M. Fae Glasgow’s Adam Dalgliesh in ‘Quantum of Solace’ is mostly based on the characters in the books. Nothing has ever been written to overtly indicate that Dalgliesh might be bisexual, yet a careful reading does not eliminate the possibility. Assume bisexuality and the psychology of the man becomes fascinating. Quantum is a quiet piece in a contemporary setting.

He needed a holiday: at least, he hoped a holiday was all he needed. This past time had been a cacophonous maelstrom of murder cases sensationalised by the hunger of the press and an infuriating whirlwind of unwanted publicity. There seemed to be no peace for him: there was always someone who wanted to talk to him either about his ‘staggering success’ at solving three rather nasty crimes in a row or about his ‘hauntingly stunning’ new book of poetry. And, much to his extreme distaste, most often of all, the desire to unearth what made a ‘policeman like him’ write ‘poetry like that’. An exceedingly unwelcome question for him, especially since he had no idea what the secret might be.

Once, he would have been able to answer succinctly and eloquently, but now... Now, he pondered that question himself, and was no longer sure where to begin to find the answers. There were even times when he looked in the mirror and had no idea who this reflection was. A poet, who happened to use as his inspiration the worst in people, the degradations and despairs that led to and from murder? Or a policeman, a two-dimensional television caricature, amalgam of Dixon of Dock Green and the Sweeney? There was one thing of which he was absolutely certain: he needed a break away from all of the questions and the questioners, time alone to refuel, time alone to simply breathe and think and feel. Time, perhaps, to fill the mourning silence within and to bury the dead.

He was unutterably tired, of the job, of the fawning praise for his poetry, of reporters waiting for him outside his work and ringing him at his home. He wanted rest, and so he had put his house in order, packed his car and gone off to Norfolk. Despite his best laid plans, his attempt to escape to his aunt’s house had been an unmitigated disaster, thanks to that hack from The Sun. It seemed that not even the solitary comfort and ease of the countryside was proof against the brashness of a so-called seeker of truth—especially one trying to beat the News of the World. Still, it had been nice to simply throw everything back into his car and drive off, no plans, no list of places to see, nothing to do and plenty of cash in his pocket. No prior arrangements, and therefore, no way by which the Fleet Street hounds could run him to ground. The village he’d lunched in had been perfect for his needs, quiet and sedate, sitting placidly amidst countryside that was pretty, not spectacular, nothing here at all to stimulate
the mind or the adrenalin. Nice and quiet, and the house the old lady in the shop had given him directions for was even more secluded.

So it was in the dead end of the afternoon that he found himself driving along meandering narrow roads which still looked as if horses and carts would be more at home on them than the sleek metallic-ness of his own modern-day steed. The sky was glowering at him with that threatening mixture of black clouds and sunset arguing to see which would fall first. A trifle anxious, he put his foot down a little more, less than keen on the prospect of trying to find an old farmhouse in the dark. He switched his headlights on, a startle of animal eyes flickering at him from the bordering hedges in the gathering gloom. The road was a tangled skein, never straight for more than fifty yards, rising and falling as often as it twisted and turned, far more rural than he had expected and far farther from civilisation, the lights of his car alone in taking over the sun’s failure to challenge the rain-heavy clouds. But he should be all right, he reassured himself, for if what the old dear had said was true, even if he missed the house, he would eventually come to the village. And as he hadn’t come across a village yet, he should be seeing the house any time—now.

There was the sign by the side of the road, a neat white rectangle and red striped post, complete with a patch of gravel just big enough to park one’s car whilst one struggled with the enormity of the wooden gate. He was warm by the time he got back into his car, the sheer force of moving that damned lump of wood more than compensating for the first cut of winter. A few feet forward, then stop the car again, get back out from the car’s heat, into the air and wrestle with that great weight of wood once more. But he was too familiar with the country to ever consider leaving a gate open, tempting though that was when he’d felt the first heavy drop of rain aim, unerringly and successfully of course, down the back of his collar. By the time he was back in the car, the clouds were opening, the defeated sun was rapidly retreating, and his windscreen wipers were mixing the first gobbets of rain with the dust, forming a muddy paste on the glass. So busy getting the washers to clear that off, he was taken by surprise when he rounded what proved to be the last bend in a long driveway, so long that it was almost another minor road. The old farmhouse he’d been told about sat there, huge and grey, with only one window lit in any show of life, and he could, with a stretch of the imagination, see that it could look welcoming, given summer and sunshine and children playing outside.

For the first time, it occurred to him that he really should have rung through first. The place hardly looked ready for visitors and it was, after all, well past the summer season, and for all he knew, perhaps the old lady in the shop had simply forgotten that not everyone was like the local pub and took guests in year round. In front of him, the lone light went out, and at this discouraging sight, his heart sank. He really did not relish turning round in this weather and going back to the village or going onwards in the hope of reaching the next habitation before the rain had set in for the night. Best then to simply approach as if one were fully expecting to be fully accommodated, thus lessening the risk of rejection. With more of those cold raindrops finding the back of his neck, he pulled his luggage from the boot, and ran, as quickly as possible under the circumstances, across the gravel and onto the flagged portico. The bell, in brazen contrast with everything else he’d seen so far, was modern, one of those fancy things with speaker and light and more buttons than seemed strictly necessary for either form or function.

He turned away for only a moment, but the door was answered almost immediately, opening behind him as he looked out at the gathering night and the downpouring weather. “Yes?” said a voice at his back. “May I help you? Or d’you have a thing for standing out in the rain?”

The voice was melodic, a faint hint of Welsh in there somewhere, with softened consonants and a wry lilt of humour. “Oh,” he said, and felt stupid at his own inarticulateness, since he should have been expecting the door to be opened and someone there to speak to him.
“I hope you can. Help me, that is. I’m looking for somewhere to spend a few days…”

“I don’t take guests in during the winter,” his not-to-be host intoned, “but, as you look so woebegone, a veritable waif in the storm,” and the humour was warm instead of wry, “I shall take you in and give you shelter. For tonight, anyway, and we’ll see how we go along tomorrow. So come in then, and stop letting all the heat out.”

The man walked away inside, calling out over his shoulder, “Oh, and you’ll have to bring your own luggage in—all the staff have been laid-off for the winter.”

So much for warm hospitality and total comfort, Dalgliesh thought to himself. But at least the house was warm and dry, and as a procession of on-going lights lit his way along corridors and up stairs, he appreciated how very pleasant a place it was. Chintzy, but in the best possible way, the sort that reminded you of family homes and mothers reading favourite books to favourite sons. Picture perfect, really, like something off a stereotypical greetings card, and usually just as insincere. But not this place. There was an air of real homeliness here, of family and love and good solid roots. Almost an echo of happiness, faint as the wispy smell of polish.

“Here you are,” his host was saying, stepping into a room that was overflowing with an enormous bed. “If you hang on a minute, I’ll put fresh sheets on for you and fetch some towels and that sort of thing. It’s not one of our usual rooms,” he went on, moving around, rearranging things, tugging the curtains shut, “but they’ve all been thoroughly shut up for the winter now. Easier to put you into the family part of the house—if you don’t mind, of course?”

And Dalgliesh was struck by how very icily grey those eyes were, so pallid as to be almost colourless—or the colour of the dead. Unnerving, for their illusion of transparency, and for the sharpness of the mind revealed by them. “Yes, that’s fine, of course it is,” he said automatically, not giving it a thought.

“Good,” his host replied and moved as if to leave.

A gust of wind rat-a-tatted the rain against the panes and he moved gracefully between the writing table and the overstuffed armchair to pull the curtains, pausing for a moment with both hands stretched as in crucifixion, transfixed by the night outside. It was as wild as the North Sea out there tonight, the tree-tops tossing like waves, the rain glinting and shattering in the reflected light of his room, grass rippling like the tide. The glass of the window was cold against his face, his breath clouding the transparency but warming nothing. And that, his clear, analytical mind realised, was what was wrong with this room and his host. Everything was precisely as it should be, but there was no warmth there, none at all. Lifeless, listless, as if the place had been shut up and left empty for a generation or two, and his nameless host was just the same.

A knock on his door, and he started, pulling the curtains closed before calling, “Come!” in his best Yard voice.

“Look,” his host began in the way of someone...
who needs to speak before he thinks better of it, “I’m sorry for having been so snotty with you. It’s not your fault you’re stuck here, is it? You’re welcome to stay, and as my personal guest, not some paying tourist. We’ll both pitch in, then you won’t feel guilty and I won’t feel resentful. That all right with you?”

“Yes, of course,” he said, good manners speaking before he’d really listened to what had been said. “Of course,” he repeated, this time meaning it. “But you keep on saying I’m stuck here. It’s only for the one night…”

The laughter was startling, as bright as a summer’s day and joyous, although there was a hollowness to it. “Only for the night? Who doesn’t know this area then? Listen, boyo, we’re at the bottom of a valley here, with two rivers within spitting distance and no drainage to speak of. Rain like that out there and every dip in the road turns into a swimming pool and half the roads get covered in mud running down from the hills. Take my word for it,” he went on, hands deftly mitring and tucking the sheet into place, and if Dalgliesh noticed the faint tremble of those hands, he was too polite to remark upon it, “you’ll be stuck here for three or four days until after this rain stops, unless you want to end up chancing the road through, which is really stupid.”

“And I’ve to take your word that this rain isn’t in any hurry to stop?”

“Did you look at those clouds this afternoon, or were you too busy admiring the local beauty spots?” The niggling was back between them, sharp little teeth on words that should have been perfectly pleasant. Disgruntled, Dalgliesh realised how much of the strain in the atmosphere was coming from himself. “It’s my turn to apologise,” he said by way of answer to his host, finally crossing the room and helping straighten the modern duvet in its traditionalist cover.

“Oh it is, is it?” The grey eyes were on him again, and Dalgliesh caught a glimmer of something before uncommunicative blankness returned. “What for this time?”

“I’m tired and that always makes me out of sorts. I’ve been,” he took a breath, deciding not to confide entirely in this stranger what he was at such lengths to hide from the reporters who had come after him, “working too much recently and you know how that kind of pressure builds up.” Well, there was nothing wrong in not telling the entire truth, especially when the impetus to confess all was really a means to garner some sympathy. He rubbed at his eyes, and when he looked up again, all the sympathy he could have hoped for was facing him.

“Come downstairs with you, and we’ll find ourselves something to eat. My name’s David Thomas.”

After a moment’s pause, he took the outstretched hand and said, “Duncan. Adam Duncan.” He almost grimaced at his own cowardice and deceitfulness, but the lure of complete anonymity was too sweet to resist.

“Duncan, is it then? Duncan it shall be.” David Thomas was almost grinning at him, a wicked lick of enjoyment in his eyes and Dalgliesh was suddenly sure that this man knew exactly who he was. And more than just his name. Something in the way those remarkable eyes were regarding him, with deep and certain understanding—but then, a blink, and it was gone, replaced by the empty-house shutting that he was already too familiar with.

“Adam,” he said, as Thomas went out of the room. “No need to be formal under these circumstances, is there?”

“Adam,” drifted back to him, softly, gently, so caressingly that he began his first conscious wondering if this man might be gay. “Then you shall call me David. Here, into the kitchen with you, and we’ll just have a look-see to see what we can find.”

There was a great clattering of doors and drawers, of cabinets and dishes, with copious mutterings to sound the way. “This shall do nicely,” David finally said, digging a bowl out of the back of the fridge and sticking it into the microwave. The compulsory pings and hums followed before he sat down at the plain pine table, a strong, broad hand waving Dalgliesh to follow suit. “You’re not vegetarian or anything, are you? Because if you are, then you’re not going to enjoy our supper at all!”

“No, I’m as carnivorous as the next man,” Dalgliesh said, settling himself on a chair that
was large enough for once, and comfortable with it.

"Unless the next man is a vegan, right? There's bread, too, from this morning, so it's still lovely and fresh."

"Yes," he said, looking up, not quite sure of what to say next. It was always easy enough when he went in as a policeman, all the questions that needed to be asked, all the answers that needed to be ferreted out. It was even easy with friends and acquaintances, really—all the questions that ought to be asked, all the answers (and how's your son? He must be what, 14 by now? How are you after your operation? How's the new job? The new house? The new wife?). There was always something he could ask that would set them off like a stream in spate, but this man, this stranger, there was nothing he could find to say to him. Awkwardly, he looked around the kitchen, seeing the age under the plaster and behind the modern fixtures, seeing the passing centuries in the massive depth of window sill and lowness of ceilings.

"Before you say anything," Thomas' voice interrupted him, "you don't have to say anything at all. I hate small-talk and I'd rather say nothing at all than sit here mouthing boring crap at you."

Perversely, he found there were a lot of things he suddenly wanted to say. To begin with: "Is this," and a nod encompassed the kitchen, "sixteenth century?"

"No," Thomas said with utter sincerity and a smile lurking gleefully in the corner, "it's twentieth century. Most deep freezes are, you know."

"I didn't mean—" he finally noticed the glint of laughter and realised that he'd been had, albeit very small-ly and very gently. And, finally, he also recognised that the liveliness that was growing in the grey eyes was attraction. Sexual attraction, aimed at himself. Well, not to worry, he'd had men attracted to him before and no doubt would again. The question was whether or not he was willing to allow an attraction to grow in himself. Falling silent, he sat and watched as David Thomas wandered around the kitchen putting this together with that, putting the butter into what was obviously one of the 'good' dishes, slicing bread thick and crumbly, all the movements unhurried, Thomas making no attempt to allure him. And that, funny enough, was what made it all go 'click' inside. Attraction peeked out, considering, this youngish man with his thick hair that tickled at his collar and his broad shoulders.

The silence stretched, as comfortable as the pleasant quiet he had shared with his aunt, but with just a souçon of tingling awareness. Once, then twice, Thomas looked over his shoulder at Dalglish, his face both somber and serious, as if he, too, were considering the other man in the room. Dalglish leaned back, perilously, in his seat, his eyelids hooded as he watched Thomas watching him, and he catalogued what the other man would see: himself, no longer in the first flush of youth; tall and slender, but with an interestingly mature, not effete, face; hair receding, but still dark and strong; well-dressed with quiet expensiveness, everything chosen as much for comfort as style; and with eyes that had made people complain that they felt more like the victim on the slab awaiting autopsy than a useful witness. So he smiled, half in apology, and caught his breath at the response.

Thomas smiled at him, his whole face lighting him up, limning this rugby-ish man with pre-Raphaelite beauty. And he was beautiful. Not handsome, not attractive, but beautiful with the same kind of radiance he remembered his wife as having had.

"Ready?" Thomas was saying, and for an absurd moment, it was as if they were both going to descend into a music hall skit of double entendres and bad puns. But then the beauty reasserted itself, the slow curl of attraction billowing out from David to touch, briefly, Dalglish's skin. "Supper's ready. Stew and bread, cheese and biscuits and there's a bit of cake for afters, if you want it."

Again the temptation to indulge in double entendre, but Dalglish said instead, quite gravely, "The savoury will do for me, thank you."

For a very long minute, they simply looked one at the other, the unspoken question passing—I'm interested. Are you?—and being answered—not usually, no.
Even though he had meant it to be: no, absolutely not, not ever.

Dalgliesh looked away then, balanced on the razor’s edge of blushing, turning himself away from the implication of the invitation he had just given. The lack of definite refusal, his very turning-away and the slow ooze of colour into his cheeks all said, ‘persuade me’, not ‘hands off’. And, he confessed to himself with a wry inner smile as he methodically ate his stew and tore his bread to pieces, he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted a ‘hands off’. After all, he was here as someone else entirely, no-one knew where he was, no-one could possibly find out. It was, he discovered with a rush of adrenalin, the perfect freedom to truly be himself, and that rather bitter irony appealed to him, the poet in him quietly storing the moment and the truth away to be filtered and distilled and brought out later, transformed. The silence between them now was peopled with short glances, quick, speculative looks, the occasional fleeting smile. It was flattering, to have someone so interested in him again, but there was a niggle of personal dissatisfaction there too, as if he were being idle and parasitical to just sit here and let the other man do all the work.

“Coffee or tea?” asked the other man, for all the world as if there were no awareness of anything but polite strangers chance met. “Or something a bit more on the medicinal side?”

“Oh,” Dalgliesh rose to his full height, saw a flicker of attraction darken eyes, smiled, “definitely something medicinal, I think. To keep out the weather, as they used to say.”

“Brandy? Or I have a very good cognac, if you’d rather.”

“Cognac. But the washing-up…” he trailed off with all the delicacy of a solitary person who had never learned to like the tawdriness of household drudgery.

“The washing-up can wait until tomorrow. You’re not the only one on holiday around here. Through there, into the sitting room. I’ll only be half a tick.”

Immediately on his left was a window that was being thrashed behind the curtain by a limb of a tree and the staccato beat of the rain. In front of him, the hallway was punctuated by doors and by paintings, the two often combined into fanciful modern icons, lush scenes of beauty, sensuality twining vaguely with amorphous mythology to create images that were never clear but were still disturbingly sexual. One in particular caught his attention and he stopped for a while to stare at it, his mind cataloguing the details and realising that the whole was far more than the sum of its parts. There was nothing actually there, nothing he could actually point at and say that this, or this, was sexual, but still, the whole thing combined to give him a feeling of warmth in his groin, the pleasant reassurance of potency. Behind him, he heard a door closing and moved on, too polite to ever actually be caught poking and prying—when he wasn’t on duty, that was.

The sitting room, when finally he found it, reached out to him, embracing him in its warmth, the heat from the fire being the least of it. He was used, in his work, and now in his private life as well, as the two overlapped more and more invisibly, to gaining impressions of places instantly, on the move, or while his mind was occupied elsewhere. But this room did not allow for that, overflowing with bits and pieces in a profusion that was actually soothing to the eye. It was a rare luxury for him, in these days of overwork and underliving, to have the time, or the inclination, to browse through a room the way other people would slowly leaf through a book, turning each thing over carefully in its turn. The fireplace, with its crackling orange and red and blue blaze, naturally drew the attention first, the white frippery beautifully impractical for a working, traditional coal fireplace, although he supposed that modern smokeless coal made the cleaning easier than in the days of generations past. Feet planted firmly before the hearth, he was rather self-consciously indulging himself in that most atavistic and manorial of reactions: the seigneur rubbing his hands before the fire. So he turned his back on the fireplace, stepping forward as the heat bit at his backside, and took his first good look at the room. Once a policeman, always a policeman, he thought dispiritedly, disgusted with himself once more because he couldn’t look at any-
thing without analysing and cataloguing it as if it were an exhibit in some court. I submit those items grouped as A, m’lud, as evidence that the suspect is fond of reading. Still, for all his self-mockery and disenchantment, he went over and switched the lamp on beside the bookshelves, not quite running his finger over the spines as he read the chaos of titles, everything from lurid science fiction to serious books of science, from books of funny limericks to a complete John Donne, from books on being a good Catholic to half a shelf of books on being a good homosexual, with a liberal dusting of westerns, gay fiction and several books on holistic health and literary analysis. And half a shelf of erotic fiction, all of it unabashedly gay, judging by the uncompromising titles. An absolute cornucopia of contrasts. Which tickled his intellect and suddenly made Mr. David Thomas far more attractive than before.

“See anything you fancy?”

He actually jumped, as guilty as a schoolboy caught peeping through the keyhole. “Ah, yes,” he brazened, picking a book at random, “just something to glance through before I go to sleep.”

Thomas laughed a little, mocking him. “Well, that should send you to sleep quick enough, though it’s not something I’d’ve thought you would want to just ‘glance’ through. Anyway, here’s your cognac. Pull up a pew, why don’t you.”

Thomas was watching Dalgliesh carefully, gauging reactions, interpreting body language, and Dalgliesh found himself wondering what his body was saying while his mind was trying to work out what it was going to do. It was one thing to be intoxicated by this feeling of freedom, another to be blinded by a delusion of it. And for the moment, he wasn’t quite sure which case applied here. He switched the lamp off again, leaving the room quite gently lit by the fire, the way his host apparently preferred. There was an armchair placed opposite the one David was sprawled in, a glass of cognac on the small book table beside it. The heat from the fire spread pleasantly down his right hand side, casting shadows across his face, mirror to the dancing darkness that turned Thomas into such a mystery.

Silently, with only the small noises of the fire and the large blares of the storm to keep them company, they sat face to face, sipping the seeping heat of their cognacs, companionable over the deeper uncertainty. Thomas had a generous hand, the cognac poured deep and copious into the cut crystal glasses and Dalgliesh knew that he had been offered a way to lower his inhibitions if he wanted it. And knew, suddenly, noticing the way Thomas was consuming the spirit, that the other man needed that more than he did himself. Which was intriguing. Which was erotic. Why would a man, an openly gay man, need so much Dutch—or in this case, very fine French—spirit before he would flirt with someone who hadn’t actually said no? Perhaps, he conceded, because I haven’t actually said yes, yet. Perhaps because I’m not sure if I will say yes, or if I’ll put on my face of outraged heterosexual and protect myself the way I’ve got into the habit of doing.

Another unthought-of habit. Another in an elongating list that was dragging him deeper and deeper into a rut that was becoming far too comfortable. The fire, as he let his gaze sink into it, was soothing and hypnotic, the sinuous fingers crooked at him to draw him in deeper and let himself relax, relax, relax… His head nodded with a jolt of shock as he realised that he’d been drifting off into sleep. Guiltily, he immediately began a conversation with his host, to apologise for the rudeness of his somnambulism. “The paintings in the hall are really quite excellent,” he said. And noted, with extreme interest, the sudden flood of guilt, real guilt, flare over David Thomas’ face.

“Yes, they are, aren’t they?”

“Did you,” Dalgliesh continued, driven by the same need to poke and prod that afflicts both dentists and policemen, “do them yourself?”

“No, I can’t draw a straight line. A…friend did them. A long time ago.”

He saw it then, the underlying grief that made the eyes seem so lifeless that even the few flickers of attraction and humour couldn’t counterbalance.

“A…special friend of yours?” he enquired, delicately, the same way he was known for...
handling witnesses and victims alike. And this man, kissed by the orange glow of the fire, had become both.

“Oh, he was very special,” Thomas whispered, staring down into his drink. “He had so much talent and—” He stopped, cut himself dead and took a gulp of his drink, coughing violently after, wiping the tears from his eyes. Tears, Dalgliesh wondered, that were the result of the too-large drink, or the excuse for the too-large drink? He waited, patient as the confessional, to hear the story.

“So you’re interested in art then, are you?” the supposed-confessor said instead, throwing Dalgliesh off.

“Only in things I like.”

“Aren’t we all? I must admit, the first time I saw what Mitch had done to the hall, I nearly killed him. I hated them at first.” Another laugh, this one soft with remembering. “I couldn’t imagine bringing families with hordes of squabbling children in through that hallway to show them to the guest rooms. I threatened him with either building a new door into the paying part of the house—or getting a huge tin of white emulsion!”

“But you didn’t.”

A pointed look, a sharply penetrating comprehension. “Part of the Spanish Inquisition in a previous life, were you? Or just a policeman keeping your hand in?” And as Dalgliesh made to demur, to say something, a wave of his hand and he went on, “No, no, don’t apologise. To be honest, I’ve been looking for someone to talk to. And who better than a complete stranger who’s going to be moving on as soon as the weather eases and the roads clear? I didn’t do anything to the hall because Mitch said that the paintings were the sort that you’d have to have a dirty mind to get any idea what they were all about, because there’s nothing definite, nothing really clear in them. Dirty minded and gay, that’s what he said. And I am. Both.”

It would be nice, Dalgliesh thought, if I could stop being a policeman long enough that people wouldn’t feel they had to constantly defend themselves to me. Or if I could relax enough to stop demanding justifications for everything. “I had rather gathered that,” he said, very mildly, passing no judgements, aware that his body had tightened, that he had instinctively crossed his legs and turned slightly away from the man opposite. Not in rejection of David Thomas, oh, no, but in habitual, instinctive rejection of that part of himself that was just like Thomas. A small part, he would tell himself, often, but a far from silent part, one that clamoured loud and long for attention, for absolution. For satiation.

Thomas was smiling at him with a wryness that did nothing to hide the bitterness. “I thought you might have, going by your reaction to me. Mixed feelings, eh? Liberal ideals, reactionary gut-feelings. I had rather gathered that.”

“Had you?” And the poised and practised superciliousness of that stung him, gave him the excuse that the cognac had failed to do.

“And had you also gathered that my feelings of ambivalence might stem from latent homosexual tendencies?” My god, he thought in shock, I’m even talking as if I’m on a case! Alistair Burnett will be asking me a pertinent question next!

The newscaster was nowhere in sight, but David Thomas did an admirable fill-in job. “And I take it that you had gathered that you had latent homosexual tendencies before tonight?” he asked, the first flares of anger flashing. “Or,” he went on, with a distinctly serrated edge to his voice, “are you going to lie to the both of us and say all this comes as a big surprise to you?”

“After telling you a thing like that, you accuse me of lying? Now that hardly seems fair.”

“But you didn’t tell me any such thing, did you? You asked me if that’s what I thought it was. For all I know, you might be a policeman out to have his jollies and then arrest me for making indecent advances.”

“In the privacy—the legalising privacy, I might add—of your own home? Hardly seems likely, does it, sir?”

“So you are a policeman, then.” Very softly spoken, although the expression was hard now, only the firelight blunting the edges, but even that gave a Mephistophelian cast to him. So much for anonymity, so much for being someone else for a time. “Yes.” Bald, flat, lying
there.

A pause, as he was examined, and then the dawning of illumination. “I know you,” Thomas said, leaning forward in his seat. “How stupid can I be? You’re not Duncan, you’re that big-wig they’ve had on telly about that murder thing. And that thing before it, what was it?”

“The child.”

That brought them both up short, as unwelcome newspaper eruptions filled one mind, as unforgettable nightmare truths filled another, a long line of details trudging off like soldiers to the Trenches. Dalgliesh swallowed, hastily, from his glass, needing the delusion of inner warmth. The pain of that case had receded, become more something that had merely happened instead of something he had experienced. And that cool distance frightened him more than anything else possibly could. If he could feel nothing, actually feel in his bones instead of holding it in his mind, when it had been something as horrific as that poor child, then God help him.

“You poor soul,” came the words, as if his mind had been laid bare to read like a tattered second-hand book. “You poor, poor soul.”

He was afraid to look up. Afraid of the sympathy, and what that sympathy would do to him. Too wound up, too distanced from his own feelings to take sympathy, because he knew, god, he knew that honest sympathy from a stranger was the key, the one thing that could unlock the stout oaken door he had between his intellect and his emotions. For now, even hearing it in the voice, he could see with perfect clarity. He had utter contempt for his own stupidity in not seeing it before, for it was all so simple, really. He was turning himself into a two-dimensional caricature of a cop, because that was easier than being himself. For if he had the depth of a TV cop, then he had an excuse for not feeling the pain that was now too much to bear. Lines from his own poetry crowded into him like ghosts at an abandoned train station, telling him how he felt, telling him what he feared.

Living. He’d brittled to the stage where he feared living, feared all of it because he was overbrimming with pain already, bound tight and tighter and all of it ready to explode from him and rip the skin from him and leave him nothing more than a seeping, weeping wound.

“Oh, you poor man, I never meant this to happen. Come on now, come on,” and Thomas was there, kneeling at his feet, warm arms, human arms, feeling arms coming around him, holding him together, warm words filling in the hollow aching left by the ricocheting lines of his own misery. “It’s all right, you can cry about it. I don’t mind, it’s nice to be needed again.”

He choked a bit, swallowing the humiliating sobs, holding himself rigid, trying to straighten up in the chair and say that he was all right, really, perfectly all right, just a bit overtired and a little drunk, he was fine. But of course, his voice wouldn’t work, couldn’t overcome all the things he hadn’t said when he’d found that small, perfect child, nor three weeks later when he’d gone into the next case, the man who had been so average until his murderers had done with him. Those two, and the months before, and the prying words of people asking him, asking him how it felt and how did he cope and what was it like…

“I hate it!” he suddenly shouted, embarrassing himself but not David Thomas. “I hate all of it and I just want it to stop, sometimes. Just for a little while. Let me bury the dead first before they make me go on to the next one…”

“That’s it, bach, you tell them all. Go on, shout at them, tell them what you think of them.”

But he couldn’t. Not sitting here in someone else’s parlour, in front of someone else’s fireplace, drinking someone else’s cognac. He started to ease away, felt Thomas’ resistance, and allowed himself this small comfort. But if Thomas—

“It’s all right, I’m not going to think you’re making a pass at me or anything, so don’t you worry,” David said, casually reading his mind again. “It’s only that I know what it’s like to need someone to just hold on to for a while.” Dalgliesh said nothing, but the muscles in his arms stiffened, as if to withdraw again back to the sanctity of the stiff upper lip.

“You see,” Thomas began, his accent stronger with his own remembering, “I could do with a bit of a cuddle myself. I was telling
you about Mitch and his bloody painting. It was his hare-brained dream to buy this house in the first place. He wanted this place so badly, and it was his inheritance money, so who was I to say no? So we took this place on, and we converted part of it for a B&B to bring in enough cash to help with the bills or give us a bit of spending money, depending on how things were. He said, you see, that we could have the place full of people all summer and then in the winter, it would just be the two of us and if we were really lucky, we'd get snowed in together and then the rest of the world wouldn't even exist. The ultimate honeymoon getaway, he called it.”

Dalgliesh sat silently, listening, a small part of his mind aware that he was listening as a human being, not a note-taker out on a case, that he was actually feeling the ebb and flow of the words, imagining the never-seen Mitch and the persuading of David.

“It was perfect. We've been here—I've been here over twelve years now, eleven of them with Mitch. D'you realise we were lovers since secondary school? My family moved to Bristol the year I was doing my A-levels, and there was Mitch and there went the A-levels. Oh, I got them, but not as well as I should have. But I had Mitch, and I got a job, and we knew he had this money coming to him. There's never really been that many other people for me, you see. Not like Mitch. He always liked a bit of adventure, and he had a weakness for prostitutes. We think that might actually be where he caught it…”

He knew exactly, precisely, what David was talking about. A physical sickness washed through Dalgliesh and he felt his face ashen, sweat bead him. He'd assumed that time had split the two men up, that the translucent Mitch had simply moved on, in the way of so many men. But for it to be AIDS—

If Mitch had died from it, then chances were, surely, that David had it too. Somewhere during the monologue, the comforter had become the comforted and it was a sheer act of will that kept Dalgliesh’s arms around the other man. Procedure thundered through his mind, screaming rubber gloves and no bodily-fluid contact, don't let them bite you or spit on you, wash thoroughly afterwards, rubber gloves, never let them touch you, wear rubber gloves, don't let them too close—

And that, he thought, viciously attacking his own mindless panic, is a load of old codswallop. In sheer defiance of his own unreasoning fear, he stroked David’s hair, cradling the man in closer to him, his gentleness saying far more than empty platitudes. “I’m sorry,” was what he finally said, and it actually meant something. “It must have been hard…”

He let it trail off, offering to listen if Thomas needed to talk. Willing, even wanting to hear. After all, he knew what it was to watch someone you loved die slowly and painfully. And because of you.

“At first, when we found out, I actually blamed myself a bit, you know, the whole stupid guilt thing. If only I'd been a better lover, he wouldn't've had to go elsewhere. If only I'd been sexier, he wouldn't've wanted anyone else. If only I'd been able to be everything and everyone... Then I saw sense and stopped all of that. Oh, god, he went so fast! I mean, some people have years and years after they find out, but by the time he went to the doctor, it was already eating him alive. And he just...withered away. Turned into an old man overnight, almost. I kept him at home as much as we could, but we're so far from the hospital out here…”

“I'm sorry,” Dalgliesh whispered again, hugging him tightly, sharing the pain because this agony of loss was almost comforting in its familiarity, something he'd lived with for over half his life. He sat back again, separating them, parting them as empathy threatened him with true unity. David glared at him, dark shadows of lines etching his forehead as the fire burned lower but Thomas' temper burned higher, made all the more consuming by the pain that was still there even though Dalgliesh had withdrawn.

“That's it?” he demanded, hands on Dalgliesh's knees. “A couple of minutes as long as you can manage? Oh, don't overwhelm me with your generosity! You're sorry, but you're too busy thinking about how embarrassing all this is—”

Again, that casual ability to see right through him, to know what was going on...
inside the so-called privacy of his thoughts. It was unnerving and unsettling, for this man whom no-one was allowed to truly know, this having a stranger plummet to the core of him.

“So you’re going to sit there like something off the nine o’clock news with your plummy posh accent and your perfect country-casual clothes and your books of poetry. Tell me, Inspector Dalgliesh, how the hell you—” and the last word was emphatically underlined with a sneer, “ever managed to write those poems? Or is that another Adam Dalgliesh, no relation to anyone here tonight?”

That, oh, that was far too close to home, touching not on a nerve but his own raw, pustulating fear. Another line of a poem came to his mind, and in the fraction of a second that is all fear requires, he wondered if the words were his or merely remembered from some far off book-reading. And worse, if there were any difference at all any more. But for all his words, his gift was in putting them on paper, or using them as the police must. For this, human contact and human exchange and personal honesty, there was nothing he knew how to say, and nothing he could say.

To a man who had lost his lover, what words could make it any less dreadful? And failing that, what could he, a man who kept his distance, whose own grief was so deeply entrenched that it still ruled his life, possibly say to him?

Honesty, perhaps. A taste of his own misery to leaven the darkness of another’s. And freedom, perhaps. Real freedom.

“Sometimes, when I see young men walking past me,” he said mildly into the fury of silence, “I wonder if that’s the kind of man my son would have grown up to be. My wife…” and strange, how the words had become pat over the years and over the repeated tellings to himself in the quiet of the night, some feminine friend lying beside him needing to be kept where she couldn’t pull him in too deep. “My wife died in childbirth, a long time ago.”

“And that’s your excuse for keeping everyone at arms’ length? For being such a cold fish?” Amazement mingled with contempt, stinging him.

The question flayed him. That doubt was not for speaking, nor for seeing, nor for hearing, not unless he were alone with nothing but himself and the protective, forgiving darkness where he could rationalise to his heart’s content—or until he had his excuses well-aired as to why he was going to keep this lady friend simply friendly, nothing more than pleasant companionship and frequent romps between the sheets. And another ready-made excuse for denying his own bisexuality. How could he, after all, betray his beloved, departed wife by breaking the vow he had made to her the day she agreed to marry him?

And what, a voice asked him, about the times after we were married?

It shocked him to the bone that it took him so long to recognise the voice. It was hers, as bright and pert and elegant as the day they met. And as ill-remembered as her face… Undying devotion? Undying cop-out, more likely. It interested him how his memory, usually so perfect at almost total recall, should fail and falter like a wonky television set, sending him nothing but squiggly pictures and snow, when every blessed detail of his job was sitting right there, ready for the viewing. Yet another symptom, he thought, of encroaching officialdom settling onto him like a suit of armour.

“But you’re not a cold fish, are you?” Thomas was talking to him, insisting that he pay attention to what he was actually experiencing now, that he should put the analysis on the back burner and deal with the present. David’s hands were no longer gripping his knees in bruising anger but stroking, caressing, deliberately trying to arouse. Deliberately, Dalgliesh could tell, to prove Thomas’ point. “You’re just a coward, that’s all. Hurt once, and too scared to chance it again. Or too lazy. Or too selfish. Which one is it with you?”

“All of them.” Cold, stand-offish, but at least honest. “And a few more besides.” He took the warmth of David’s hands in the coolness of his own, clasping them together in double prayer. “So if you’re trying to get me going to make a point here, then don’t bother. I already know me very well,” and a bitter freedom indeed to finally admit it before a witness. “And I’m well aware what I do. But before you get on your high horse,” leaning
forward to stare all the more effectively and chillingly into David’s eyes, “remember that perhaps I need to cut myself off just so that I can do my job without losing all trace of humanity.”

Unblinking, unflinching. “And if you believe that, then you’re a liar and a fool.”

He had to let go then, to let go of this perspicacity that he neither wanted nor needed. All he needed was a rest, a break from all this soul-searching, from the job, from feeling, from guilt about not feeling enough. A break from people and all their demands and weaknesses that needed his strength to shore them up.

“What are you really so afraid of?” David was asking him, ethereal demand, slithering into his soul.

And he listened, and he thought about it, while he stared into grey eyes that flickered and danced with the fire. Most surprisingly of all, he answered, not David but finally, ultimately, himself. “Me. I’m afraid of what I actually am.”

“You’re just a man, Adam, no different from anyone else, not really.”

He drank the words in, only then knowing how much he needed to hear them. “Even when I can’t feel anything when I see a child that’s been murdered?”

“Not feel anything? You? You know something, Adam, I think your problem is that you feel too much and then you try to pretend you’re hard as nails and sooo cold. But I don’t think you are.”

“Trauma fatigue,” he said, quoting a memorandum he had scoffed at when it had crossed his desk. Such weaknesses were not for him. Oh, no, not him. Let the lesser men suffer from job burn-out and trauma fatigue and all the other ailments of smaller men. He was made of sterner stuff. Well, perhaps his father had been, and definitely his father had demanded that he be like that, but life is usually a far cry from what we so foolishly imagine it to be.

“Is that what the trick cyclists are calling it these days? As good a name as any, I suppose. But we weren’t talking about your career—at least I wasn’t. And when it comes to your personal life, I think you’ve just been too scared to get involved again. I mean, what would you do if you gave someone yourself—and they didn’t want you? That’d be too much to take, wouldn’t it. Adam? So instead you cling on to the memory of your True Love and that the best way to keep everyone else at a distance.”

“Voice of experience?” he asked, pleased to hear no judgement in his voice, just a small cutting edge.

“Oh, yes, absolutely. You see,” and David’s eyes locked with Dalgliesh’s, begging with the innocent pride of a child, “sometimes I think that’s what I did with Mitch. I always told myself that I loved him to distraction, that’s why I never bothered with anyone else. And I knew he loved me—when he went wandering it was only a sex thing, and that’s nothing. Or it used to be nothing, before. It’s different, now, of course.”

He had to ask. David was begging him to ask. “Are you positive?”

A wan smile, gathering courage, becoming brave and defiant. “What do you think? We’ve no idea how long he had it before he was even diagnosed with it, so god knows how many times we—” he adopted the lofty distaste of a Mary Whitehouse, “‘shared bodily fluids’ before he actually fell ill. I got myself tested right off, of course.” Introspection, turning his smile pallid once more. “Not that I told Mitch the truth, though. He couldn’t have borne knowing that he’d killed me.” Suddenly bright eyes glinted at him, filled with more desperate pain than Dalgliesh had ever felt himself. “Terrible, isn’t it, that you can kill someone just because you love them. But I didn’t tell him. Neither one of us ever tried to hurt the other, not really. Not like this.”

He was going to say something, going to reach out, offer comfort, do—something. But David was visibly pulling himself together, retreating to the same safe bastion of stiff upper lip that Dalgliesh had hidden behind. “But as my mother was fond of saying, mustn’t grumble.”

Dalgliesh had to smile, to honour the courage. But he wondered what it must take to survive and actually live, knowing that your own body was a time bomb, ticking your life away every time your heart beat. David
was on his feet all of a sudden, bustling around adding coal to the fire, beginning a witty monologue on the trials and tribulations of being a Welsh city boy dwelling amidst the weird and wonderful denizens of the English countryside. And not quite strangely, it was this ruddy-faced courage, this cheerful refusal to go on living, to not waste the rest of his time in regrets that could never be reversed—it was this that reminded Dalgliesh that he'd found this man attractive. That he'd considered coming here in anonymity to be a burst of welcome freedom. That he’d thought that this might be the perfect opportunity to satisfy a need in himself usually left ignored.

But there was the not-so-small question of AIDS. Not even for the intoxication of freedom was he willing to risk his life. Of course, there were ways round it, or so the advertising and the carefully non-explicit reports all said.

“What do you do regarding sex?” he heard himself blurt out with embarrassing bluntness.

David laughed, really laughed, until he had to wipe fresh tears away. “You’re the last person I thought would actually come right out and bare-faced ask that!” The fire—the one in the hearth, although there was an abruptly growing heat between the two men also—expertly stoked, David sprawled in his seat again, and this time it wasn’t the way the fire lit his face that Dalgliesh noticed, nor the sound of the storm throwing a temper tantrum outside. It was the way the light emphasised the bulking curve in the gusset of David’s jeans, and the way his own heart was beginning to beat faster. Which was foolish. After all, he hadn’t done more than toy with the idea of sleeping with this man, so he certainly wasn’t going to indulge in casual sex with a stranger he knew was HIV+. But then David smiled at him, only accidentally seductive, and he found himself wondering.

“I’ve become very fond of my own right hand,” David was saying. “There hasn’t been anyone at all since Mitch was too ill to do anything. And after he’d died, god, the last thing I could do was face having sex with someone who wasn’t him. But then,” and again the pallid smile that merely showed how uncowed he was most of the time, “you’d know all about being too hurt and too afraid to get involved with someone else, wouldn’t you?”

“But if you met someone you actually wanted to have sex with?” he asked doggedly, wanting to know. Needing to know, for this man’s lonely empathy struck deep within him, and the man’s blatantly masculine good looks were drawing him in.

“Then we’d do one of the things that’s safe, of course.” He went on, telling Dalgliesh the things that most people were too politely discreet to mention. “Fellatio, for him, with a condom on, but not all the way to coming.” he ticked off a finger in the bored manner of one delivering a lecture, sparing Dalgliesh’s blushes, “frottage, mutual masturbation, anal penetration with gloved and spermicided fingers or penis but not to ejaculation. And lots of imagination.”

Dalgliesh could imagine all of that, very well indeed. As for David being so obviously sensitive to Dalgliesh’s sensibilities, well, that was enough to prick his pride. “What about,” he said, deliberately and uncommonly crude, “if he were HIV- and fucked you?”

That made David choke on what would have been an innocuous sip of cognac. He took a good look at Dalgliesh, as if something once thought supremely familiar had turned into a mutant in the blink of an eye. “Still too risky, they say. In case the condom broke and there was some blood or…something inside me that managed to get into you somehow or other. It’s not very likely, I know, but would you want to take the risk?”

And Dalgliesh wondered how long it would take David to realise exactly how he had phrased his answer. Ten seconds, fifteen, and then the penny dropped and the chin lifted in defiance of any embarrassment he might be expected to feel.

“Well,” David said, “you did ask, and I assume your interest wasn’t purely scientific?”

“I thought it was,” Dalgliesh answered, playing for time until he could decide whether or not his interest was, indeed, less than pasteur pure.

“With the way you’ve been looking at me since I opened that door? Or the way you’ve been blowing hot and cold at me all night?”
They were staring at each other again, in this quiet womb of a room that was keeping everything but the sound of the storm outside. “It’s almost unreal, sitting here,” Dalgliesh said, because it was the truth, and one thing he had decided was that truth was no threat here, not tonight. There was nothing that could be revealed to him that he didn’t already know about himself, whether or not he’d yet admitted it. “It’s like something out of a play, isn’t it? Two people sitting in front of a fire in a comfortable room, dreadful storm battering outside, while the two men debate the meaning of emotion in their lives and—what is it they’re saying these days?—get to know their inner selves.”

“But we both already know ourselves, and in a funny kind of way, we probably know each other too. And there’s no audience sitting watching us, and no-one’s written our lines out for us and no-one’s decided how this play’s going to end, have they? It’s just you and me, the world doesn’t even exist any more.”

The ultimate honeymoon getaway, so the late Mitch had said, and the ultimate in temptation, or so Dalgliesh said. Looking around this pleasant room, looking back at David Thomas, Dalgliesh could understand why Mitch had wanted this house so desperately. This was still a home, even though one of the lovers had died. Still a home, and still filled with love, some of it flowing from David, some of it lingering on in all the memories that filled all the corners and dusted all the mementos, like the oriental bowl on the mantelpiece, and the photographs, and the primitive clay figurines. He glanced at David Thomas, and that man was watching him with a steady, patient, gaze.

“I’m very like Mitch, aren’t I?” he asked, fairly sure of the answer.

“Not in looks, no. But for the rest of it... I could probably tell you what you like for breakfast.”

Again, the sexual lick to the words, the open, casual acceptance of sexuality between them. But for Dalgliesh, there was nothing either open or casual about it. Too long spent mourning his wife and infant who had died together trying to give birth to his dream of a child, and too many years in between using that as his lion tamer’s whip to keep the world from coming too close. But now this man was offering him sex as if it were nothing more than a coffee after dinner. Perhaps it was, perhaps—

An instant of intuition broke the circular cycle of his thoughts. Thomas had gone through what he had, which was losing everyone you truly loved in one fell swoop, but for him, it had happened, what?, less than a year ago? Surely not longer than eighteen months, for David said that he’d been in this house twelve years, eleven of them with Mitch. So even allowing for the vagaries of human memory and possible incompetence with all subjects mathematical, then the loss must still be new, and fissuring deeper into him. So what had it cost him to make such an offer to a man who didn’t have the courage to make a decision one way or another?

“It’s not exactly easy for me, this, you know,” David said, startling Dalgliesh. “But I can’t keep on living in this house as if it’s my own mausoleum.” A short laugh that really tried hard at being humour-filled. “Anyway, Mitch would kill me if I did that. He honestly wanted me to go on and keep on living, but— You know what it’s like, don’t you? And then, after a while, you start wondering if it’s really because of them that you aren’t going out with other people, or if it’s because of something in yourself. Or something that’s not in yourself, like love these days. Or even sex. Do you realise,” his stare left him wide open, utterly without defences, and peeled Dalgliesh’s skin back as if he were at his own post-mortem and left his heart bare, “that you’re the first person I’ve fancied in the slightest bit since Mitch got really ill? I was too miserable before, then it was too difficult to go out there and start all over again. And now I’ve got so used to being on my own and not having to think about anyone but me, I don’t even know if I really did love him as much as I think I did.”

“Or if that’s just a convenient excuse for not getting involved and not having to let people get close to you.”

“The way you do?”

Dalgliesh leaned forward, sinking into the
honesty of David’s eyes. “The way I did,” he said, very, very softly, voice barely carrying above the sound of the storm’s wildness and the low cracking of the coal on the fire. “Or I should say, the way I hope it will be the way I did.”

“Turning over a new leaf, Adam?”

So much vulnerability in that gaze, so much need, and such a depth of giving waiting to be taken, proffered to him on silver eyes that knew him so well. “Trying to. Perhaps. In here,” and he hesitated, not quite sure how to say this, wishing he could wait until the words had settled themselves down into the proper pattern, “it’s different, isn’t it? We’ve created a false environment—”

“But that’s the best place to find the truth in ourselves, isn’t it? Does it really matter if it’s three o’clock in the morning truth, or pickled as a newt, or meeting some stranger on a train? That’s when we do our best honesty, isn’t it, Adam, all those places where it’s safe to tell the truth because then you can just walk away and it’s as if the truth never existed.”

There was something in his words, something in the whispering portent that made Dalgliesh shiver. And David saw, and David reached out, and it was David finally, and of course, who touched first. Breathless fin- gertips danced across Dalgliesh’s face, the lightest of touches, so as, perhaps, not to scare him off. “It’s been a long time since you were with a man, isn’t it?” David whispered as his fingers found the sensitivity of an earlobe, then moved on to feel the nervous swallowing under the fine skin and faint beginnings of stubble. “Don’t worry about it. I’d rather be passive anyway. Too paranoid about passing it on to someone, you see.”

And that fell into the entwining mood like a mallet, shattering it. Dalgliesh began to pull away, rejecting, erecting barriers, metaphorically making the sign of the cross and hanging out the garlic. Until he saw the resignation in those grey eyes, the pain-filled expectation that this would happen, the beginnings of depression. Before his very eyes, he could see David diminish, could see the self-hate and the self-guilt begin once more. And he hated himself for it. After all, he’d read all the reports, heard all the news on the radio, knew perfectly well that safe sex didn’t mean no sex. Use your imagination, that was the slogan, wasn’t it? That, and use a condom.

“Do you have any french letters?” the old-fashioned phrase from his youth slipped out, as he went back to the only times he had ever felt he had to bother with such things, modern birth control and health ignorance being what it is.

A grin for that, bright tinged with melancholy still, but David was obviously not someone to wallow in self-pity unless he thought he had good cause. “French letters? Sorry, all mine are made in Britain,” he quipped, leaning back and contorting himself so that he could reach behind the cushion on his chair. Which was when Dalgliesh finally found out what had taken his host so long to put two glasses and a bottle on a tray.

“You want us to do it down here?” Dalgliesh asked, rather horrified.

“When the choice is getting you all the way upstairs and into bed, when you’ll want to have a wash first, and brush you’re teeth and all your other polite, middle-class niceties, you’re bloody right I want us to do it here. How long,” he knelt forward, his hands now squirrelling under Dalgliesh’s pullover, “would it take you to get cold feet? Or come to your senses, I suppose you’d say, eh? How many reasons could you come up with that would keep you as far away from me as you could get? Or let you go back into your nice, safe little deep-freeze where no-one ever gets to really touch you or know you?”

He opened his mouth to answer, and was kissed instead, the inexorable thrill of a man’s mouth on his, so strong and demanding, as large as his own, pressing at him, tongue sliding in to fill his mouth with desire. His groin tightened, heat pooling there as David’s hand found the buttons on his shirt and parted them, exposing his chest to the prickle of Shetland wool and the tickle of fingertips around his nipples, dallying there, flirting. He heard a sound in his mouth, recognised it dimly as a sound he sometimes made, but not recently in his annals of restrained good passion, but far away, a long time ago when sex meant the lowering of barriers, the invit-
ing in of someone into his own inner sanctum of private being.

David’s hair was very soft and very long in his hands, far unrulier than he would ever dream of permitting his own hair to be, and it made him think of the troubled beauty of Michaelangelo’s David, all that beauty and masculinity made fragile and accessible by the misted melancholy of the eyes and the tiny droop of the lips: someone who had lost a love, or was watching it slowly wither away. Fanciful, for a policeman to think such a thing. But he was, he knew with a slow spiralling joy, more than that. He was a man, and a poet, and he still had a life inside him, piled deep under the mountain of stresses his world had become.

Quietly delighted, he kissed back, his own tongue taking possession of David’s mouth, not understanding at first why the other man pulled back, just a little. But of course. Dry kissing was safe, anything else had an increasing level of risk. So be it. If his fear of himself could no longer stop him from being involved with another human being, then he’d be damned if he let a mere virus stop him. There were, after all, other parts to be kissed, other parts that could extrude no fluids but which could absorb enormous pleasure. Hurriedly, he tugged and pulled until the thick aran sweater had been removed and the thin white t-shirt underneath pushed up underarm, and then, in a blur of white skin and peaking pink nipple, he plunged, devouring flesh into his mouth, sucking and licking and nipping, his mouth roving across the firm rise of muscle to the thicket of hair pressed flat by t-shirt. David got rid of the shirt before Dalgliesh could get his hands on it, so he filled his grasp instead with smooth white skin, and laved at David, sharing in the shuddering pleasure he was giving.

Another movement, and they were separate once more, each one rather shyly taking the rest of his clothes off. Then they were looking one at the other, the final moment where they could either one of them pull back, go back to being separate and untouched and therefore safe in their respective cosy cocoons of splendid isolation.

It was, not to Dalgliesh’s surprise, David who was the first, again, to make the move, leaning forward so as to get rid of the tangle of wool and cotton that covered Dalgliesh. Torso bare, the firelight glinted on the fine dusting of hair and gilded his nipples as if with gold. David bent lower, and Dalgliesh looked down, every microsecond stretched ineluctably until there, at that precise instant, he saw when David’s tongue touched his nipple, saw it the instant before the pleasure hit him, saw it for the instant before his eyes closed, red glow of firelight brightening him inside where pleasure was beginning to flicker and flare. Sharp teeth, white teeth, which he saw in his mind, knowing how it would look, nipped at him, catching at his flesh, at his chest hair, lower and lower, tongue and lips tangling in the arrow of hair that led to his groin, wetness swirling through the hair, changing the pattern, tinglingly. He expected the mouth to go lower, to descend upon him, but there were fingers there instead, stroking at him, soothing his own pre-ejaculate over the tautness of skin. And of course, his mind supplied, a thread of sanity through the mindlessness of almost forgotten pleasure, bodily fluids, he can’t risk it...

He knew, obviously, not being an innocent, merely out of practice, what would happen next. And he surprised himself with how fiercely he needed to see it, of how erotic the once-distasteful idea now seemed. He was kneeling on the half-circle of hearth-rug, the pile plush beneath his shins and on the tops of his feet, his knees spread wide and David between them, right knee brushing the vulnerability of his scrotum with tender pressure, just exactly the right amount, exquisite sensation, whilst a strong sure hand held him, the other one bringing a foil package to his mouth for him to bite. He held it between his teeth, watching David all the while, unblinking, as David slowly tore the package open. The gaping foil was held in shaking fingers while the coiled latex was brought out by flicking tongue. The eroticism of it plundered Dalgliesh’s groin, making him so hard he ached. Soothing coolness smoothed on to him, Dalgliesh’s deftness making it appear that it was not his hands, but his caressing mouth that covered him with the condom.
Dalgliesh gasped for air, hips automatically thrusting, hands raging over David with the need to touch. His fingers knew soft skin and hard nipple, softness of belly and hardness of hip, softness of curling hair and hardness of prick. The sensation was overwhelming, this maleness in his hand, this maleness filling his vision. He wanted this man as he had wanted no-one before, wanted him all the more perhaps, because he was a trusted stranger who knew his truths. He wanted to suck him inside, or to cool the flush of his heat in the depths of this man's mouth, but there were hands there to refuse him, to remind him, to gentle him into something else, something that whispered words kissing his ear promised him would be just as wonderful. David shoved a chair out of the way then pulled him downwards, until they were lying on the floor, plastered together length for length, and he was rubbing his body against David's, every muscle taut and alive, every nerve singing pleasure at his brain, his mouth and hands and nostrils filled with the taste and feel and smell of man, of this man who was holding him so tightly, warmth overflowing from him to bathe Dalgliesh until he couldn't tell what was heat from the fire and what was heat from David.

He was firmly, adamantly pushed flat, and he lay very still, afloat with the burgeoning needs of his body, feasting his eyes on the vision of David standing at his feet, naked save for the caress of the fire, slowly stroking a condom on, addicting the eye to the sight of that priapism flaunting itself with such rampant pride. The other man was huge, longer and thicker than Dalgliesh, but he had enough confidence in himself to do nothing more than enjoy the sight—with a passing wonder that the very constraints they had placed upon them actually added to his own pleasure. There could be no contest to see who would be the top man, not under the circumstances, and then Dalgliesh felt the hand on him, felt himself manipulated, then the cool wetness of spermicide slicked onto latex, onto his balls, and suddenly he was caught between gripping thighs, a tunnel as tight as any body he had ever plundered, tighter than his own fist could be. David laughed, a shout of such sheer exultation and joy that Dalgliesh knew a stab of jealousy, but then that was gone, buried under the avalanche of pleasure as David moved, hips undulating, the familiar dance of intimacy. Aroused beyond endurance, Dalgliesh drowned in the rhythm, plunging between David's thighs, wetness slapping as David's balls clung to Dalgliesh's belly, reluctant to let him go, David's prick hard and thrilling against Dalgliesh's belly with every downward plunge, sharp and needing every time he dragged himself away, only to plummet downward again, unable to bear being still.

Sweat dripped from him to plash on peaked David's hands. Trusting a stranger, and with more than he usually gave to so-called lovers and friends.

David lowered himself until he was kneeling between Dalgliesh's wide-spread legs, his hands coming to rest on either side of Dalgliesh's head, his mouth lowering until there was a storm of little kisses covering Dalgliesh's face, then neck, sucking on his earlobes, flickering at his pulse. And as his face was bedecked with caresses, his body was canopied by flesh, David's weight coming down to rest on him, hot and heavy and intensely satisfying. His arms went round the other man, holding him tight, flexing his own muscles, his whole body attuned. His prick was pressed against an echoing hardness, and he groaned, arching up, rolling them over until it was he who covered David, and he who covered David with kissings and strokings. He arched his back again, pressing their groins harder together, and he felt the first sweet flooding of his balls, felt them move, felt himself harder, tighter, closer to coming.

And then David moved under him, lifting his legs. Dalgliesh opened his eyes in startlement, but David only smiled at him, whispering to him again, promising him every delight the world had ever known, distracting him thoroughly, and then Dalgliesh felt the hand on him, felt himself manipulated, then the cool wetness of spermicide slicked onto latex, onto his balls, and suddenly he was caught between gripping thighs, a tunnel as tight as any body he had ever plundered, tighter than his own fist could be. David laughed, a shout of such sheer exultation and joy that Dalgliesh knew a stab of jealousy, but then that was gone, buried under the avalanche of pleasure as David moved, hips undulating, the familiar dance of intimacy. Aroused beyond endurance, Dalgliesh drowned in the rhythm, plunging between David's thighs, wetness slapping as David's balls clung to Dalgliesh's belly, reluctant to let him go, David's prick hard and thrilling against Dalgliesh's belly with every downward plunge, sharp and needing every time he dragged himself away, only to plummet downward again, unable to bear being still.

Sweat dripped from him to plash on peaked
nipples, to land on parted lips, to dew long eyelashes, and sound rose from David to fill the silences in Dalgliesh with his pleasure. An undulation of sound, mirroring the movement of Dalgliesh’s hips, of his prick clutched tight between thighs of liquid strength, and then Dalgliesh spilled over the edge, coming and coming, body straining for that last second of perfect pleasure before he collapsed, sated, on the withering hunger of David’s body, sliding half off him in his boneless satisfaction. But then a mouth fastened on his, sucking him in, devouring him, mewling sounds of agonised pleasure damming his mouth and so, filled with an overwhelming tenderness for his fellow man lost in the atavistic drive for release, he used his hand to fist David’s prick, squeezing and pulling the way he liked himself, feeling the onrush of orgasm almost as if it were a refrain of his own. David arched up, back like a longbow, heels digging in to the short pile of the carpet, eyes blind and mouth wide-gaping. Fascinated, Dalgliesh watched as the clear latex became milky, stilling his hand to barely hold, gentle as he himself preferred. But David’s hand came down on his, forcing him to grab tightly, to milk him hard, David’s own hand going lower to knead his balls, forcing every last drop of ejaculate and every last atom of pleasure out.

Silence, then, the storm having screeched off somewhere else while they had been enraptured in each other. Dalgliesh lay there waiting for his own heart to stop pounding, half-deafened by the heart trumping beneath his ear. There was a droplet of sweat an inch from his mouth and his tongue tasted it, not knowing if it were his own or David’s and that moment was, for him, somehow even more intimate than the sharing of sex. Sex was a drive basic to all people, he felt, but there were other things more difficult to share: toothbrushes; sweat. Oneself.

Discreetly, David disposed of the messy reality of sex and settled down with him again, a huge and ancient sofa blanket keeping the draughts from them now they were aware enough to notice.

Idly stroking the longish hair, Dalgliesh sank into thought, examining what he had done tonight and what the repercussions would be. What was that David had said? Because you can just walk away and it’s as if the truth never existed. That was something he could do: something he wanted to do. But he had already done more than that tonight: he had at last been honest outside of the confines of his own head. And he had actually allowed someone else to get close to him, to see him, warts and all. He had actually done that tonight, reclaiming some of his own humanity, proving to himself that he was still more than just a policeman who put his feelings in his pockets along with his political beliefs when he went out on a case. My god, yours is a filthy trade, a woman had once said to him, and he had left it to another policeman to answer, for all he could have done was agree with her, for no-one knew better than he just how filthy a job it was. Nor how necessary, he thought, staring at the glowing coals that supported the fire, thinking about how much crime was like that: festering grievances and greeds, and no-one knew anything about it until it burst into flame and became a crime. Like the nasty messes he’d been treading in lately, sorting out the horrors that should have been weeded out before the innocent had started dying.

David stirred, reminding him of another kind of dying, and not just from a virus. From withering within, from hiding from himself in protection and doing nothing more than coddling himself until he didn’t dare allow anything at all to register. Funny, he had never really counted himself a coward before, but he was, clinging on to a memory of a woman whose face had faded now more than the face of the first arrest he’d ever made.

And what did that tell him about himself? David, for better or worse, saved him from answering, turning to him with soft kisses, wrapping his warmth around Dalgliesh who lay there, accepting it, allowing himself to be cradled and cossetted and caressed, until it grew again to passion, rising between them in the last embering light of the fire. Bed then, and David had known more than Dalgliesh had. The separation to go upstairs, the sketchy wash before bed, the brushing of teeth and using of the lavatory, all of it conspired
together to form a plot of reality intruding between them. No more storm howling outside like Heathcliffe, no more primæval fire, no more time out of the flow of time.

He was himself again. Adam Dalgliesh, policeman, and sometimes poet. And a man who was more comfortable embracing close a memory of a love long dead than clinging on in open need to a living, breathing person.

A living, breathing person, he lay thinking in the feathered warmth of David and Mitch’s oversized bed, a sleeping man nestled into his side, a man who might not be alive for much longer. Oh, he might have ten years, or twelve, for the scientists didn’t seem to be able to make up their collective minds on the subject, but it would come. Possibly quickly, possibly slowly, a wasting away of mind or body, or blessedly, both, to make the end quicker and the suffering less. But it would come.

And he couldn’t bear to see it.

No, he thought, with cutting clarity, he didn’t want to bear to see it. He wasn’t in love with this man; in fact, tonight, listening in the wee hours to David talking about his lover, he doubted he was capable, had ever been capable, of loving someone enough to go through that with them. He had done it with his wife, of course, but that hadn’t taken weeks to go through. And he had had no idea of what he was going to be facing when he had gone to the hospital, nor when she had first told him, face shining, that he was going to be a daddy. That was how she had said it, like a child herself, or in the voice of the child she bore inside her. You’re going to be a daddy. He had been delighted, of course, but there had been that faint, tiny little part of him, that guilty secret best forgotten, that had been relieved that he wasn’t going to have to change his entire life after all, now that there wasn’t going to be a child. And an even guiltier secret that told of how readily he embraced the role of devastated widower who could never get over the love and loss of his darling wife, the perfect excuse for never becoming involved without raising so much as a flicker of suspicion about himself.

But now he knew, about himself, and David knew that he honestly had loved Mitch enough to find living less than appealing. One had uncovered his own cowardice, the other his own courage in getting through each and every day.

Dalgliesh would still rather choose his brand of cowardice than David’s brand of spirit: easier, pleasanter, cleaner by far. It left him free to pursue the intellect and the spirit, to remove from society those who harmed it, free to know the clear exhilaration of mind when finally a puzzle was solved and a crime dissected and laid out bare.

Very quietly, he slid out of the bed, moving with his customary silence that years in the Force had taught him, gathering clothing and looking around. David was curled up now in the patch of heat he had left behind when he had got up, only a few wayward wisps of hair peeking over the quilt to show anything of the man himself. There was a tug of regret in Dalgliesh as he stood there, watching, but the tug of his own life was stronger still. He slipped into the bathroom, dressing in yesterday’s clothes with stoic indifference, easing into what would have been his bedroom, given other circumstances, other needs, stealing out suitcases that had not been opened. Almost silent, it took him only a few moments to be downstairs, opening the door and outside in the overcast dampness of the aftermath of the night before. The trees were still dripping in the greyness of the false dawn, the flowers, hidden by darkness the previous evening, lay ravaged in their beds, an analogy which he refused to permit to infiltrate him with guilt. They had both consented last night, both gone in to it knowingly and with their eyes wide open. But still, as he turned the key in the ignition, suppressing a wince as the racket juggernauted through the morning, the feeling was there, refusing to go away. Ravaged was so often another word for betrayed, or abused, or used and then abandoned.

But that wasn’t, quite, what he had done. No, not quite. Tyres squawking on gravel, he started down the driveway, tossing a mental coin as he came out on to the road to decide which direction to take. Right won, and so he turned, driving along the road away from the village he had been in the day before, away
from the house and the man he had spent the night with and onwards, and although he knew himself better than he had before, there were a host of new questions arisen to take the place of the old comfortable ignorances and so he was less sure now of where he was going than he had ever been.