. Symie was on top of him, pressing him down into the sofa, a tangle of arms and legs that splayed and spread to compensate for the smallness of the furniture and Morse’s hands were on Symington’s buttocks, grinding him down as he himself thrust up, Symie’s hand trapped between them. There was a sudden gathering explosion of sweetness in Morse’s belly, and then Symie thrust down onto him again and he erupted in orgasm, coming and coming, his cry muffled by Symington’s kissing.

The first thing he realised was that the shuddering heaving going on above him had nothing to do with uncontrolled lust and everything to do with uncontrolled mirth. Emasculated, he pushed at Symington, only to shove the man off the narrow sofa and be pulled off himself by an embrace that had lessened not at all. Tangled on the floor, a shoe discarded god-knew-when digging into his side, Morse was petted and kissed and adored, all of it punctuated by giggling hysteria.

“Find it amusing, do you?” he finally snapped, voice slapping some sense into Symington who subsided into controlled hiccoughing delight.

“I’m sorry, I truly am. And it’s not you I’m laughing at, Pagan, love. It’s just—have you any idea how many times I’ve imagined our reunion since I left you? It must be absolutely thousands. And not once, not once, I tell you, did I ever think we’d end up like spotty teenagers, grappling on a couch and leaving sticky patches on our underwear. You didn’t even touch me and look at me!”

“You too?” A symphony of disbelief, distrust and dismay.

“Well, what else did you expect with you going off like a rocket simply because it was me? Yes, Pagan, me too.” Something in Morse’s expression obviously betrayed him, for Symington added, “You can feel it if you like.”

All the tension flowed out of him with that one comment, all the insecurities and inadequacies vanquished by that offer, for Symie knew him well enough to know that he would, actually, check. And he did, and he found not only a very damp, very sticky patch seeping through Symie’s very expensive trousers, but he also found the humour of the situation, his eyes crinkling at the corners, his mouth lifting from its pout into a smile. “I’ve always liked to feel it,” he said. “In fact, as you didn’t even have the good manners to expose yourself in a lewd and libidinous manner, sir, I shall have to ask you to do so now.”

“And I’m always more than willing to assist the police, constable.”

“Constable! Why you—”

“Police brutality?” Symington purred, rolling onto his back and pulling Morse on top of his spread-eagled body. “Promises, promises.”

“Like that kind of thing, do you?”

Symington looked at him with the remembered honesty that could cut, condemn and condone all in a glance. “You were my lover for longer than anyone else in my life. You tell me.”

Morse gazed at him for a long time, then eased himself to his feet and reached a hand out to bring his friend with him. “The bedroom, I think,” he murmured, leading the way, one hand holding his friend, the other holding his trousers up. “You have a lot of loving to catch up on.”
“And you,” a kiss on the nape of his neck, a hand stroking the cleft of his bum, “are just the man to do it.”

Exhaustion-clogged brain, worn-out body too heavy to lift off the mattress, at first he thought the noise was his alarm clock, but insistent poundings thereupon hadn’t shut the damned racket up. Then it filtered in as slowly as the knowledge that that was daylight burning through his eyelids. Doorbell. It was his doorbell, at some ungodly hour, rung by some ungodly demon who was going to end up with his balls in a sling and—

The unspoken diatribe ended the instant he opened the door and realised simultaneously that it was Lewis come to pick him up for work and that he had answered his own door in nothing but gaping dressing gown and a frown. He wiped the latter off his face and tugged the former tightly about his body, refusing point blank to blush when he saw the kiss-and-tell love-bites that decorated him.

“I’m not quite dressed yet,” he said as if there was absolutely nothing worth commenting on. “Hang on half a tick,” opening the door wide, wandering back towards the living room, Lewis in tow and realising, with a lurching of horror, that the bedroom door was lying wide open. And that Symie was lying on the bed, wide open, the rumpled sheet covering his left foot and nothing else. Swallowing hard, he whirled round to face Lewis and was confronted by a carefully blank expression.

“Shall I go on in to the office myself, sir, and tell them you’ve come down with this stomach bug that’s going around?”

“Yes,” he stammered, “you do that, Lewis.”

“Right you are then, sir. See you in a couple of days?”

“Make it Monday. Tell them I’m really flattened by it.”

A quirk of a smile, quickly erased. “I’ll see to it, sir. Monday it is, then. Oh, I’ll, em,” a nod at where the dressing gown, having been without belt from the start, had parted like the Red Sea again, “show myself out.”

Dumbfounded, he stared at Lewis’ departing back, shocked to the core by the other man’s casual acceptance. Good god, if Lewis knew and didn’t bat an eyelid, then who the hell else knew? Or suspected, or assumed? Phrases, half-remembered questions, friendly enquiries, blunted ribbing. Never been married, at your age? Never found the right, ah, girl, eh, Morse? Just as well you’ve never married, the way you go on. But of course, you’ve never wanted a family, have you? Your sort never tie the knot—your sort of dedicated policeman, I mean, of course. And on, and on. Not to mention the other comments, not all of them nice, that he had shrugged off over the years.

So much for being in the closet, then.

And Lewis’ reaction—or lack thereof—raised new questions and subtly altered some, turned others 180 degrees. If people knew, if it was already known about by his colleagues and superiors, was it all right? Or had it been all right so far simply because he’d had about as much sex life as a petrified forest?

A sound of movement caught his attention, and he turned round in time to see Symie roll over onto his stomach, his perfect buttocks and beautiful back displayed in the forgiving glow of morning sun. As if under thrall, Morse went into the bedroom, dropping his dressing gown at the foot of the bed, climbing beside his lover amidst much wincing and aching of muscles he hadn’t used in far too long a time. Symie stirred again, one hand reaching out, and finding the space empty, eyes opened sleepily and Morse saw the moment when he himself was seen and Symie smiled at him without a single protective barrier in place. This, then, was to be one of those cases where omnia vincit amor, up to and including his own self-destructive doubts.

Of one thing he had no doubt whatsoever: he had never, ever, been loved so much before. Carefully fitting in beside Symie, he covered himself with sleep-warmed, welcoming flesh, until he was lying with Symie draped half over them, their heads sharing a pillow, faces only inches apart. There were so many questions, so many doubts, so many fears. Symie had loved him before, but left him anyway—why should this time be any different? And if it were, could he himself, bachelor content—if not precisely ecstatic—
to live alone, change his selfish habits after so many years of thinking about no-one but himself? And if miracle came true, what the hell about the real world of work and money and the reactions of neighbours and friends and colleagues? And what about— And what about the old axiom, he thought to himself, lying in the happiness of this bed, remembering the languid, halcyon days of his youth that had been ripped from him by a single abuse of love: abusus non tollit usum. Should he allow one abuse to forfeit himself all further use of this love? Or should—

Tomorrow, he thought, stopping the vicious circle dead and staring instead at the sleeping face of the one person he had loved and never stopped loving, he’d deal with all that tomorrow. There’d be time enough for the questions and the doubts and the fears. Today—carpe diem. That would be his new motto: enjoy the present day, and, to finish the rest of the quote, trust the least possible to the future. He was going to do precisely that, allow himself to enjoy this, to gambol in it like a child locked in a sweetie shop, inundating himself with sensation and with all the things he’d wanted for so long but had never been able to afford before. The probable problems...They could wait until tomorrow. Carpe diem, he repeated, hugging Symie closer and beginning to wake him with roving kisses and strolling hands, smiling to himself as he heard his own name whispered and a firming of desire pressing into his thigh, and love conquers all: they’d manage. He’d bloody-well see to it!