Birdsong

by athena_crikey

Summary

The sum is greater than its parts, and somehow supple lines and curt angles join to create beauty. More than that, to create perfection.

Notes

I just couldn't stay away...
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I have seen them, gentle, tame and meek,
That now are wild, and do not remember
That sometime they put themselves in danger
To take bread at my hand, and now they range,
Busily seeking with a continual change

“They Flee from Me” – Sir Thomas Wyatt

“…Following a long lead-up, Algeria has voted for independence from France; further details are yet to come. And now to the national news. A bill tabled by Labour this morning in the House aiming to supplement songbirds rights as a first step towards legal equality was soundly quashed by both parties; sources in Westminster say the bill’s advancement had been precipitate and lent the support of only a handful of MPs. Speculation is brewing that—”

“Bloody Labour. Might as well start handing out voting cards to doorknobs.” Detective Sergeant Lott lets out a puff of smoke, tapping the end of his cigarette on the Jag’s window. “Anything to reel themselves in a handful of fresh meat. Don’t think of the rest of the man in the street, do they? Nor less the plain facts: what would civil rights mean to a pack of whores – they’ll end up selling themselves one way or another. It’s in their nature.”

“Don’t recall you voting last election,” replies Thursday in an easy-going tone, navigating around a student on a bicycle with a tug at the wheel. The Jag responds smoothly, engine purring at their sedate pace. It’s before noon on a July day, and the lethargy of summer has descended upon Oxford. Most of the town is on the river, or holidaying farther afield. Traffic is mostly absent, pedestrians few and far between.

“’S different. It’s my birthright; no need to exercise it.”

They pull up in front of Lonsdale College, the two stone pillars of the entryway towering over the tall gate. A wicket gate set in the larger wooden gates has been pulled inwards to reveal the flagstones of an inner quad and a long wall with stained-glass windows set in it; the college has a square, masculine look to it, all uncompromising corners and angles. The chapel tower looms large to the left, its spires stretching skywards.

Thursday parks the car down the street and the two detectives walk back together, squinting against the sun that floods down from above. Even in his summer suit the temperature is too warm, the surrounding stone storing and radiating heat like an oven. Lott is sweating; he rubs irritably at his face and flicks his cigarette into the dry gutter. His face has an ugly clawed look, made no better by his pulling at it.

They step through the wicket gate and produce their warrant cards for the waiting porter. “You’re here about poor Dr Fleming, then,” he says. “On the Fellow’s Quad, he was.” He steps out of his booth and leads them across the yellowing stones and under an open carved gateway that casts a brief but welcome shadow over them. Then it’s out into a second larger quadrangle, this one with lush grass in the centre. They skirt its edge and come to a door leading to a stairway.

“Third floor,” says the porter; Lott leads the way followed by Thursday. There’s the usual musty
smell of old stone; the steps have smooth indentations worn in the centres. Their footsteps echo down
the well of the staircase.

They come out on the third floor and find a PC standing stiffly outside a closed door, his tunic well-
pressed and his shoes shiny. Trembley, a new recruit. He steps out of their way smartly, thick boots
scuffing against the stone floor. “In there, sir,” he says, nodding at the door.

Thursday throws open the door expecting a sun-drenched room and the sweltering heat of
midsummer. Instead he steps into darkness, poorly illuminated by a banker’s lamp sitting on the
corner of the desk. By its sickly glow he can make out the outline of a body slumped in an armchair
by a tall set of windows, heavy velvet drapes drawn against the sun. Beside the chair stands an
unfamiliar man, short and thick-set, with a notebook in hand.

“Pathologist, are you?” Thursday asks with a glance at the box sitting on the floor beside the body,
striding into the room. “What’s happened to Kelly?”

“Broke his leg falling off a ladder, I’m afraid. I’m his locum; Max DeBryn.” The pathologist holds
out a gloved hand to shake. Thursday obliges; “DI Thursday.” He glances at the windows as he
steps away. The drapes hang flush against the walls, letting in only a thin line of light about their
borders.

“Not much light, is there?”

“There’s a smashed floor lamp on the other side of the chairs; he must have had it on when the attack
occurred.” The pathologist points with his pencil.

“Attack?” asks Lott, prowling into the room behind them.

“His throat’s been cut. Nearly ear to ear.”

“Bloody,” comments Thursday, glancing down. The don’s white shirt is covered in a dark stain,
chocolate-covered in the poor light.

“‘But all unknown his glory or his guilt, These only told that somewhere blood was spilt,’” recites
the pathologist. Thursday casts a quick look at him: they hardly need a poet-physician. The job is one
of facts, not art. Kelly, the usual pathologist, is a short bulldog of a man with a biting temper, but he
gets the job done on the dot without any unnecessary frills. It’s unusual for an educated man in
Oxford, and Thursday has in the past been thankful for it.

“Photographers been?” asks Lott, equally uninterested in poetry, his voice raised to address
Trembley outside in the hallway. The lad pokes his head around the door and nods. The sergeant
walks to the windows and pushes the drapes aside.

In an instant the room shifts from a dark characterless box to a pleasant office. The room is a large
square one with a faded red Indian rug laid over the stone floors, art-deco play posters mounted on
the walls, a wide oak desk on one side of the room and two upholstered armchairs on the other with
a small table between them. One wall has been taken up entirely with bookshelves, crammed full of
cloth and leather-bound works. Lining two of the corner room’s walls are tall lead-lined windows,
their glass weepy with age. They’re open, letting in a cool breeze. Thursday glances out and sees the
street below, and beyond it a shorter set of buildings; no line of sight to the deceased. Not that would
have mattered much with the drapes closed.

The body slumped in the arm chair is that of a middle-aged man with a good head of thick brown
hair, wire-rimmed glasses in the Trotsky style and a pleasant face. All this is overshadowed,
however, by the gory mess of his neck flapping loose above the collar of his shirt. His tie and shirt are saturated with blood; some has flecked off onto his trousers and the upholstered chair. “Made a mess of the killer’s sleeve, I expect,” says Thursday, raising his eyebrows enquiringly at the pathologist.

“I should think so. Probably not an excessive stain, but some trace of splatter would be hard to avoid.” DeBryn looks down at the corpse. “As for Dr Fleming, he’s been dead about two hours by the liver temperature – cause appears to be massive exsanguination. I’ll know more after the autopsy.” He tucks his book away in his jacket pocket and picks up his traps. “Good day.”

Thursday tips his hat. Lott stands aside to let him past, then comes over to stare down at the corpse. “What a bloody mess.”

“Call in Trembley; we’d best have the facts.”

Lott gets the PC in while Thursday has a shufti at Fleming’s desk. It’s quite clean; the summer vac. is upon them, so the man can scarcely have had any undergrads to chase after. There’s a green-edged blotter on the centre of the desk with an inkwell and quill-tipped pen beside it, a few neat folders stacked on one side of the desk, and a few books on the other. Thursday shifts through them looking for a diary, but there’s no sign of one.

“Well?” barks Lott, on the other side of the room. Thursday looks up to see Trembley standing near attention, face pale with nervousness. His first murder, Thursday deduces, looking at him. At the way his eyes twitch to the corpse, and then down to the floor. “Pipe up already,” orders Lott. “Who was the bleeder, and who found the body?”

“Dr Guy Fleming,” begins Trembley weakly, under Lott’s critical scowl. “He’d been a professor here at Lonsdale for about fifteen years. Unmarried, no children. He lives in North Oxford. He was found by Joan Lovelace; she’s the Dean of Wollstonecraft College. She said she had a meeting with him about his course for next term; he teaches a third-year Greats course there on...” the lad digs into his pocket, produces his notebook and begins to thumb hurriedly through it. His finger catches on a page and he drops it. Lott makes a sound of disgust. Trembley hurriedly scoops up his book and finds his page. “Attic tragedy,” he reads, brows furrowed.

“And what’s that when it’s at home?” asks Lott sarcastically.

Trembley looks up uncertainly. Christ, thinks Thursday, they just keep getting younger. It had been easier in London; all the lads there grew up in the gutters, and they knew what was what with their manor. Here in Oxford, the county lads brought in to police the city proper flounder as soon as they’re dropped (arse first, usually) into the University.

“Look it up and put it in your report,” says Thursday kindly. “Where’s this Mrs Lovelace?”

“Across the hall, sir. Waiting in an empty office.”

“Alright. Lock up after us and see to it that no one enters until the coroner’s men arrive.”

“Yes, sir.”

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Joan Lovelace turns out to be a small tartar of a woman, her lips pressed thin and her wiry grey hair pulled back in a tight no-nonsense bun. Her skin has a tight, smooth quality to it, and a sheen like holly leaves. She’s sitting in a straight-backed wooden chair overlooking the quad, her back to the
door. She turns around sharply when it opens, her expression blank.

“Mrs Lovelace,” begins Thursday, stepping into the office. It’s smaller than Fleming’s, and mostly undecorated.

“Dr Lovelace,” corrects the dean, lips tightening.

Thursday lifts his trilby. “Pardon me. I’m Detective Inspector Fred Thursday; this is my sergeant DS Lott. I understand you discovered Dr Fleming’s body.”

“That’s right. We were supposed to meet at eleven. I turned up promptly as always, but he didn’t answer his door so I stepped in to wait for him. That’s when I discovered him.” The corners of her mouth tighten and she glances away.

“And you didn’t touch anything?”

“I can assure you I did not,” she says tartly, flushing. The raised colour gives her face a mottled, bruised look.

“What was your meeting about?” asks Thursday, stepping closer. Behind him he hears Lott taking out his notebook.

“Next year’s courses. Funding has been tight and Dr Fleming has been kind enough to take a class for us for a reduced wage for the past three years.”

“Popular, was he?” asks Lott. Lovelace turns her eyes to him, expression flat and disinterested.

“Moderately. He was rather conservative for the modern academic setting, but he wasn’t a bore about it. He got on well with the students, and with his colleagues overall I should say.” She pauses.

“But?” suggests Thursday.

“Some of his opinions put him at odds with our more liberal colleagues. You might speak to Dr Poole, another of her dons. I’m afraid I can’t help you much with the Lonsdale side of things; you could try speaking to his junior. Of course, you might find more help at home…”

Thursday raises his eyebrows. “I understood he wasn’t married.”

For the first time, a hint of a smile crosses Dr Lovelace’s face. “He’s not.”

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With the most pressing work at the scene of crime completed, Thursday leaves Lott behind to conduct the rest of the initial interviews and assemble a wider list for questioning.

With Fleming’s address in hand he returns to the Jag for the short drive up to North Oxford.

The dead don lives in a posh neighbourhood, with cars parked in the street and blooming gardens set in front of stately houses. Fleming’s own is a square red brick affair with white windowpanes shining cheerily in the sun. It looks out over a tiny front garden surrounded by a well-tended privet hedge, a short gravel drive on the right hand side.

Thursday parks in the street and gets out, taking a deep breath as he closes the door behind him, fingers lingering on the handle. Breaking bad news hasn’t gotten any easier down the years, for all he’s learned its ways and patterns.
He walks up to the door, gravel crunching underfoot, and knocks. His imagination idly forms an image of Fleming’s female companion: middle-aged, pretty, subdued. A tweed suit, perhaps, with pearls – something understated but fashionable.

The door opens inwards, revealing the lithe figure standing behind it.

Red-gold hair twisted in untamed curls frames a pale, sharp-featured face. Freckles are dusted over milky skin, tracing down over a delicate neck and under a white collar. Blue eyes – the brightest blue he’s ever seen – stare out at him in quiet curiosity.

Taken in disparate pieces, the man standing in front of him is regular, ordinary. But the sum is greater than its parts, and somehow supple lines and curt angles join to create beauty. More than that, to create perfection.

The words disappear out of Thursday’s mind as he stares at the songbird standing in the doorway. It’s the closest he’s ever come to splendour, and it’s blinding.

“Can I help you?” asks the songbird politely. Thursday takes himself strongly in hand.

“My name is Detective Inspector Fred Thursday. I’m here about Dr Fleming,” he says.

This is not going to be the interview he had anticipated.

Chapter End Notes

DeBryn quotes Lord Byron's "Lara."
“My name is Detective Inspector Fred Thursday. I’m here about Dr Fleming.”

At the words, the songbird stiffens; it turns his beauty from that of something living to a stony elegance, glamour cast in marble.

Thursday’s dealt with songbirds twice before, once on a murder and once on a suicide. They’re bright, brittle things, and the lives they lead make them prone to striking out – sometimes at others, sometimes at themselves. But both had been female, loveliness and seduction and desire wrapped up in one neat package. The suicide had been hauntingly beautiful even in death – the unearthliness of her nature transcending the grave, making men long for the forbidden. His colleagues had hated her for that, for the thoughtless way in which she stripped away control.

Thursday pitied her it.

“May I come in?” he asks, and the spell of stillness breaks. The songbird steps back, silently motioning him in. Thursday follows him through into the front room, where a record is playing quietly and a cloth-covered book has been set face down on the arm of a sofa. It’s a pleasant room, with quiet beige wallpaper and light drapes; the gold damask furniture creates an air of richness.

The songbird switches off the turntable and swivels to stand with his back to it, one hand catching the opposite elbow. His shirt collar is open, revealing the smooth hollow of his throat. His voice, when it comes, is husky but well-spoken.

“What about Guy?”

“He’s your keeper?” asks Thursday. There are few other explanations, but he needs to make sure. Needs to know where he stands.

“Yes. What about him?”

Thursday takes the plunge. “I’m afraid he was found dead in his office this morning.”

He sees the songbird take a long, slow breath. Sees his chest rise and falls with it, his shoulders tighten, his pulse flutter in his throat. His face remains unchanged, blue eyes piercing Thursday’s. “Heart attack?” he asks, stiffly.

“No. His throat was cut.”

For a moment the songbird freezes; then all at once he snaps, entire body suddenly shivering. Grief stamps itself across his face and he reaches out spasmodically for the sofa arm. Thursday steps forwards but he controls himself, straightening with his lip caught between his teeth and his eyes narrowed. “What happened?”

“We’re investigating. I know it’s not a good time, but if I could ask some questions…?”

The songbird waves him towards the armchair on the opposite side of the room while he himself slides down into the corner of the sofa, propped up against the damask arm, his hand raised to tangle in his hair. He combs it reflexively several times before catching his hands together in his lap and
looking up. “What do you need to know?” he asks, voice rough.

“What do you need to know?” Thursday starts off simple; no need to spook him.

“Morse. I’ve been with Guy for eight years.”

The songbird looks to be in his mid-twenties, which would mean he’s belonged to the don for the entirety of his adult life. Thursday wonders whether he considers himself lucky; songbirds change hands as the fortunes of their keepers wax and wane, status symbol that they are. An eight year post for a younger one at the height of his attraction is not necessarily the normal way of things.

On the other hand, if he were ill-treated it would be a lengthy and grim prospect. His grief appears genuine, but not overwhelming.

“Did Dr Fleming always work out of college in the summer?”

“Off and on. He went in this morning because he had a meeting; I’m not sure who with. It was something to do with Wollstonecraft College.”

“The dean, Dr Lovelace,” says Thursday; Morse looks unsurprised. “She said Dr Fleming taught for them?”

“Yes. He took Greats students on a reduced wage; the college has been suffering financially. Fewer bursaries and scholarships are funded for the women’s colleges, and their alumni earn lower wages than their male colleagues, reducing their donations in comparison.”

“And Dr Fleming objected to that?”

“He felt a student was a student, defined by the quality of their scholarship rather than their sex. Academe was his passion; he made no qualifications as to his students so long as they were able.”

The songbird smiles sadly, eyes faltering. On some level, at least, he clearly cared for his dead keeper.

“Did he have any enemies?” asks Thursday.

“There were colleagues with whom he disagreed, both in Oxford and elsewhere. And there have been disgruntled students who believed they deserved a better result than they received. But nothing to kill over, surely.”

“Had he been himself recently?”

The songbird considers for a moment, drawing an absent thumb over his lips. Thursday follows the line with his eyes, heart speeding. He finds his feet tapping on the floor, his body suddenly restless in the over-stuffed chair. He tries to concentrate on the songbird’s words, but his eyes keep returning to his lips. “He’s been distracted lately. He gets that way sometimes at the end of term; at loose ends with the undergrads gone and his post-graduate students often on holiday. But it’s lasted longer than usual this year.”

“Any idea why?” The words nearly catch in his throat; he coughs to clear it, teeth clinching.

Morse shrugs lithely. The sunlight filtering in through the front windows plays in his hair, picking out golden threads in the red. Thursday has a sudden longing to run his hands through that hair, to push Morse’s face upwards and –

He digs his nails into the palm of his hand, smothering the thought before it can fully breathe life.
He’s a DI conducting an interview, for Christ’s sake, not a PC interviewing his first whore. Morse isn’t his property; never will be. And even if he were – Win. At the thought of his wife, some of the restlessness bleeds away from him. He falls back into his chair and sits watchfully.

“He didn’t talk about work. His subject, yes, but not his colleagues or his students. He thought it discourteous. He’s – he was – very proper,” adds Morse.

And yet he kept a songbird, thinks Thursday, watching the dead man’s possession as he re-settles himself neatly on the sofa.

So far, Thursday feels left with a confused picture of the murdered man. Conservative, yet open to women’s education. Proper, yet sleeping nightly with a beautiful young man rather than a wife. But then it stacks up neatly with the rest of the population: the man in the street is nine-tenths contradictions, and most of them he’s blind to.

“Did he keep a study here?”

The songbird looks up. “Yes.” He rises with smooth grace, long fingers tracing soundlessly over the sofa’s wide arm. “You’d like to see it?”

“Please.”

Morse leads him into the hall and to the other side of the house. Here on the northern side there’s no sun lying in bright patches on the floor, and the songbird switches on the light as he steps into a small room with a desk and chair, and two large bookcases on either side. The desk is positioned below a long window that looks out over a slanted grass garden with a thick row of bright pink and yellow daylilies at the bottom, their stalks waving cheerily in the light breeze.

The desk is piled deep with neatly-stacked papers and books, tucked so tightly around a typewriter that they climb its metal sides. Thursday moves over to the desk, leaning around the leather-backed chair, and looks through the stacks. Most seem to be drafts of academic papers and theses, with a pile for more mundane college business.

“Did he keep a diary?” asks Thursday, shifting the papers around in search of it.

The songbird speaks from behind him. “Yes; in his office at Lonsdale. He brought it home occasionally, but I haven’t seen it of late.”

Thursday looks up to find him standing in the doorway, watching with shuttered eyes as the police detective searches his keeper’s – his lover’s – study. His earlier grief has been bridled, no trace of shock or sorrow in the long lines of his body, but his eyes remain dark. “Can you describe it? I’ll have a search made of the college – and have a constable look over the house, if that’s alright.”

In fact, the songbird has no say in granting permission; no right to own property or to deny admission to serving law officers. From the flat look he gives Thursday, the inspector is sure he knows it. But he waves a gracious hand, “You’re welcome to search. It’s a small black book.”

“Thank you. I’ll arrange for an officer to come out. My sergeant will accompany him.” And hell, what Lott will make of this he can only guess. It would have been far from diplomatic to send his rough-shod second in command out to deal with the case had the professor been alive to take offense, but the songbird is alone and his personal feelings don’t come into it. “There’s one more thing,” Thursday adds.

“Yes?”
“We’ll need you to formally identify the body.”

The songbird shakes his head slowly. “Is there anyone else who could do it? I… would prefer not to.” His gaze drops, thumb rubbing against the edge of his trouser pocket as if seeking reassurance.

Thursday frowns. He’s used to sentimentality in devastated widows; rarely in young men. “Who is Dr Fleming’s next of kin?”

“I don’t think there is one. His father died before he was born, and his mother was killed in a train accident when he was seventeen. He had no siblings, and if there were any other close relatives I’ve never heard of them.”

“His will,” begin Thursday. The songbird looks up, mouth tight and blue eyes hard.

“There isn’t one. Guy once said he’d see me taken care of, but that he didn’t see the imminent necessity of it.”

Foolish, thinks Thursday. But as the songbird has astutely hinted at, it’s more than foolish. Without a will, it will take time to determine who inherits his property. Including Morse.

“What will you do?” asks Thursday, with a sharpness he didn’t intend.

Morse shrugs, and there’s a stiffness there that Thursday hasn’t seen in him until now; it’s the first jarring movement he’s seen in the songbird and it sweeps away some of the air of thoughtless grace that surrounds him. Hints at the emotion that lies waiting beneath the surface, tense as piano-wire. “What choice do I have? A lawyer will have to be hired to determine to whom the property will go to, but my suspicion is the Crown. An auction will have to be arranged.” He sounds singularly unexcited by the possibility.

“For the time being, I’ll have to ask you to cooperate with the investigation. You’ll have to stay here, and remain available.”

Morse gives a sharp, bitter quirk of his mouth. “I have nowhere else to go.”

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Thursday brings the Jag around to take Morse to the morgue. Fleming had no car of his own, preferring to cycle, and the idea of forcing a songbird to cycle to Cowley hospital to identify his dead keeper is ludicrous, not to say cruel.

He watches out of the corner of his eye as Morse folds himself smoothly into the car, running his fingers over the edge of the red leather seats as his appreciative eyes dart across the interior – flickering over the wheel, the dash, out the windscreen to take in the long bonnet.

Thursday’s never been in a position to impress a songbird before. Before he can get used to it he turns, switching the engine on and slipping the brake off. They glide off into the empty street.

Morse spends the trip staring out the window, watching Oxford roll by. Thursday doesn’t mind; it gives him time to try to focus on the type of sandwich in his pocket, instead of the way Morse’s red-gold hair curls delicately about the nape of his neck. So long as he keeps reminding himself of Win, imagines her ironing his shirts in the den in front of the telly, he can keep himself focused. Keep himself sane.

It’s a short drive to Cowley, thank god, and they’re there before he runs out of concentration. He
parks the car in a side lot and the two of them walk in together, Morse trailing behind slightly.

Down in the mortuary it’s cool despite the blazing sunshine outside; it’s the first time he’s been cool today. He pushes in through the double doors, and he’s so focused on not being distracted by Morse that he forgets entirely to tell him to stay behind.

Instead, the two of them walk in on the pathologist standing above a full stretcher; thankfully the corpse on it is sheeted.

DeBryn looks up, frowning at Thursday and then staring at the sight of the man behind him.

“This is Mr Morse. He’s here to identify Dr Fleming,” says Thursday. “Is that him?”

The pathologist inclines his head. “Just finished. Mr Morse?”

Thursday turns to watch the songbird step closer; he moves with trepidation, form tense and apprehensive, and Thursday finds that with him so distracted, he feels nothing. No attraction, no animal magnetism urging him into madness. Just a cold kind of pity, nesting low in his gut.

DeBryn pulls the sheet back on the body, revealing the grey face and the open, flapping neck, a wide red wound in the pale flesh.

Morse stares silently for a moment. Then he faints.

Chapter End Notes

I had to go back and tweak the first line of the last chapter, owing to the fact that I forgot what year this was taking place... 1962 is the answer!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s the backwards tilt of Morse’s head that tips him off, the way it lifts bonelessly as he begins to slip to the ground. Then, even as the songbird’s knees are giving out, Thursday steps forward and catches him about the chest, lowering him to the cold tiled floor. For a being so ethereal, he has a surprising weight to him. Thursday sets him down, cradling his head in his hands. His hair is soft as goose down, feathering over Thursday’s calloused fingers.

Thursday’s world collapses into a single narrow focus: quite suddenly there is nothing beyond Morse, no sound or colour that is not the songbird. He lies spotlighted before Thursday, while the mortuary, Fleming’s body, and the pathologist all fade into a bland mist.

Unconscious, Morse has a pristine, untouched look to him. His shirt collar has fallen open to reveal the smooth dip of his collarbone, and the pattern of freckles that disappears under the white cotton as if in invitation to be pursued. His narrow hips are accented by the perfect cut of his grey flannel trousers, his legs lying open as if in invitation to intimacy.

This close, Thursday can smell the songbird’s clean scent: honey, sandalwood, and a hint of musk. It makes his stomach curl in anticipation, his tongue aching to taste that smooth skin. He slips his arm beneath Morse’s shoulders and pulls him closer, eyes on the tantalising sheen of his lips, and –

A sharp, shocking scent shatters his concentration; the ammonia-tang of it lingers thickly in the back of his throat, setting him into a series of heaving gasps. Morse falls from his arms to lie on the white tiled floor while he reels backwards, returning to his senses so abruptly it’s dizzying.

Dr DeBryn is kneeling beside him, an unstoppered glass phial in his hand. He corks it when Thursday catches his eye, his air entirely practical.

“Smelling salts?” demands Thursday, roughly.

“Fainting isn’t an unknown hazard in the mortuary, inspector. Best to be prepared.”

“Why not use them on him, then?” asks Thursday, glancing down at the unconscious Morse sprawled on the tiles. Now that his head is unclouded, he recognises the smell of carbolic soap and Jeyes’ fluid rather than the songbird’s scent, sees the white walls and the tiled floor and the warm light filtering in through the high windows past the brown bottles of ammonia.

“I thought he might benefit from the rest. He’s had a bad shock; no need for a brutal awakening. If you’ll help me, we can carry him into the office; there’s a sofa there.”

The taste of ammonia still in his mouth, Thursday bends to slip his arms around the songbird’s thin chest; he and DeBryn together lift him and carry him across the intervening distance into a small office filled with metal filing cabinets, wooden glass-fronted cabinets mounted on the bare cinderblock walls. The sofa stands beneath the cabinets, an uncomfortable-looking square design with rough upholstery that appears to have been shredded by a cat. The stuffing pokes out here and there from longer rents, giving it a ragtag look.

They lay Morse down, Thursday resting his head carefully against the sofa arm, and then retreat to the chairs on the other side of the office. The inspector sinks into the worn wooden seat with a sigh, removing his hat and running his hand over his hair. He can only imagine there will be more grey in
“Charming and alarming at the same time, isn’t he?” remarks DeBryn, peering at the songbird through thick glasses.

“He’s going to be a damn nuisance,” predicts Thursday glumly, without heat. Once word gets back to the nick that a songbird’s involved in the investigation, the men will have a field day. They’ll skiv off work to try to get a glimpse of him, and there will be betting pools running throughout the station by midday.

DeBryn turns his gaze back on Thursday, propping his chin up on his hands. “Will he be involved in the investigation?”

“As little as possible. Songbirds don’t deal well with difficult situations, in my experience.” Without prompting, his mind’s eye conjures up an image of the dead songbird he investigated in London, her sightless green eyes staring up at him as if in supplication. Just as beautiful dead as alive, just as desirable. No rest for the wicked, even in the grave. Such had been the common opinion.

DeBryn raises his eyebrows. “They’re more resilient than that; they have to be. Like anyone they have a limit, but I would place it no nearer than that of the average human. The fact of their utter dependence on one person has been posited as an unnatural stressor.”

“Unnatural?”

“In many species, including man, monogamy is a societal construct, inspector. To tie a songbird – whose very life depends on the affection he receives – to one single keeper is to say the least dangerously limiting.”

“For him, perhaps. But for society?”

“I don’t claim we would handle wider access to songbirds any more wisely than we have other desirable commodities, but restricting usage of alcohol and drugs, for instance, has yet to prove itself an effective control mechanism.”

The thought of a songbird as an addictive substance is one that hadn’t occurred to him before. Glancing over at Morse, lying gracefully across the scarred cushions, Thursday thinks it may not be so far off. “That’s not a copper’s perspective.”

DeBryn sighs. “No. I suppose not.”

“How long can he go without a new keeper?” asks Thursday, eyes still on the songbird.

“Five days would be a stretch. A week would render him dangerously ill. Surely an auction can be held before then?”

“Fleming didn’t leave a will. It’ll take a lawyer to sort it out. And by then…” Thursday trails off, tracing the soft line of Morse’s eyelashes, sweeping downwards over his pale cheeks. Desire wars with pity, frustration with curiosity. Charming and alarming, the doctor had said, but in truth the songbird is closer to dangerous – dangerous to Thursday’s reputation, his morals, his marriage. And whether he feels desire or pity, any tendency to show the songbird regard puts him at greater risk. He should toss Morse to Lott, make him someone else’s business, someone else’s problem, and damn the consequences to the songbird.

Somehow, though, that’s not an option he’s willing to consider. The songbird has piqued his interest, and until it’s sated he knows he won’t be able to leave well enough alone.
“Are you a married man, inspector?” asks the doctor, breaking into Thursday’s thoughts in a voice Thursday can’t interpret. He turns sharply, face blackening.

“What? Yes. Yes. I damn well didn’t mean –”

“You couldn’t be blamed for thinking it.”

“I could for suggesting it. He’ll be sent to auction, and that’s an end to the matter.” He nearly stands to leave, but there’s still the songbird to see to.

Making a further two minutes of small talk with the pathologist feels like bathing wounds in vinegar, but he sits and does it until finally, mercifully, Morse sighs and shifts.

Thursday and DeBryn fall into silence and turn to watch as Morse opens his eyes, blinking in puzzlement up at the water-stained roof above. Then he raises a hand to run through his hair, combing his long fingers through the silken strands in a lonely, lost gesture. “Where is this?”

“You’re in the pathologist’s office,” answers Thursday. “Do you remember coming here?”

“Yes. Yes.” He swallows thickly. “Guy…” his eyes slip closed, shoulders tensing. “He really is dead,” he says, stiffly.

“I’m afraid so.”

“I’d like to go home now,” he says, after a minute. He sits up slowly, fingers pressed lightly against his brow, then swings his feet off the sofa.

“Is he alright to go?” Thursday asks of DeBryn.

The pathologist nods. “Have Inspector Thursday stay with you for the next twenty minutes or so, and don’t strain yourself.”

“Come along then,” says Thursday, rising. He’s not foolish enough to try to help the songbird; losing his head once was enough. DeBryn hurries out to re-sheet Fleming and then they make their way slowly through the mortuary, Morse’s eyes firmly on his feet, Thursday walking two steps behind him. Then it’s down the hall, up the staircase, and out into the summer sunshine.

***

Thursday keeps his eyes firmly on the road as they drive through Cowley and back towards Oxford. The songbird sits quietly, gazing out the window. Once in Oxford, instead of proceeding through town Thursday turns off onto a smaller side street. Morse stiffens, looking around; from the corner of Thursday’s eye all he sees is the flash of movement.

“Where are we going?”

“You could use a pick-me-up. So could I, if it comes to it.” He pulls up beside the kerb and turns off the engine. “Go on ahead; I need to make a call.” He waits for Morse to get out before radioing back to the nick. “This is Thursday; message for DS Lott. He’s to search Fleming’s house, looking for a small black diary.”

“Roger that.”

He hangs up and gets out to find Morse waiting beside the car, standing in the shade on the
He leads the way to the Penny Farthing, a local pub with outdoor tables that overlook the river. “Have a seat,” he tells the songbird, nodding at the collection of wooden picnic tables. He ventures inside into the warm musty interior of the pub, thick with the smell of beer and fried food, and orders a couple of pints.

Stepping outside again into the sun temporarily blinds him; as his vision returns he looks across the washed-out scene and spots Morse immediately even from the back; the straight line of his spine and the fiery halo of his hair set him apart. As does the way the other pub-goers are staring.

Thursday makes his way across the intervening distance quickly; he rounds the table and sets down the pints. Even as he does so Morse looks from them up to him, brow wrinkling. “I’m sorry – I don’t drink –”

“Very commendable. Now get that down you.”

Morse looks askance at the pint, but slowly picks it up and takes a sip. He gives the drink a considering look, takes a deeper draught, then puts it down. He traces his fingers down the side, drawing dark lines in the condensation.

“Why did you bring me here?” he asks, eyes on the ale.

“Thought you could use some time to recover,” says Thursday easily. “Besides which, it’s lunch time.” He produces the usual sandwich from his pocket; Morse raises his eyebrows as he unwraps it with a smile. “Monday: cheese and pickle. When it comes to reliability, the fixed motion of the heavens has nothing on my Win.” He opens the sandwich to show its contents to Morse, who blinks at them. He takes a bite, swallows, then continues. “I’ve sent DS Lott over to your house – he’ll have a look-see for that missing diary.”

Morse shrugs. “I doubt he’ll find it. If it wasn’t in the study, Guy most likely took it with him. Do you suppose the murderer took it?”

“Possibly, but it’s too early to jump to conclusions. There’s any number of other explanations. Was Dr Fleming careless with his belongings?” It’s only after he says it that it occurs to him that that category includes Morse, in no uncertain terms. The songbird doesn’t appear to take offense, however, instead narrowing his eyes in consideration.

“Not particularly. He was very conscientious with his books, and he always returned what he borrowed on time – and expected the same of others. He could be untidy, but we have – had – a char who kept the house tidy and the housekeeper at college did the same there.” He folds his hands together and rests them on the table, head canted to one side thoughtfully as he stares back at Thursday.

With the sun streaming down on them and the green grass shot through with golden buttercups, and the whisper in the background of the river running in its bed, the scene should have been impossibly idyllic – the kind of pastoral bliss that encourages men to folly. But Thursday feels only warm and comfortable; the driving urge to claim Morse as his, to reach out and take what’s in front of him, has subsided. It was at its height when the songbird lay unconscious on the floor; now with him calm and capable, the pull is negligible.

“You can control it, can’t you?” he says slowly, putting down his sandwich. Morse’s face tightens, eyes narrowing. “The blind lust you cause. It’s not so blind as all that, is it?”
Morse holds his gaze for a moment before answering. “You make it sound like a switch to be flipped. It isn’t that. But if I concentrate… yes, I can dull the attraction. You shocked me this morning with the news about Guy – and then in the mortuary I was far too distracted to mind it. Guy let me control it – some keepers won’t. It’s expected that we look our best, always. He was happy for me to share that with him alone.” Morse’s eyes fall, and with them the mask of indifference and interest. For a minute Thursday sees grief and loss play across Morse’s features – and, after they have passed, fear. “Christ, what will become of me?” he asks, his low voice catching in his throat. Then he straightens, forcibly suppressing his emotions. “I’m sorry. I know the answer to that as well as you do.”

“You need another keeper.”

“Need, yes,” agrees the songbird, in a bitter tone.

“And want?”

Morse’s eyes flash upwards, sea-blue and steely. “What choice do I have? There’s no other life open to me.”

Which, really, is an end of it. Morse is entirely right: he was born to this life, and he’s chained to it until his death. To imply otherwise is not only untrue, it’s cruel.

Appetite gone, Thursday bundles up the remaining half of his sandwich and shoves it back in his pocket. He drains his stein, drops it onto the table with a thump, and stands. “Let’s get you home.”

***

They arrive at the house only to find a patrol car already parked in the street, and a few neighbours on the pavement peering towards the house. They stare as Thursday and Morse emerge from the Jag and walk up the narrow path leading to the front door. Inside in the hallway stands a PC; he straightens to attention as Thursday enters, and then turns to stare as Morse follows him.

Lott’s already coming down the stairs; he stops three steps up at the sight of Morse, and whistles. Thursday frowns suppressively and he descends the rest of the stairs with a book in hand, eyes sweeping from Morse to Thursday with an irritating amount of jollity in them; Thursday can already see the ribald jokes forming in his sergeant’s mind. “Didn’t find the diary, sir, but here’s a journal. At least, it says so on the cover…” he trails off as he hands the book over; opening it, Thursday discovers why. The text inside, written in neat pen, is in what looks to him like Latin.

“Damn.” Thursday snaps the book shut and turns to Morse. “Do you know what he typically wrote about?”

Morse shrugs. “No idea. Why – can’t you read it?”

Thursday gives him an unimpressed look and opens the book to a random page, holding it up. “Seems the professor preferred Latin.”

“That’s not a problem.” Morse takes the book from him and flips through to the final pages. “How far back should I go?”

Thursday stares. “You can read it?”

Morse looks up, expression indecipherable. “I told you, inspector. Guy enjoyed teaching those eager to learn.”
I'm going on vacation next week. It's possible there will be another chapter before then; if not, it won't be up until late October.
Chapter 4

What light there is in the hallway is mostly provided by a strip of sunlight streaming in through the transom window above the front door, falling like a spotlight at Morse’s feet. As he flips through the book, the songbird walks slowly into the better-lit sitting room and leans his hip against the sofa’s arm. With his attention on the journal, his movements take on the thoughtless grace that defines him, tongue slipping out to wet his lips in a motion that Thursday’s eyes follow with rapt attention.

Beside him a movement catches his eye; Thursday glances to the side to see Lott join him in the centre of the sitting room, watching the songbird with a dark, hungry look in his eyes.

The sight of his sergeant’s blatant, undisguised lust sends a cold chill through Thursday. It rises like a mist through his gut, spreading outwards to cool his skin, and settles uncomfortably in his fingertips, pressing outwards. He finds his own desire dampened and in the cold clarity of thought that comes with it he notes how easy it would be not only to abhor the want Morse raises in him, but Morse himself as the cause of it.

“It’s complicated,” says the songbird at last, having flipped through several pages, unaware of Thursday’s dark train of thought. “I’ll need more time to read back further; he’s not explaining much of his thoughts. But he was planning a meeting with someone, and he anticipated a confrontation. It reads like an ongoing argument; he was outraged about something to do with the college.”

“With Lonsdale?” asks Thursday. The songbird frowns and shakes his head slowly. He raises a hand to trace the curve of his ear, looking thoughtful.

“I think it might be Wollstonecraft. He talks about being taken advantage of – of having done them a favour. But I can’t be sure without going farther back.” He fans the pages beneath his thumb; the journal is thick and the last written page is more than two-thirds of the way through the book.

“He doesn’t say who it was he was going to meet?”

“He uses abbreviations; just uses the letter I.”

Thursday turns to Lott. “Any light to shed, Sergeant?”

Lott sucks his teeth briefly before beginning. “Not sure, sir. The only two I talked to from the women’s college were the dean and another professor – Joan Lovelace and Edwina Poole. The dean you met; Miss Poole –”

“Dr Poole,” corrects Morse, looking up from the pages. Lott frowns.

“Doctor, then. Seems she and your own doctor didn’t get on so well; no love lost according to the dean. Harsh words at high table and all that.”

“Why was that?”

“The lady doctor didn’t hold with keeping songbirds. Thought they should run free.” His tone drips with scorn.

Thursday watches the muscles in Morse’s jaw tighten, but the songbird says nothing. “Was she confrontational?”

“She made her views clear at every opportunity, from the sounds of it. She certainly didn’t shed any
tears when she heard Fleming was dead.”

Thursday looks to Morse. “You didn’t mention her.”

The songbird turns flat, unamused eyes on him. “Because I can’t see Dr Poole committing violence. She has the conviction of her principles, and like most academics isn’t behind in stating them. But she was always civil. I’ve only met her twice; after failing to persuade Guy of the evils of acting as a keeper, she refused invitations to events at which I was to be present. Besides which, I don’t see how killing Guy would advance her cause – as it is, I’ll be auctioned off to a new keeper soon enough.”

“Perhaps she intended to disrupt that?”

Morse looks disturbed at the suggestion, closing the book and holding it pressed between his hands. “I don’t think she could,” he says at last. “If she tried, at best she might drag out a custody battle, and songbirds have died when caught in the middle of a legal dispute in the past – I can’t see that meeting her purpose. I suppose she could argue I ought to become property of the college, and under that auspice grant me greater freedoms.” He looks dubious.

Lott gives a ribald laugh, startling both Thursday and Morse. “A women’s college keeping a songbird. I’d pay to see those extra-curriculars. Not sure how many parents would, though – it doesn’t take an Oxford first to turn tricks.” He leers at Morse.

Morse flushes a vivid red; his wide eyes and unruly hair give him a thin, coltish look. There’s a strange innocence to it, an impossible untouchedness about him. It makes Thursday want to come down like a ton of bricks on his sergeant. All he says, however, in a mild tone is: “Could she do that?”

Morse looks to him, and Thursday thinks he sees a flash of gratitude in the songbird’s eyes. “I don’t know. It could be done, but in my case? I doubt it.”

Lott opens his mouth, and Thursday steps forward. “I’d like you to come down to the nick with us,” he says. “Give you some more time with that journal.”

“I can’t work here?” he looks around himself at the cozy sitting room, expensively furnished and quiet. The station will come as a bad shock after it.

“Not with an important piece of evidence. We can arrange a private room,” he adds, seeing the songbird’s reluctance. “Or we could get another translator; this is Oxford – can’t throw a stone without hitting a Latin scholar.”

Morse straightens, pulling the book closer to his chest. “This was Guy’s personal journal. If anyone is to read it, it should be me.”

“Alright then. Let’s go.”

***

The idea of bringing Morse into the nick accompanied by Lott winking at all and sundry behind the songbird’s back makes Thursday’s skin crawl, so he leaves the sergeant behind with the PC to finish up at the scene and brings Morse alone in the Jag.

“I’ll take you to my office; you won’t be disturbed there,” Thursday tells him, as they round the street corner and the motor pool comes into view.
Morse sighs. “It’s alright. It won’t be my first time in a police station.”

Thursday turns to look at him, narrowly missing overshooting his turn and scraping the car on the fence. “No?” he slips on the brake and brings them to a standstill along the wall reserved for the station’s three Jags.

Morse gives him a crooked smile. “I’m not so popular with a fair portion of the populous, especially the more religiously-minded. I’ve had paint dumped on me, produce thrown at me; the house’s windows have been broken twice. People think of songbirds as home wreckers, even though Guy’s had no partner but me. Sometimes we let it go, but sometimes Guy tried to prosecute. Turns out most judges don’t look on songbirds very favourably either. Any cases we brought were written off as misdemeanours. I suppose in a way they were; I was never seriously injured.” He blinks, looking over sharply at Thursday. “Unless you think it’s a motive for murder?”

Thursday switches off the engine, considering. “Like you said, it was mostly petty crime. Unless you’ve been repeatedly targeted by the same person, it’s a leap to go from silent resentment to murder. But I’ll put it in the file and have the old charges dug up.” He opens the door. “Ready?”

Morse shrugs and follows.

***

The inside of the nick smells of greasy food, cigarette smoke and old socks; the lighting is dim after the blinding brilliance of the mid-day sun, the floor treacherously uneven. Thursday sweeps into his manor, and thinks with a flicker of irritation how grubby it is in comparison to the songbird’s airy home.

Thursday doesn’t rule in Cowley Station; that lofty position is held by Detective Chief Superintendent Crisp. But he is Crisp’s head man, is known to keep a set of brass knuckles in his office left over from his curiously opaque time in London, and he can give a bawling out to shame a drill sergeant. Which is why, when they enter the station and Police Constable Doolihan begins to give a wolf-whistle at the sight of Morse, Thursday’s piercing glare makes the man break out in a cold sweat and evaporate silently into the dingy corridor. The rest of the men take the hint and part like the Red Sea to allow Thursday and Morse through.

Thursday leads the songbird through the maze of the station’s back corridors and stairways; the building had once been a rooming house, afterwards converted to offices, and latterly to a police station some fifty years ago when Morris made the town a going concern. Waves of refurbishments and renovations have left the station an uncoordinated, piecemeal country full of doors to small closets or unsuspected filing rooms, staircases leading nowhere, and radiators positioned in awkward places along yellowing walls.

Morse takes it all in silently, his face tight and his wide eyes watchful when Thursday glances back to see how he’s managing. They ascend the staircase that leads to the CID office, and Thursday sees his shoulders rise and fall fatalistically before the inspector pushes the door open and they enter.

For an instant, Thursday is reminded of the silence just after heavy artillery ceases firing, of the ringing emptiness that follows deafening noise. At Morse’s entry conversation stops, fingers freezing over typewriters and the tapping of shoes on wooden floorboards stilling.

“As you were,” barks Thursday and leads the way to his office; the room is slow to pick up its rhythm, conversation beginning in fits and whispers. He lets Morse in and closes the door, leaving the blinds open; better that then the speculation of what might be occurring behind them.
Thursday rounds his desk slowly; when he finally sinks down into his chair, it’s to find Morse sitting across from him, journal held carefully on his lap. “You can read here at your leisure; if you need anything I’ll have DC Wolfe look in from time to time.”

Morse blinks. “Where will you be?”

“I have to get abreast of the investigation, lad. Wheels churning in my absence and all that. This afternoon we’ll have to question more witnesses and review the physical evidence. I’d like you to take notes of what you read – you can use my typewriter, or –”

“I prefer longhand,” says Morse.

“So long as it’s legible,” replies Thursday, with a sudden image of pages of chicken scratch to sort through and nothing to show for it. But then, everything about the songbird has been refined to date – his clothes, his music, his accent (just a trace of the north there). Probably he writes in copperplate. “I’ll be careful.”

“Alright then,” says Thursday, mollified. He rises. “I’ll check in on you in a few hours.”

***

Lott’s at his desk by the time Thursday steps out of his office, back turned with such uncharacteristic disinterest that Thursday is certain he was craning his head for a view of the songbird a moment ago.

“That’s him neatly caged, then,” is all he says, eyes slanting from Thursday to the closed office door.

“With any luck, we’ll have more to go on when the journal’s translated. Where are we with interviews?”

“Dean didn’t have anything to add; she’s a regular harridan, could sour milk by looking at it. That other lady professor – Edwina Poole – like I said she disapproved of Fleming, but that’s pretty thin as motives go. Unless she was one of these religious saviour types – the songbirds must go free, an’ all that. It’s a mania with them,” he added, shaking his head. “I can go on interviewing the faculty this afternoon – maybe we’ll turn up someone harbouring a secret grudge, but in my opinion it was probably some nutter as thought it weren’t natural, carrying on with a songbird. Plenty of them in the world.”

About half the nick, thinks Thursday darkly. “In that case why kill Fleming? Why not Morse?”

“You’ve seen the way he looks, guv. Could you slash his throat?”

A surprisingly sensitive thought, for Lott. But, thinking of Morse’s alabaster throat, dusted with freckles and fluttering softly with his pulse, Thursday can’t help but agree. Slitting Morse’s throat would be a horror, a travesty. It would be easier to slash the Mona Lisa.

“Fleming made police complaints of harassment in the past – we’ll look into that. But for now, I want to pursue the college angle. Set up interviews with the other members of staff for this afternoon. And include Lonsdale for now; we can cut them out later as needs be.”

“Right you are, sir.”

Thursday takes a step towards the door, but doesn’t miss the way Lott’s eyes swing immediately to his office. Hungry. Lustful. Lascivious.
“I’ll be in the canteen. Find me when you’re done; I want to get this job done and dusted.”

Lott looks back to him, expression morphing easily into sycophantism. “Yes, sir.”

Thursday sighs and walks out.
By the end of an afternoon of interviews with Oxford academics, Thursday’s skin is beginning to itch. It’s a condition he picked up in Mile End, where a posh accent could make or break a young officer, and where accusing the wrong man of the wrong thing had far-reaching consequences.

These days he’s a consequence unto himself and he doesn’t worry about knuckling under to the upper classes, but there’s still a part of him that resents the polished veneer of superiority.

The women are better than the men, likely because they’ve had to fight for their place at the table. He and Lott talk to the dean again – very stroppy by this point – and Dr Poole, as well as two colourless Classics dons who make very little impression on Thursday. The upshot of it is that for 9:30 – the time of the murder, according to DeBryn’s estimate at the scene of crime – everyone interviewed to date has an alibi.

“’S not looking hopeful, is it, sir?” says Lott as they step out of the final office on their list at Wollstonecraft, the heavy oak door ghosting shut behind them.

Wollstonecraft is one of the newest of Oxford’s colleges; built in the 1920s when women’s education was just beginning to become established as a notion, it is housed in squarish, unimaginative stone buildings that are already too small for its burgeoning population. The hallways are long and dreary, with white walls adorned with black and white photographs of notable alumni and donors and wooden floors whose varnish is already showing signs of stripping.

Thursday and Lott pause at the end of the hall by the stairs to glance out a large half-moon window overlooking the tiny quad, almost laughable when compared to those of the older colleges. Unlike Lonsdale’s solid, Spartan elegance, the tiny rectangle of grass is surrounded by showy borders of bright summer flowers, red and yellow petals waving gaily in the soft breeze as the afternoon sun beats down on them.

“We’ll head back to the nick and see what Morse has turned up for us. We’ve yet to follow up on his first lead, at any gate.”

“Guv?”

“Name beginning with an I, Sergeant.”

“Right. I’ll go over the interview logs tonight.”

***

Thursday has become adept over the years at reading the mood of his nick. Although generally even-keeled, at times it dips into dangerously melancholic, while at others tension encircles it tight and terse as piano wire. Right now, the atmosphere is what he undiplomatically thinks of as “arsing about.”

Most of the men are standing about chattering like monkeys, laughing at jokes and reciting dirty stories. Desks sit abandoned, phones go unanswered, while cups of tea are numerous and the occasional balled-up piece of paper scythes through the air into a wastepaper bin.
Now and then, the laughter grows louder and then stops, while gazes turn to Thursday’s office.

“Oi,” shouts Lott as he steps through the door and catches Thursday’s face darkening. “Fingers out of arses, what is this, the Queen’s goddamn garden party?”

Like chastised children, the men slink back to their desks and typewriters begin to clack and pens to scratch across paper. Thursday walks through the room dealing out unimpressed glares all the way to his door.

He doesn’t miss the way Morse stiffens at the turning of the knob.

The songbird is sitting with his back to the room, although he looks up when Thursday enters. He has Fleming’s journal propped open on the desk in front of him, and under his hand is a screed of paper covered with lines of careful writing.

“You were some time,” he says, straightening without stretching but still managing to look fresh and unrumpled.

“Did they bother you?” asks Thursday, indicating the CID with an inclination of his head as he closes the door behind him.

“No. Well, not really,” he amends, more truthfully.

“I’ll ask Lott in to hear your findings; is there anything you want to tell me first?” he asks, face politely neutral. Morse looks at him for a moment, surprised, but shakes his head.

“No. Thank you.”

“Alright. Just a mo.”

He opens his door and beckons to Lott, who steps over and comes in, closing the door behind him. Thursday rounds the desk to his seat, while Lott pulls out the second interview chair. He looks like a discarded suit of clothes as he slouches in the chair, pulling out a hand-rolled cigarette and lighting it in between yellowing fingers.

“So what’s he got to say for himself, then?” asks Lott, glancing at the journal. Morse’s face falls into a stiff, wooden expression; he addresses himself to Thursday.

“For several months now, Guy had been suspecting someone of selling Firsts at Wollstonecraft. He believed one of the staff was complicit in rigging the exams so that students who would have gotten Thirds or at best Seconds received Firsts, in return for significant financial profit. All the students who benefitted in this way – those Guy judged to be incapable of achieving such grades – were from prominent and successful families with money to burn. His notes seem to indicate he traced the first sales back to last year.”

“So who’s been selling them?” asks Lott.

“He doesn’t name them; just the letter I. He accused I., and they were going to meet to discuss what steps to take. The meeting was set for this morning.” Morse swallows, eyes dropping.

“What time?” asks Thursday. Morse shakes his head. “What time did he leave in the morning?”

“Fairly early – before eight. But he might easily have wanted time to prepare. He was very methodical. And he believed, when given the opportunity, people would choose to do the right thing.” His hands, resting on the desk, curl into fists.
“Wrong about that, wasn’t he?” says Lott. Thursday spears him with a glance, and he huffs out a lungful of smoke.

“Is there anything that gives any hint to who this I. is? Or isn’t? Does he name anyone else?”

“He talks about his students occasionally. And he talks about me. Beyond that, it’s mostly just his musings on his work, and his personal thoughts.”

“Such as?” probes Lott. Morse turns a flat gaze on him.

“Gardening. Cooking. Holidays. He was planning a surprise trip to Tuscany for September.” His voice is cold and unemotional, his eyes flinty. There’s a frosty haughtiness to him, as though he were perched on a pedestal, looking down from on high. Thursday senses Lott beginning to take umbrage, and steps into the conversation.

“Do you think he talked to anyone else about this?”

Morse turns his eyes on Thursday. “No,” he says, with certainty. “He thought he could resolve it without destroying I.’s career, or at least without being the agent of its destruction. If he was going to tell anyone, I would have been the safest person to tell – I couldn’t betray him.”

“Couldn’t, or wouldn’t?” prompts Thursday.

“If he specified it, couldn’t. I’m his, body and soul.” Morse reaches beneath the collar of his shirt and produces a chain with a beaten-metal tag hanging from it. Thursday doesn’t have to see it up close to know it will bear Guy Fleming’s name. “At least, I was,” corrects the songbird, letting the chain drop back beneath his shirt.

“Is there anything else you can tell us?” asks Thursday, in a kindly tone.

Morse looks him in the eye, and shakes his head. “No.”

“Then let’s go. I’ll take you home.”

***

With the summer solstice only a fortnight behind them, the sun is still high in the sky when Thursday drives Morse back to his home – or rather, to Fleming’s home.

“I suppose I should start boxing things up,” muses the songbird, as they drive up the leafy street leading to the house.

“That’s not your responsibility. Let the lawyer worry about organizing it. Except for your things.”

Morse glances over at him. “I don’t have any things – not that belong to me. I’ll leave with exactly what I came with: nothing.” His voice is bitter.

“Morse…” He stops the car; Morse reaches for the door handle.

“Thank you for letting me read Guy’s journal.” He opens the door, steps out, and is gone.

Thursday sits in the idling car for several minutes, staring after him. Wondering how this will all work out, and what the cost of it will be.
“I’ve turned up one,” says Lott on the drive in the next morning.

“One what?”

“An I. connected to the women’s Classic’s department. Isobel Parks. Acted as supervisor in the exam sessions for Fleming’s classes. We haven’t talked to her yet; I have her address.”

“Then let’s go.”

Isobel Parks lives in a basement flat on the edge of Cowley’s industrial heart; it’s a cheap building whose brick is stained with soot and whose front steps are uneven and cracked. They descend the steps together, Thursday holding back to let Lott knock.

The door is answered by a young woman with wispy blonde hair and a slender frame. Her eyes are set slightly too wide in her face, giving her a delicate, doll-like appearance. She looks at the two men askance, hand on the doorframe blocking entrance to the flat. “Yes?”

“Detective Sergeant Lott, ma’am; this is Detective Inspector Thursday. It’s about Dr Fleming’s death.”

The tension eases from her body, her fingers relaxing against the door frame. “Yes. Of course. Would you like to come in?” She speaks in a quiet tone, just raised from a whisper. “Could you be quiet please? My husband is sleeping.”

She lets them into the flat, stepping back into the tiny foyer to make room before shutting the door. Her clothes are drab and out of style; a long charcoal-coloured smock dress with leggings and a yellow shirt that’s fraying at the cuffs.

The inside of the flat is dark; its walls are a chocolatey brown and the carpet is a dark dirty grey with age and wear. Although the curtains of the wide windows looking out on the front steps are open, limited light is filtering through the deep stairwell into the flat. There are no lights on; the meter mounted on the wall is silent.

From the remains of breakfast still sitting on the tiny two-person table – bread and butter and milk – it’s obvious she hasn’t used the cooker or toaster.

She leads them over to the sofa sitting up against the front window and wrestles one of the table’s chairs around to sit in herself. Thursday and Lott seat themselves, Lott flipping open his notebook.

“You work as an exam supervisor at Wollstonecraft college,” begins Lott.

“An invigilator. Yes, during exams. Most of the newer staff do. I’m a junior member of faculty; I taught two sessions last year.”

“You invigilated for Dr Fleming,” says Lott, scribbling down a note. She nods.

“Yes, and also for Dr Potts, and Miss Beckett.”

“What did you make of Dr Fleming?”

She pushes a strand of hair behind her ear, head dropping thoughtfully. “He was well-intentioned.
Kind. But he knew where he stood in his personal and political opinions, and he wouldn’t mince words. He had no patience for intellectual laziness.”

“Or misconduct?” asks Thursday, causing Lott to pause in his note-taking.

“I’m sure he wouldn’t have put up with that, not that it ever came up.”

“Were you close to Dr Fleming?”

Parks looks surprised. “Me? Oh, no. We hardly knew each other.”

“Why did you decide to supervise his exam, then?” asks Lott.

“There was a rota set up; it wasn’t my decision.”

“Who set the rota?”

“The dean – Dr Lovelace. No one invigilates their own class; other than that the schedule was fairly random.”

“Who marked the exams?”

“First and second years are marked by the professor. The final papers in third year are sat on by a committee. Usually the class’s professor, a junior or senior fellow depending on the status of the professor, and the dean.”

“It was a third year class you were invigilating for Dr Fleming, is that right?” asks Thursday. She nods. Thursday leans forward.

“Where were you at 9:30 yesterday morning, ma’am?”

“What the hell is all this bloody racket? demands an angry voice as the door to the next room slams open and a short, tussle-haired man emerges in shorts and a vest. He pauses at the sight of two strangers in his den, then strides forward. “You – what’re you doing barging in here at the bleeding crack of dawn?”

“DI Thursday and DS Lott,” answers Thursday calmly, without rising. “We’re here to speak to Mrs Parks about a death that occurred at Lonsdale yesterday.”

“That nancy don,” sneers Mr Parks. “Who gives a rat’s arse about it?”

“Paul,” begins Mrs Parks; he rounds on her, his face black with anger.

“And you – how often have I told you that I need my sleep. You know I’m in late of an evening.”

She bows her head, pitiful and defeated. “I’m sorry, Paul…”

“Right. Now you lot can clear out of here; I’ve had enough of this goddamn inquisition, and –”

“Your wife still hasn’t answered our question, sir,” interrupts Thursday, in an icy, unwavering tone.

“I was here. Yesterday morning, at half nine. I was home. With Paul,” she says, quickly.

“Mr Parks?” asks Thursday, looking to the man. He crosses his arms and answers sullenly.

“Aye, she was here. So stuff that in your pipe and smoke it. Now get out. Out,” he repeats, pointing
at the door.

Thursday and Lott rise and leave.

***

“Well, well. Pauley Parks. Just when you think life’s giving you lemons, it comes up a peach.” Lott starts the car and they pull out onto the empty street; it’s gone nine am and the factories started work hours ago, leaving the neighbourhood deserted.

“You know him?”

“Seen ‘im once or twice, sir. Inveterate gambler, is Pauley. Been done several times, but it never came to anything.” He tsks his tongue, an ugly smile curling over his lips. “Well, his word’s not worth the paper it’s printed on, and he’s her husband and all. You saw her; scared stiff of him, she was. Easy enough for him to wrap her ‘round his finger. They were short of cash; that was clear as day.”

“If they’d just earned a big payout, you’d think they’d have coins to spare for the gas,” muses Thursday, as they turn onto the main road back to the nick.

“Pauley probably lost it all already. I told you, sir, he has it bad.”

“Run a check on him. On both of them. Turn them inside out.”

“Yes, sir,” says Lott, with relish.

***

Thursday’s morning is spent on the mundane administrative tasks that fall to inspectors: wage chits, overtime requests, shift rotas. He goes out to a nearby pub for lunch, then it’s back to the office for a review of the recent evidence logs.

It’s gone two when his phone rings. The voice at the other end is husky and hesitant; he recognizes it immediately. “Morse?”

“I made an appointment with Guy’s solicitor. I thought you might have questions for him as well; you’re welcome to come.”

Thursday glances at his watch. “What time?”

“Three. Finch, Finch, and Fernley on the Botley road.”

The inspector makes a note. “I’ll be there.”

***

It’s Morse he sees first as he walks down the street towards the lawyer’s office, not the wooden sign above his head advertising the firm.

The songbird is wearing matching grey tweed trousers and waistcoat, elegantly nipped in to display his narrow waist and the curve of his arse. His hair shines like spun gold in the sunshine, and his eyes are bright as he catches sight of Thursday and raises a hand in greeting.
“It took some work to get an appointment,” he says. “Guy’s accounts are locked, and they know it. I think they agreed to see me out of sympathy more than anything – that, or curiosity.”

“Are you alright for money?” asks Thursday, conscious of the several ten bob notes in his bill fold, intended to last him the month.

Morse shrugs. “Fine. I don’t have anything to spend it on.” He reaches out and opens the door, stepping into the gloom beyond.

They make their way up a narrow flight of stairs to a well-appointed waiting room, stocked with several red velvet-upholstered chairs that look to Thursday to be better suited to Covent Garden, and a receptionist in a high-collared white shirt and long black skirt who looks as though she stepped out of the 1890s.

“Mr Morse?” she says, looking over gold-rimmed glasses. He nods, and she gestures at one of two doors behind her. “Mr Finch will see you now.”

They enter Finch’s office. The large, airy space at the top of the building doesn’t appear to have been significantly renovated since the Renaissance. The room is entirely done in dark wood, with lead-lined diamond-glazed windows looking out over the Botley Road. A red Indian rug lies in the centre of the room before the massive oak desk, empty save for a leather blotter. Thursday is almost surprised not to see an inkwell.

Behind the desk sits a shrunken elderly man. His suit is subdued but well-cut and fits him like a glove despite his wizened form. His gnarled hands are resting on the desk; his dark eyes are watchful.

“Ah, Mr Morse. And…?”

“Detective Inspector Thursday, sir,” says Thursday, taking one of the chairs the elderly lawyer motions them towards. “I’m in charge of the investigation of Dr Fleming’s murder.”

“I see.” He turns to Morse. “I agreed to see you today in place of my son because I fear the news I have to share is not hopeful.”

Thursday sees Morse stiffen out of the corner of his eye, but the songbird’s voice is passive when he speaks: “Go on.”

“As Guy chose not to make out a will, it will require a Crown-appointed solicitor to appoint an executor to deal with the necessities of closing out his accounts and handing his possessions over to the Crown. Of which you are one.” He speaks matter-of-factly, staring Morse straight in the eye. “The timing of this is likely to be at least a fortnight,” he adds, with calm impassivity.

Morse says nothing. Thursday turns to him and sees his mouth open, and then close again. His eyes are wide, staring, irises impossibly blue and skin very fair in the soft sunlight filtering in through the windows. He holds himself straight-backed, his spine two inches from the chair’s back, the angle of his chin tipped up with aggression. In this room with its antique furniture and its dark paneling, he looks like a Renaissance portrait: delicate, ornate and glowing with inner fire.

“You must know that will kill him,” breaks in Thursday, angry with the lawyer’s indifference and worried by Morse’s silence; his stiffness reminds Thursday of a vase teetering on the edge of a table, about to smash.

“I will of course do my best to expedite matters. But even then, a wait of at least a week must be anticipated, if not longer.”
“That’s not –” begins Thursday, only to be interrupted by Morse.

“I can’t pay,” says Morse, flatly. The words sound to Thursday’s ears like a challenge, a dare. Defiant, thinks Thursday, is how he will remember the songbird: defiant of the status quo, of his nature, of the rules imposed on him by society.

“In your case, Mr Morse, I have agreed to waive the usual fees.”

Morse looks uncomfortable at this statement, but he nods. He doesn’t thank the lawyer; Thursday doesn’t imagine taking charity comes easily to him.

Morse looks to Thursday questioningly; Thursday straightens. “If I may ask, sir, when was the last time you met with Dr Fleming?”

“Several years ago, now. It was on the occasion of his acquiring Mr Morse, here. I advised him at that time to consider making a will, however it was his feeling that it was not an immediate necessity and he did not feel in a position at that point to leave Mr Morse to anyone. I think he hoped to make satisfactory arrangements in the future, but alas…”

“He never indicated to you that he considered himself to be in danger?”

“Never. I had not spoken with him in years. My son generally handles my accounts these days; I came in as a favour to Dr Fleming – and to Mr Morse.”

“I see. Thank you.”

The lawyer nods. “I’ll be in touch.”

***

Thursday follows the songbird down the stairs and out onto the street. Morse’s face is bleak, eyes looking off into the far distance. The first button on his shirt is undone; Thursday can see violet shadows pooling in the hollow of his throat, can see the smooth line of his clavicle, can see a few links in the chain that proclaims him a kept thing.

“I’ll drive you home, lad,” he offers, turning towards the Jag.

“Thanks. But I’d rather walk.”

“Morse…”

“Good afternoon, inspector.” Morse turns his back and walks away; Thursday watches his lithe steps until he disappears around a corner, taking with him some of the brightness from the day.

Thursday puts on his hat and heads back to the Jag.

***

“What’s on your mind, love?” Win asks him that night, as he’s sitting in the den smoking his pipe. Joan is out with her work friends, and Sam is upstairs swotting. Win comes in with a small glass of sherry, sipping at it as she takes a seat on the sofa.

“Work,” he says.
“What work?”

Thursday lets out a series of smoke rings, watching them rise towards the ceiling. “There’s this songbird. Morse.”

“How exotic. Seduced you, has she?” Win asks, playfully, taking another sip.

“He’s a he. And no; he’s been very careful to keep himself above board. With me, and the rest of the nick. His keeper was murdered; he’s alone now.”

“What will happen to him?”

“If he’s lucky, he’ll be reassigned as Crown property and put up for auction.”

Win frowns, putting down her empty sherry glass. “And if he’s not?”

“He’ll die waiting. At least… He could always take matters into his own hands, find himself some company. But somehow…” Thursday pictures Morse as he was in the lawyer’s office, in defiance of fate and fact. “I doubt he would choose that solution. He’s a head-strong bugger alright.”

“You sound fond of him,” says Win, smiling.

Thursday pulls in another mouthful of smoke, tasting the rich flavour, and lets it stream out. “He’s not exactly likeable; he’s awkward for all that he looks absolutely perfect, and he’s scrappy beneath his buttoned-down exterior; that’s easy enough to tell. But inside he’s bloody terrified, and I don’t blame him.”

“You want to help him.”

Thursday sighs, looking at her tiredly. “How can I? I can’t speed up time, or make the lawyers take on his case by the end of the week.”

Win reaches out and rests her hand over his. “I’m sure you’ll think of something, Fred. You always do.”

Chapter End Notes

Finally got my act together and plotted out the rest of this; chapters will be a bit longer now that I’m not flailing around without a plan. We’re looking at about 8 chapters in total.
It’s early in the morning for a pipe, but Thursday cherishes the bowl in his hands all the same as he lights it, drawing air through the mouthpiece until the flame catches. He gives several quick puffs, finally sitting back when the thin trail of smoke begins to filter upwards.

He’s looking for something to centre him, for a touchstone to ground him in his work. His thoughts keep slipping away from him, running eagerly towards a lithe figure with a halo of red-gold hair and sea-blue eyes.

Thursday forces his gaze downwards, taking another draw on the pipe. The pathologist’s report sits on his desk. The full autopsy confirmed DeBryn’s initial supposition at the scene of crime: Fleming was murdered two hours before DeBryn arrived, setting time of death at 9:30am. Cause of death was undoubtedly the severing of the great vessels in the neck, resulting in nearly-instantaneous exsanguination.

Thursday taps the manila folder containing the pathologist’s neatly typed report, fingers drumming out an impatient tattoo.

Beneath DeBryn’s report are his notes on Lott’s preliminary findings on the Parks. Without a warrant they can’t secure bank transactions, but Parks is commonly known to be in financial difficulties. He’s also known to Uniform for several domestic calls.

Thursday lets out a stream of smoke as he traces the gum binding of his notebook. Isobel Parks has an alibi but it’s fragile as a bubble, easily burst. Lott has gone to find out who else sat on the examination board for Fleming’s class, but everyone interviewed to date at the college has a stronger alibi for the time of death.

An image of Isobel Parks comes into his mind: thin and delicate, with wide staring eyes and a nervous twitch to her hands. Thursday’s a good judge of character; he knew seconds into the interview that she was malleable as dough. Parks could roll her into any shape he pleased.

Without his consent, the memory of Morse standing square-shouldered at the solicitor’s office flashes into his thoughts, his fiery determination so apparent in every line of his body. It seems unfair that someone so resolute could have his life broken to pieces by someone so weak. But Thursday has learned by long experience that fairness is not something to be expected from the world.

Thursday looks back to his notes on Lott’s progress, but he can’t seem to concentrate on them. His thoughts are slippery as soap and keep skidding back to the songbird he left on the solicitor’s doorstep in Oxford.

Frowning, Thursday reaches for the phone and picks it up, only to realise he doesn’t have the number he wants at hand. He rings the operator instead and has her put him through.

The voice on the other end answers after several rings: “Hello?” Morse sounds tired, his husky voice rougher than usual.

“We’ve turned up some new information. I’d value your opinion; could you come in?”

There’s a momentary pause on the other end of the phone, then: “Yes. Alright. When?”
“In an hour?” asks Thursday, suddenly aware that his reasons for seeing Morse do not stand up to much scrutiny.

“Okay,” says Morse. There’s a click, and the line goes dead.

Thursday returns to his notes, and tries to focus on them.

***

Even with his office door closed, Thursday is aware of the moment the songbird steps into the CID offices. There’s a momentary silence, followed by a frenzy of activity that fails to completely muffle the sound of several cat calls. Those die the minute Thursday opens his door; Morse crosses the floor like an ambassador carrying a white flag through an enemy army, entering Thursday’s office silently. In the stillness that ensues, Thursday closes the door. It’s quiet enough that he can hear it latch.

“Maybe I ought to have come to you,” says Thursday, ruefully. The truth of it is, he wanted the security of his office. Needed to be on his own patch to keep his thoughts in line.

Morse stands in front of the closed door for a minute. There’s something very stark about his appearance; with his pale skin and his slim build puts Thursday in mind of a birch tree in winter, cold and alone against a colourless sky.

Morse shrugs, a stiff, brittle movement. “It’s nothing I’m not used to.” He slips into a chair, the wood creaking incongruously beneath him. At Thursday’s surprised look he gives the awkward ghost of a smile; “We’re flesh and blood, inspector. ‘Prick us, do we not bleed?’”

“Wrong us, shall we not revenge?” replies Thursday. Morse’s eyebrows arch upwards. “More under my hat than nits, lad,” he adds, smiling. Morse’s expression settles into gentle embarrassment.

“You’re not much like the other officers I’ve met before now. As for revenge, I have no plans. Even if I did, you have no suspect. Or has that changed?” He sits very properly, back ramrod straight. His hands, Thursday notices, are fisted in the fabric of his trousers.

“This is a formal investigation, which means I can’t be as free with information as I might like, especially regarding suspects. I can tell you that we’re pursuing several leads. I called you here to ask your opinion of Isobel Parks.”

Morse frowns. His hands relax their grip, and Thursday notices that they’re shaking slightly, as if from tremor. “I’ve met her,” he begins, slowly. “Just the once, at a Gaudy I attended with Guy. I’m afraid I didn’t register much of an impression. I’ve heard Guy speak of her, though. She came to college with a black eye once, caused quite a stir; she insisted she had fallen down a staircase.”

“Had he spoken of her lately?”

“Inspector, if you’re trying to imply Isobel Parks could have murdered Guy…”

“We all of us have hidden depths, lad.”

Morse gives him a considering look. “Poisoned him? I suppose that’s not impossible. But walked up to him with a knife, and…?” he shakes his head. “I can’t believe that.”

“Twenty-five years in the job gives you a different perspective. We each have a line, and when we’re pushed across it, that’s when everything goes to pieces in ways no one could’ve expected. Had Dr Fleming spoken of Mrs Parks lately?” he repeats.
“Only to say that she was invigilating some of his exams. Nothing more,” Morse says, stonily. He notices Thursday’s gaze drop to his shaking hand, and crosses his arms tightly over his chest.

He’s starting to crack. Hairline fractures running through him, crisscrossing like a pattern of smashed glass. Thursday doesn’t know him well, but it’s plain to see that he’s not right.

“Morse… this can’t go on,” says Thursday, gently. “You need…”

Morse’s eyes narrow and his words take on a vicious tone. “What? A good bedding? From you?”

Thursday raises his hands in mock surrender. He’s careful to wait a moment before replying, let Morse breathe. “I’m spoken for. This isn’t a proposition. I just don’t want to see you hurt. I’m sure I could recommend someone – no strings, no attachments.”

Morse stands, and for a moment Thursday thinks he’s going to walk out of the office – out of the investigation, out of Thursday’s life. But instead he relaxes his shoulders infinitesimally and raises a hand to tuck his hair back behind his ear; the gesture humanizes him in a way Thursday wouldn’t have expected. Suddenly he’s a young man, alone and frightened. When he speaks it’s in a low, rough voice.

“Guy thought of me as a possession; he couldn’t have kept me if he didn’t. He was old fashioned enough to believe I could belong to him – and legally of course I did. But despite believing that, he let me be myself. He tutored me like any other student; he let me cloak my nature rather than show it off; he let me say no when I needed to. That’s as much freedom as I’m ever likely to have. I don’t know that I can go back to being nothing more than a plaything. I certainly have no intention of finding out before I’m legally bound to. I won’t be a possession to be handed off to someone for a night: not even to save my life.”

“Morse…”

“You can’t make me,” says the songbird, harshly, eyes flashing.

“I know that lad. I’ve no intention of trying to force anything on you. But it’s a question of your life.”

“I know,” replies Morse, angrily. Then, taking a deep breath, “I know,” he repeats, more calmly.

“Then,” begins Thursday, and gets no further. There’s a knock on the door; Morse turns as Lott pokes his head in.

“You’re wanted downstairs, sir. Williams has his report in on the Barns Road raid.”

If it weren’t several days overdue, Thursday wouldn’t have given it any attention; a drugs raid rates below a murder enquiry. But as it is Crisp’s been threatening to bring the roof down if a report isn’t imminent.

“Alright. I’ll go.” He looks to Morse: “Will you wait here?”

Morse gives a very faint shrug, which Thursday takes as acquiescence. The inspector stands and walks out, shutting the door behind him.

***

Thursday’s downstairs less than ten minutes fetching the report and bawling out Williams for being
three days overdue with it. When he returns to the CID, slipping quietly in through the main doors, he catches every head in the room craned towards his office.

Thursday comes in just in time to see Lott standing pinning Morse up against the wall inside his office. Lott’s face is dark with an ugly, festering lust. Morse’s expression is unreadable.

Thursday is just stepping forward when Morse reaches out, takes Lott’s face in his hands, and pulls him in for a kiss.

An instant after their lips meet, the DS drops to the ground in a dead faint. And Morse steps away with a disgusted look on his face, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Several men begin to caw, thrilled at the sight of their sergeant laid low by a songbird. They stop when they notice Thursday storming through the office. He takes hold of his door and yanks it open.

Morse raises his eyes to meet Thursday’s. He looks angry. And betrayed.

“Don’t expect me back,” he says, and pushes out past Thursday.

He’s gone before the inspector can call him back.

***

Thursday’s inclined to leave Lott lying where he fell; as far as he’s concerned he more than deserves what he got. But a guv’nor can’t leave his bagman unconscious on the floor, so he calls in a couple of constables to move the sergeant onto the sofa. He’s never known anyone knocked out by a songbird before; he can only hope it comes with a pounding headache.

Then, cross at the sight of Lott, he bangs out of the office without even taking the time to pick up his hat.

Outside the sky is cloudy, the sunny temperate weather of earlier in the week already just a memory. The wind is ripping through flags and tree branches, setting them rippling against the grey sky.

Thursday takes one of the Jags, pulling out of the motor pool and onto the back road that connects up with the high street. Then it’s down through the narrow streets of Cowley, faced with brick buildings and the occasional limestone, to the hospital.

Downstairs, the mortuary is dark today, no lights on in the main room, the tiled expanse cold and barren. Off to the side the wooden door bearing the placard Dr T Kelly is rimmed with light; the pathologist is in his office.

Thursday knocks and then enters; rather than Kelly behind the desk it’s still his temporary replacement, DeBryn. The smaller man looks up, blinking owlishly behind his hornrims and putting down his pen.

“Inspector Thursday, was it?”

“That’s right.” He steps in, closing the door behind him. DeBryn raises a curious eyebrow.

“I have a few questions. About songbirds.” He steps forward, gesturing questioningly to the chair; DeBryn waves him into it.

“Certainly. Songbirds in general, or one in particular?” asks DeBryn, with a wry look in his eye.
Thursday frowns.

“In general. Although, I suppose…” Thursday takes a seat, resting his hands on the worn chair’s scratched armrests. “One just knocked out my sergeant. He tried to get too familiar, and… lights out. He’ll recover, won’t he?”

“The songbird, or your sergeant?” asks DeBryn. Seeing Thursday’s lack of amusement, he nods. “Certainly. The goodnight kiss is temporary; it’s a secretion of a mild sedative to deter unwanted attention.”

“I’ve heard of it, but I’ve never seen it happen.”

“It’s relatively rare; given how much songbirds put up with, it takes a serious breach of etiquette to cause them to resort to it. Especially as it generally causes repercussions against them.” He gives Thursday a hard look, the humour now gone from his face.

“There won’t be any here. L – my sergeant – took liberties without permission. As far as I’m concerned, this is an end to the matter.” Especially as he can’t imagine Morse returning to the station now.

“Is that all?” asks DeBryn. “I must say, this seems like more of a matter for the police surgeon…”

“No; I had another question. About…”

“Mr Morse?” suggests DeBryn, kindly.

“Songbirds,” replies Thursday. “I know they have limits to their stamina – you said they can’t go for a week without care. Is there anything that can be done, short of taking them to bed? Any way to keep them healthy that doesn’t…”

“Turn them into an object of pleasure? It’s a question very few people ask, inspector, and one that’s been forcibly suppressed by proponents of keeping songbirds as possessions. The answer is yes: they can thrive on affection, without needing to go further. It requires close physical proximity, but nothing more.”

“That’s all,” says Thursday, flatly.

“Yes, inspector.”

“And for that they’ve been enslaved, without rights or consent?” He hears the incredulity in his voice, but what he really feels is disgust. Deep-seated, nauseated disgust.

“You believe men incapable of co-opting something beautiful for power – or pleasure?” DeBryn’s tone drips with cynicism.

It’s a slap in the face to Thursday, who has always thought of himself as a cynical bastard at heart when it comes to the ills of society. His naivety – his ignorance – cuts like a knife. He’s always considered the keeping of songbirds as a slightly distasteful necessity, an unfortunate requirement for their wellbeing.

The idea that there is no necessity, that the possession of songbirds benefits no one but their keepers, comes like a shot to the chest. It kicks the air out of his lungs and cuts into his muscle and bone, leaving a vicious scar on his heart.

“Why didn’t you say something earlier?” he demands, half-rising, anger running through his veins.
like gasoline, seeping out of his skin to soak him in fury.

“Why didn’t you ask?” replies the doctor, calmly. “Most people, in my experience, don’t want to know. A few join advocacy groups. So far, none of it has made a bit of difference. Songbirds are viewed at best as rich pampered pets, at worst as home-breakers. Neither engenders much outrage – at least, not in their favour.”

Thursday thinks back to Edwina Poole, the Greats don Lott mocked for her sentiments – for believing songbirds should go free so strongly that it defined her relationship with Fleming. Suddenly it seems not the cause of a bleeding-heart liberal, but of a sensible woman recognizing something rotten and festering in society.

He stands. “I won’t see Morse sold off like chattel because some rich nobs with their pricks hanging out rule popular opinion.”

“Do you think you can change it?”

“I think if I don’t, I’ll have another death on my hands. And I won’t stand for that.”

“Then I wish you luck, inspector.”

***

The rest of the day is a long one. Lott spends most of it out of the office, presumably licking his wounds. Thursday doesn’t regret his absence.

By the end of the day he’s more than ready to go home, speech prepared and mastered over the course of the afternoon.

He finds Win alone in the kitchen; Sam and Joan are elsewhere, doubtless skiving off their chores. She’s sampling broth for turkey barley soup, giving it a thoughtful look and adding a dash of salt to the simmering pot.

“Evening pet,” he says, stooping to press a kiss to her temple.

She turns to give him a surprised look. “You’re home early.”

“You mean on time,” he says.

“As I said: early,” she retorts with a smile. She turns to watch over her shoulder as Thursday reaches up to the top shelf and takes down a bottle of cheap whisky, pouring himself out several fingers. “Into the drink already, are you?”

Thursday knocks back nearly half the glass. “It’s been a long day.”

“The songbird again?” she asks, perceptively.

“He knocked Arthur out cold this morning for getting too familiar. Only regret I didn’t put the boot in while he was down.”

“He is your bagman, Fred,” she says, without much censure.

“He’s a brown-nosing, spineless, lecherous toad, is what he is. Regardless, Morse took off running afterwards. I’ll never get him back down the nick; not that I blame him.”
Win turns to the soup, stirring the pot gently with a long wooden spoon. “You can interview him at home, can’t you?” she asks, back to him.

“I can. That’s not the problem.” He takes another deep drink, savouring the smooth burn. “He’s setting himself up to come apart at the seams, Win. Choosing to die, rather than let anyone touch him. Even if he makes it to auction somehow, I’m not sure he won’t end it anyway; he had that look to him. Reckless; fey,” he says, thinking back to Morse’s flashing eyes, the desperation in his stance. Of the quiet intensity in his voice when he answered Thursday’s challenge that he would die: *I know.*

Win puts the lid on the pot and turns back around. “Is there anything you can do?”

“There’s something we can do. I talked to the pathologist this afternoon; songbirds don’t need more than affection to sustain them. We could give him that.”

Win frowns. “I thought they needed – well –” she gives Thursday a frank look.

“The pathologist says not. Says just caring is enough.”

Win turns back to the pot, fiddles with the temperature, then looks back over her shoulder. “Would he accept?”

“I don’t know. I can only ask.”

She turns around slowly, arms crossed low over her stomach, expression thoughtful. “If we did, it would save his life?”

“Yes, pet.”

“Then you had better talk to him, Fred.”

Chapter End Notes

I unaccountably forgot to rec it last update, but please check out Jemisard’s wonderful fic *The Pretty Things* set in this universe during Lewis.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lott is reportedly feeling liverish the next morning and so sends a PC to pick Thursday up, a sure sign that he’s got something untoward on the boil. Thursday ignores it for the time being, and instead of heading into the station has the young copper drive him up to Oxford.

“I’ll call in for a ride back,” he says, dismissing the PC as he steps out onto the pavement, and watches the car pull out into the road before walking up the path to the front door.

In the minute that passes between Thursday knocking at the door and it being answered, he has time to wonder whether Morse will let him in – whether he will even bother to open the door.

The sound of the knob being turned from the inside answers the second of his two questions: Morse pulls the door inwards, standing in the shadow of the doorframe. His hair is an unruly tangle, his skin grey; his clothes are the same he had been wearing the day before, rumpled by a night’s sleep.

He should by all rights look a complete wreck, like a man peeled off the pub floor after a long night’s hard drinking. As it is though, his appearance calls to mind a man just pulled from his bed, still warm and supple from sleep. As though he would be more than pleased to be returned to his bed at the earliest opportunity, with company.

“Inspector,” he says in a flat, dry tone. His eyes meet Thursday’s with a flicker of challenge. Music is playing in the background, something fiery and dramatic; the contrast between the pallid Morse and the vivacious symphony of sound is difficult to ignore.

“I’ve come to apologise.”

Morse gives him a cold look. “For the conduct of your sergeant? Can you?”

“No; that lies with him. I came to apologise for asking you back to the station. It was unnecessary and selfish, and it put you in a position you never should have been put in.”

“So why did you?” asks Morse, touching the heart of the matter with ease. Thursday admires his clarity of thought, even as he shifts to lean against the doorframe.

Thursday answers straightforwardly, looking him right in the eye. “Because I wanted to meet you on my patch. I don’t want to lose my head around you; I value your opinion too much for that.”

He sees surprise in Morse’s face; a wide-eyed look of shock, his face going slack with it. For an instant the tiredness and wariness disappear, leaving him looking young and lost and agonizingly handsome.

“There’s something else,” says Thursday through gritted teeth, as the weariness thankfully bleeds back into Morse’ countenance and dilutes his effulgence.

Morse raises his eyebrows, a flash of irony in an otherwise distracted appearance. “More non-suspects to clear with me?”

“No. Something else. May I come in?”
Morse considers him, then steps back slowly, hand withdrawing from the doorframe’s support in a gradual movement like a theatre curtain pulling back. He leads Thursday into the house, through the sitting room and into a large, cheerful kitchen. The walls are a light cream colour, the wooden cupboards and shelves a mellow oak. Three wide windows look out onto a back garden, the sashes painted white to lighten the room. The garden beyond is small and private, a shallow green space sequestered by a tall brick fence overgrown with ivy.

“Tea?” asks Morse, already fetching the kettle from the cooker to fill with water.

“Thanks,” says Thursday.

“I’ll bring it out.”

Taking the statement for a dismissal, Thursday retreats to the front room. He takes a seat on the sofa, watching the record spin on the player; the sleeve beside it reads Vivaldi – Gloria. The music has taken on a darker, more contemplative tone than the bright vitality of the earlier theme.

More than the music, though, he focuses on the state of disrepair of the front room. There are boxes scattered about the place, half-filled with books. Two trunks lie under the front windows, packed carefully with statuettes and framed photographs and lamps. A picnic basket near the turn-table is filled with records.

Thursday is just reaching out to pick up the book that’s lying open on a footstool – Wittgenstein – when he hears the sound of breaking crockery from the kitchen.

He crosses the sitting room and into the kitchen in a few short steps to find Morse leaning on the kitchen counter. At his feet is a broken cup and saucer and a puddle of steaming water. He’s breathing hard, a light sheen of sweat on his face. Instead of detracting from his looks it gives him a wraith-like beauty, the loveliness of a pale flame. There’s a waft of fragrance, a mixture of sweet and musk – Morse, Thursday realises. He’s extremely appealing, even in collapse.

“Alright?” asks Thursday, striding in and picking up a tea towel from the counter. He bends to soak up the spilt tea, pushing the porcelain shards together with the bundle of linen.

“I’m fine,” says Morse thinly, eyes hard and narrow.

“You don’t look it,” replies Thursday, bluntly. “Best go have a seat. I’ll mop up in here.”

He picks up the remains of the tea cup and saucer and puts them in the bin, then makes himself a second cup of tea, giving the lad a few moments alone to pull himself together. The teacups are willow pattern, now a service of three rather than four.

When he returns to the sitting room the record player is silent and Morse is sitting stiffly in the easy chair across from the sofa, his back to the windows. It casts him in a slight shadow, disguising the pallor of his skin.

“I spoke to a doctor yesterday afternoon,” begins Thursday. Morse turns to watch him, but doesn’t speak. “About what could be done for you. Some third option, something you could accept.”

Morse still doesn’t speak.

“He told me that songbirds only need affection to live – nothing more. That that would pull you through.”

Morse takes a deep breath, but doesn’t speak until his shoulders have fallen back down. His hand,
resting in his lap, strokes along the edge of the crease in his trousers. “It’s true that chicks – young songbirds – only need affection. We receive nothing more until we reach adulthood. But I’ve never heard of an adult surviving on the same.”

“He said it’s possible,” maintains Thursday, staunchly. “And if you’re willing to give it a try… well, so am I. Unless you have someone else who could help?”

“No,” says Morse eventually, gaze falling towards the basket of records. “I mean – there’s no one else. But you – why would you risk that? If it gets out, people will surely think…”

“I’ve already talked to the only person whose opinion matters. As for the rest, we can cross that bridge when – and if – we come to it.”

Morse closes his eyes, head dropping back against the over-stuffed chair. His hand drops away from his leg, lying limp at his side. Thursday opens his mouth to call him, sure he’s fainted, when he sighs. “Give me some time to think it over.”

“Morse…”

“Please.”

It’s hard to accept, hard to consider leaving him looking like a man who’s lost nearly his full allotment of blood and now lies near to death. But this is his one piece of agency, his sole opportunity to hold to his own values. Soon, that will be taken from him. By death or by a new keeper – Thursday has the worrying realisation that it may make no difference to Morse.

“Alright. I’ll come by this evening.” Thursday takes his untouched tea through to the kitchen and puts it down the drain, stopping to telephone through to the nick for a lift back while he’s at it. Then he leaves, Morse still sitting silently in the chair when he walks out.

***

Thursday stops at the library on his way back to the nick, leaving the constable waiting in the street while he nips in and thumbs quickly through the card catalogue. He finds what he wants and checks it out from the librarian, returning to the car with several books tucked under his arm.

Alone in his office, he opens the books and begins to scan the pages of tight text, notebook by his elbow.

By the time ten o’clock strikes at the church down the road, he’s made a comprehensive start on understanding the ins and outs of the regulations and precedent around keeping songbirds. He’s just getting ready to make his way down to Crisp’s office for their weekly meeting when a knock comes on his door.

Lott.

“Feeling better then, are you?” asks Thursday, without much interest, as his sergeant slides in.

“You know me, sir. Come over a bit poorly of a morning on occasion.”

“Sad to hear it.”

They’re neither of them speaking the truth, which absolves Thursday of any guilt he might otherwise feel. “Made any progress?” the inspector asks, closing his notebook and opening the file on Fleming.
As a matter of fact, I have sir. Turned up a new suspect – one worth looking into.”

“Oh yes?” Thursday looks up, interested, and catches sight of Lott’s eager, twisted grin.


“Sergeant,” begins Thursday warningly, but Lott ploughs on.

“No alibi for time of death, resentful of his status, emotionally unstable, attacked a police officer during questioning…”

“Attacked,” begins Thursday.

“What would you call it, sir – being knocked out while on duty –”

“I’d call it just comeuppance for pushing unwanted attentions on a man young enough to be your son,” says Thursday sternly, hands fisting heavily of their own accord.

“He’s no man,” spits back Lott, face black. “And he did it deliberate. Lured me in and –”

Thursday pulls back, staring down his sergeant. “Come off it, Arthur. I was there, I saw it. You gave him no choice. The rest of the CID was witness.”

Lott gestures at the room behind him. “You think they’ll back a songbird? A songbird accused of murder? Over one of their own? It’s you needs to come off it, guv.”

“He’s not been accused of anything yet, and if you choose to push this…”

“I am pushing it, sir,” replies Lott, straightening. “And given he’s a suspect and all, we’ll need to get the journal translated by a proper police translator.”

“You’re overstepping yourself, sergeant,” says Thursday, sharply. Lott stares back, uncowed.

“We’ll see about that, sir.”

He slams out, leaving Thursday in a filthy mood in which to see Crisp.

***

“What’s this about the songbird being a suspect, Thursday?” asks Crisp, as soon as the door’s closed.

The superintendent is sitting behind his desk, window open to let in a warm summer breeze into an office that has smelled of damp socks and chewing tobacco since Thursday first came to Cowley Station. It’s a cramped space in the centre of the station’s upper storey, and Crisp chose it over the traditional super’s offices in the north corner for its centrality and improved central heating in the winter. The smell is simply an unfortunate extra.

Thursday takes a seat, burying his seething anger at his own bagman. “DS Lott has formed a theory, sir, that –”

Crisp waves this away. “Yes, yes, I’ve heard about Lott’s theory,” he says, explaining where Lott was this morning. “I want to hear what you think. Songbirds are notoriously unstable; if he resented his keeper…”

“There’s no evidence of that, sir. Fleming was a kind man, and he gave Morse as much freedom as
he could – it’s unlikely he’ll earn the same under his next keeper. There’s no benefit to him to killing Fleming.”

“Maybe so, if their relationship was, as you say, friendly. We’ve only his word for that. Supposing there was a grudge. That would give him means, motive and opportunity.”

“I think someone would have noticed a songbird coming into college,” replies Thursday, with the hint of levity the statement needs. Crisp shows no interest in the joke.

“There are ways into almost all the old buildings that are off the books, Thursday. You know that. If he’d belonged to a don there, he’d know it too.”

“I think the journal would tell otherwise, sir.”

Crisp gives him a sardonic look. “Ah, yes, the mysterious journal that only our suspect has translated.”

Thursday sits up straighter, replying tartly. “As I said, sir, Morse has not been considered a suspect –”

“Until now. Get it properly translated. I would have thought I could have counted on you to follow procedure in this, Thursday. Songbird hasn’t turned your head, has he?” he asks, eyes narrow.

“No, sir,” replies Thursday staunchly. “He’s been nothing but helpful, that’s the whole of it.”

“Commendable, if he’s innocent. If not…”

“We’ll see what the journal has to say, shall we, sir?”

Crisp leans back, weaving his fingers together and propping his hands up on his desk. “So we shall.”

***

As predicted earlier, finding a Latin scholar is no hardship in Oxford; they have a part-time translator installed in an empty office by early afternoon. By late afternoon, he has a report to make to the team, Crisp now discreetly included – making Thursday very aware his previous conduct is under the microscope.

“Dr Fleming suspected someone of rigging the examination system to supply undeserving students with firsts in exchange for considerable financial gain,” explains the translator, holding the book in his hands and standing in front of the chalk board. “He doesn’t name his suspect, but he does use the abbreviation I. He had intended to meet I. the morning of his death.”

Thursday looks to Crisp, Morse’s theory – and Morse – vindicated. “Does he give any hints as to who I. is?” asks Thursday, the same question he asked Morse.

“No. That is – it’s a woman. Other than that, no.”

“How do you know?” asks Crisp, while Lott glares.

“The inflection of the pronouns is definitive.”

“So not Morse,” says Thursday, to make his point clear. The translator looks at him, surprised.

“No. I should say definitely not. Fleming speaks of the songbird fondly – and with pride. There’s no
hint of any difficulties in their relationship.”

“Thank you, sir,” says Crisp. “We’ll trust you to have the full translation available next week.”

“Of course. Glad to be of assistance.”

Lott sends a DC to show the man out. Thursday turns to Crisp.

“Alright, Thursday, you don’t have to crow about it,” says Crisp, but with good grace. “We’ll toss the songbird as a suspect. You have to admit, it would have been convenient.”

“When is police work ever convenient, sir?”

Crisp gives a grudging nod. “Fair point.”

***

Lott abdicates his responsibilities to drive Thursday home to a PC again, this time doubtless to lick his wounds in private. As in the morning, Thursday sends the constable back to the nick after stepping out of the car; he doesn’t know how long he’ll be.

He can hear music playing through the door; something triumphant and celebratory. Thursday knocks loudly once, then again when there’s no reply.

When there’s no reply to his third knock, he steps off the front step and onto the grass in front of the front windows. The curtains aren’t drawn and he can see easily into the front room, still in the disorganized state it was this morning.

Easily see Morse, lying prone on the floor.

Thursday runs back to the front door and scrabbles with the knob, feeling it give under his grip; he slams the door open and runs in.

“Morse!” He can hardly hear himself above the swelling music, the strings singing with a fanciful air. He snaps off the turn-table and drops down beside the songbird, reaching out to feel for a pulse.

A wave of desire washes over him, a sudden aching need that sinks its teeth into his bones, turning his guts to jelly. Morse’s eyelashes lie delicately over his freckled skin, his perfect lips parted slightly, temptingly. Thursday can smell him, smell beneath the sweetness and musk something darker, more urgent. It sinks its hooks into his animal hindbrain, cutting away his morals and principles and revealing the beast beneath.

Thursday reaches out.

No!

He pauses in the act of turning Morse’s face towards him, his rough fingers skimming over the songbird’s silken skin. Sudden conflict churns in his stomach, upsetting the warm curl of desire with a frigid dread. A lifetime’s decisions, the integrity that he carried on the dark streets of London and through bloody battlefields, drops down on him with crushing weight.

No!

He blinks once, then closes his eyes.
Without the sight of Morse lying before him, some of the mad urgency fades away. His thoughts cut back in – *Get out of it, you fool!*

But he can’t just leave Morse on the floor. His hand is still cupping the songbird’s cheek. He traces it down to Morse’s neck, and feels the thrum of life there. Too quick, too thin, but life nonetheless.

Eyes still closed, Thursday pulls Morse up and props him up against the sofa. He sits down beside him, one arm wrapped around Morse’s thin shoulders, and concentrates on breathing.

It’s hard. Hard to keep his hunger at bay, hard to keep Morse’s scent from intoxicating him. He thinks at first of work – hopeless – and then, with more sense, of Win.

She grounds him, as she’s done for the past twenty years. Reminds him of good times and bad, of their marriage during a two-day pass, her in her mother’s dress – no coupons for anything new – and him by her side in his uniform. Of being demobbed and coming home to meet Joan for the first time, she already two and standing by her mother’s side at the station. Of Sam’s birth, the doctor coming out into the hall to tell him everything was shipshape: all fingers and toes accounted for, and Win doing just fine. Of birthdays and anniversaries and family meals and family quarrels and trips to the cinema and nights alone just the two of them together.

Of their shared life, one predominantly of happiness, at least within the four walls of their home.

When he opens his eyes again, he doesn’t see a siren lying captivatingly at his side, waiting eagerly for his touch. He sees a young man, ill with exhaustion and hunger, barely holding together body and soul.

Thursday pulls him closer, until Morse’s head rests on his shoulder. “You’ll be alright, lad. You’ll be alright.”

Chapter End Notes

The piece of music playing when Thursday comes to the house the second time is Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto.
There’s no clock in Fleming’s front room; as such, Thursday has little idea how much time passes while he sits in front of the sofa beside Morse, the songbird leaning limply against him. He knows it’s been several hours by the lowering of the sun, however, the shadows outside growing longer as evening falls.

He spends the time staring out the window going over the case in his mind – suspects, motives, alibis. Before Lott hared off after Morse as his prime suspect, he had done some research into the committee sitting on the examinations of Fleming’s third years. Fleming, the Dean, and Edwina Poole – which must have made for an uncomfortable atmosphere. The two women and Isobel Parks – the only suspect hinted at by an I – remain the only real suspects. All with an alibi. No matter which way he fits the puzzle pieces together, he comes up with the same answer.

Beside him, Morse takes a deep breath and shifts, head rolling against Thursday’s shoulder. “Mn – what?” He straightens abruptly, pushing himself away from Thursday. Thursday sits still, turning to watch him with calm eyes.

“Welcome back, lad. You’ve been ill.”

“Ill? I… suppose so.” He raises an unsteady hand to rub at his eyes. Thursday takes the opportunity to check his watch – 7:10. He’s been here for two hours.

“I think you’d best come home with me. The missus and I can keep an eye on you; you shouldn’t be alone.”

Morse’s hand falls away; he looks startled. “I –”

He’s past waiting for Morse to take care of himself; he’s crossing this Rubicon. “I insist, Morse.”

The songbird doesn’t object.

***

He calls them a cab, helping the songbird out of the house and locking up for him when his trembling hands threaten to drop the keys on the front step. He gives them back to Morse, who tucks them away in his pocket; it’s a warm evening and he’s only wearing his shirtsleeves – grey flannel trousers and matching waistcoat over a badly-creased white shirt that’s loose at the collar. Thursday catches sight of the chain around Morse’s neck, and turns away.

They ride through the streets of Oxford in silence, heading south towards Iffley. Thursday catches the cabbie throwing glances at Morse in the mirror, but the songbird has pulled himself together; cloaked like a dark lantern, very little of his natural attraction shines through.

They arrive in short order and Thursday pays the man from his pocket change; by the time he rounds
to the pavement side of the car Morse has stepped out and is standing looking at the rows of terraced houses with something like apprehension, shoulders high and tense.

“Come along; we won’t bite,” says Thursday. Morse looks at him askance, but follows without further prompting or assistance.

Thursday opens the front door to the rich, inviting smell of pot roast. He puts his keys on the hall table and hangs up his hat before turning to Morse, lingering behind him on the doorstep like a cat who followed him home and is now uncertain of his welcome. “You’re welcome here, Morse,” he says quietly.

A moment later Win is bustling down the hall, pulling off a pair of oven gloves as she comes. “You must be Morse,” she says, smiling.

“This is Mrs Thursday,” introduces Thursday.

“Win, love,” corrects Win in a light tone. “Come in – you look as though you could do with a sit-down and something stiff to drink.”

“Thank you, but I don’t drink,” says Morse, allowing himself to be escorted into the house. They pass the dining room and Thursday motions him towards the den. He can hear the TV on; one of the kids must be watching a programme.

“Just some tea, then,” says Win. “You go sit yourself down through there.” She hurries off before Morse can correct her.

“Loves to mother, does Win. My advice is not to fight it,” says Thursday genially, taking Morse through the doorway into the den.

Sure enough, Joan is perched on the sofa with her feet crossed under her, watching Steptoe and Son. She turns as they enter, a quick glance turning into a longer, wide-eyed look as she takes in Morse. From Thursday’s angle, it’s hard to tell whether it’s because he looks like a mannequin or a tramp.

“Joan, this is Mr Morse. Morse, Joan. He’s stopping with us for a while.”

She turns to look at him, eyebrow quirking upwards. But after a moment she smiles all the same, turning back to Morse. “Nice to meet you. What brings you to Chez Thursday?”

“My own stubbornness, I’m afraid. I’ve been ill lately. Inspector Thursday’s looking out for me.”

“Well, Mum and Dad’ll sort you out. It’ll be chicken soup at all hours – wait and see.” She stands up and switches off the telly. “Have a seat; I’ll go help Mum with the sprouts.” She slips out past them, treading into the kitchen and starting up a low conversation with Win.

“Don’t stand on ceremony,” says Thursday, indicating the sofa; Morse sinks down stiffly into the corner cushion as though he fears it may bite him, hand gripping the arm rest tightly.

“I didn’t realise there were children,” he says quietly.

“Aye; two. Joan and Sam. Sam’s probably upstairs listening to the transistor and skiving off on his schoolwork, if I know him.”

“But still – I don’t know if –”

“Relax, lad. They’re warm-hearted; they’ll understand. Besides, children lend a certain
verisimilitude, don’t you think? Shows I haven’t spent the years lusting after young lads.”
Morse colours, the tips of his ears going a bright, endearing puce.

“Besides – you already said you’re here to be sorted out. So sit back and give in to it. You’re here to be cared for, Endeavour Morse.”

Morse startles, his control slipping as the light catches his eyes and lends them an incredible depth of hue, turning them a dazzling sky blue. “That name –”

“It’s yours, isn’t it? Detective Lott looked you up in the registry.”

Morse looks away, eyes glancing at the now-dark television set. “I don’t use it. It doesn’t carry any good memories.” His face is blank, empty as he speaks. Whatever more there is to the story, he’s obviously not keen to tell it.

“Then what do you prefer?” asks Thursday, happy to let him keep what secrets he can.

“Morse. Just Morse.”

***

Joan bustles in with the tea a few minutes later, a tray carrying a cup, the sugar pot and milk in a creamer, complete with two biscuits on the side. The cup isn’t anything as fancy as Fleming’s china, but Morse picks it up carefully. Thursday reaches out for a biscuit, and has his hand rapped.

“Dad! Those are for Mr Morse.”

Morse looks up, cup in hand. “Actually, I don’t eat. Thanks all the same.”

Joan’s face puckers with confusion. Morse, taking pity on her, answers the unspoken question straightforwardly, “I’m a songbird, Miss Thursday.” He takes a sip of the tea, looks down at it as though he’s never tasted anything similar, and lowers the cup.

Joan is staring as though he had just announced himself as the Queen of England. “And you’re here?” she asks at last, looking from him to Thursday and back again incredulously. “I mean – but – why?”

“My keeper died. For a while, I had started to think the best thing would be if I did too. Your father wouldn’t let it rest, though.” His frankness makes Thursday’s throat tighten, mouth suddenly bone dry.

“But you live on – well –” she looks sharply to Thursday, who shakes his head.

“They can survive just fine on affection, pet. That’s something I thought we could provide.”

Joan stares back at him. “I don’t understand. They – you, I mean,” she hesitates, looking to Morse, who gives her an awkward look in return, “sell for fabulous prices. They’re kept by film stars and peers – not… not coppers in Cowley.”

“Maybe things would be better for us if we were,” suggests Morse, before Thursday can answer. “Miss Thursday, the law views me as a possession. When my former keeper died, I was thrown into limbo and will remain there until the Crown’s lawyers become involved and sort the details out to see me put up for auction. In the meantime, it’s my lot to languish. I thought the only way to keep my
autonomy was to refuse help, and damn the consequences. I was wrong. That’s why I’m here. But if you’d rather I go…” He puts the teacup down on the table beside him and places his hands on his knees, a precursor to rising.

“Don’t be silly. You haven’t finished your tea. And Mum full well expects you to stay to dinner.”

The corners of Morse’s lips quirk upwards. “That’s very kind. But I don’t –”

“Eat? Then we won’t set a place for you. But you’ll come all the same. Won’t you?” She looks at him with a mock-sternness that is entirely her own, something she inherited from neither of her parents.

“I suppose I will.”

***

After Morse has finished his jaundiced sipping of his tea, Joan runs upstairs to tell Sam of their visitor. The two of them tumble back downstairs like a pair of puppies, Sam rushing in to soak in his first look at Morse, then proffering his hand stiffly; “May I shake your hand?”

Morse gives him a quizzical look, but does as he’s asked.

“Brilliant! The other boys at school’ll never believe this,” Sam says, withdrawing his hand and staring at it as though he may never wash it again.

“Sam, we’re keeping Morse’s visits anonymous for the time being,” interposes Thursday, before his son can get any further down the path of imagining his glory at school.

“Why’s that?”

Joan comes up behind him and ruffles his hair. “Really, can you ask? A songbird, slumming it here in Iffley? Poor Mr Morse’d make the evening news. Think of everyone gawking at him outside the front door.”

“Your sister’s right, we’ve Morse’s reputation to think of.”

Sam frowns, but nods. “Alright then – it’ll be our secret. That’s nearly as good.”

“Good. Run on now and help your sister set the table,” says Thursday, and the pair of them scramble out of the room to fight over the chore.

“It’s not my reputation that we need concern ourselves with,” says Morse a few moments after they leave.

“Joanie’s old enough to understand that. As for Sam, he’ll be happy with a secret all his own.”

“If you say so.”

***

Dinner proceeds quietly, with Joan occasionally kicking Sam under the table when he puts his foot in his mouth – only just 18 and already fancies herself fully grown-up; Thursday doesn’t know whether to smile or sigh.
Considering the exhausted state he’s in, Morse holds up remarkably well, only beginning to fade out at the end; Thursday sends him to sit in the den and leaves the children to clean up, with orders to keep out of the den that evening.

Morse is sitting on the sofa with his head resting on the top of the back cushion when Thursday comes in; he opens his eyes but doesn’t raise his head. “It’s just me, lad.”

“You haven’t finished your dinner,” protests Morse, without moving.

“Between you and me, Morse, I could stand to let a few dinners go unfinished.” He pats his ample belly. Morse gives a smile that make his eyes crinkle at the sides; small but heartfelt. “Win’ll come in in a minute or two. If that’s alright with you.”

“Of course.”

Thursday sits down carefully beside him, just near enough that their elbows are touching. “Is this alright?”

Morse closes his eyes. “Thank you,” is all he says.

They sit there in silence for a few minutes. Like a time-lapse film, as Thursday watches the layers of camouflage that help Morse blend in with regular, flawed humans peel away. His skin changes from grey and drawn to waiflike to stunningly pale, silken smooth and perfect. His hair shifts from tangled and wayward to mussed to a fiery nest in hues of red and gold. His lips are pink and perfect, his waist narrow, his thighs slightly parted and the fabric of his trousers tight.

Thursday leans in, and is startled by Morse’s eyes flashing open, the songbird recoiling beneath his weight – weight he doesn’t rememrs shifting. “Stop. Stop,” says Morse, suddenly panicky, and Thursday pulls away, his heart hammering in his chest.

“Christ,” he spits, turning away. He can feel himself flushing – with embarrassment, with disgrace, with horror. He can feel Morse shrinking away beside him, hear his hand scrabbling on the sofa’s arm rest.

Then there’s just silence, and from the kitchen the sounds of cutlery clinking against the metal sink, of dishes being piled haphazardly against each other. From upstairs comes the tapping of Win’s footsteps upstairs as she fetches her knitting.

“I’m sorry,” whispers Morse, voice so low it’s breaking.

“Not your fault,” replies Thursday, without looking at him. His chest is aching from his heart’s sudden sprint, from the proximity of irrecoverable disaster.

“It was. Listen. When – when I relax, I let go of my control. Not intentionally; it just happens. You need to occupy yourself. Read a book, watch telly, something to keep your mind off me. Understand?”

“Alright,” says Thursday. He heaves himself out of the sofa, and pads across the carpeted floor to turn on the telly. He returns to his seat and feels Morse’s lean arm beside him. Attention focused solely on Richard Baker reading the evening news, he hardly notices Win come into the room.

“Getting on alright, you two?” she asks, taking a seat in the armchair. He looks over to her. “I think we’ll manage.”
It’s late when Win packs up, stooping to give him a kiss and then shuffling off upstairs to get ready for bed. Morse has remained silent for hours, sitting still as stone on the sofa beside Thursday.

“Morse?” he asks, quietly.

“Yes. You can look at me,” he adds, softly.

Thursday looks over at Morse and sees his eyes glinting in the odd monochrome light cast by the telly.

“How are you feeling?”

“Much better. Much. Thanks.” Morse takes a deep breath and sits up. “What now?”

“Now? You can kip on the sofa if you like…”

“I’d rather go home, I think. Thanks all the same.”

“Then I’ll call you a cab.”

“I can walk.”

“Not this time of night you can’t.” He stands and steps out into the hall to ring up a cab. While he’s on the phone Morse follows him out, combing down his hair with his fingers. Without his natural beauty to distract the eye, it looks like a haystack; Thursday smiles and gives his address to the operator. “They’ll be along in a few minutes.”

“Inspector… I don’t know how to thank you.”

“I think at this point, lad, you might as well call me Fred. And you don’t have anything to thank me for. I couldn’t just leave you on your own, could I?”

“You didn’t have to search out the answer you found, though.”

“Searching out what people don’t expect you to turn up is half a copper’s job.” He digs into his pocket, pulling out a few coins for Morse’s cab. “You know, Morse, you’re welcome here anytime. If things don’t get sorted soon, you can come back.”

Morse smiles. “I know.” He takes the money Thursday hands him, slips it into his pocket. “I appreciate it. Truly.”

“Then mind you take care of yourself.”

“I will.”

When Thursday climbs into bed that night, Win is waiting for him. “I didn’t think he’d be so shy,” she says. “Sweet, really.”

“If he comes back – I mean, if he needs –”
“Of course he’ll be welcome here, Fred.”

He bends in to kiss her. “You’re one in a million, love.”
Fridays at the nick have a different energy. Uniform spends their downtime preparing for the Friday and Saturday night drunks, Records spends theirs desperately to finish the week’s filing, and the CID detectives chatter about their weekend plans.

Thursday doesn’t have weekend plans – murder means work at all hours, including weekends if needs be. Win has already enlisted Sam to help with the weekend shopping in his place; she knows him of old.

At the moment, Lott is sitting quietly stewing at his desk under the guise of completing his paperwork. Thursday has completed his own and is sitting reading the books he took out from the library when he senses something amiss.

Outside, the CID has gone quiet. Thursday looks up to see Morse escorted into the office by the duty sergeant, back straight and shoulders outstretched, full of confidence and assurance. He breaks away and crosses the floor to Thursday’s office without looking around.

“I thought of something,” he says, standing in Thursday’s doorway looking at the crime scene photos stuck up on the glass partition. His eyes stray to Fleming’s corpse, then drop hurriedly. A moment later he’s looking up again, though, stepping over to take a closer look.

Thursday walks out into the office, noticing the way the other officers are drifting closer, like a pack of wolves silently surrounding their prey. Lott leads them, face dark.

“It’s not I.,” says Morse, still looking at the glass. He reaches up to trace his fingers over one single note, just the letter I written hurriedly in black marker, a stark line. “It’s J.”

Thursday stares. “You said it was I. – so did the translator. Surely it’s clear enough?”

“The letter in the book is I,” agrees Morse, looking around now. His eyes are bright, eager. “But the ancient Romans didn’t have a letter for J; in more modern times we’ve represented what they used an I for with the letter J when it was a consonant. And if it were J, it could be Joan. Joan Lovelace – she’s desperate to save the college from its impending financial crisis. Last year she tried to convince Guy to teach for free, as a favour to the college. The staff there are on reduced wages, the buildings are going to wrack and ruin.”

“You think the dean threw the exams?” asks Thursday, voice flat to disguise his incredulity.

“If it would save the college? She would do it,” replies Morse, certain beyond a doubt.

And murder a man? Thursday thinks back to the battle-ax of a woman, sitting in their interrogations with a kind of furious contempt. A more likely killer than the wispy Isobel Parks, perhaps. But…

“She has an alibi,” interrupts Lott from the sidelines, contemptuously. “College meeting, from nine to ten. Fleming was killed at nine-thirty, or thereabouts.”

Morse turns slowly back to the mess of notes and photographs summarizing the crime. “How do you know?” he says, eventually.
“Pathologist confirmed,” answers Thursday gently, trying not to shatter the lad’s theory too loudly. Morse shakes his head, unperturbed.

“Yes, but how does he know?”

Around them, the other men are beginning to murmur to each other, a soft backwash of noise in the large room. Thursday ignores them.

“Body temperature, room temperature – it sets the time of death in recent deceases.”

Morse steps closer to the photographs, the black and white snaps showing the dark room in the hard lines of contrast cast by the camera’s flash. He reaches out and taps a photograph of the room. “What if these were open? It could get to be roasting in Guy’s office in the summer.”

Thursday looks closer and sees Morse’s finger pointing to the curtains.

“Witness said they were closed,” says Lott flatly, as though it were the voice of God that had spoken.

“What witness?”

Thursday looks to him, and sees impatience flash across his face. “The dean,” he answers, sourly.

“She found him?” Morse turns to Thursday. “Don’t you see? She could have closed the curtains; left the windows open to cool the room down for ten or fifteen minutes, then called you.”

Thursday shakes his head slowly. “If she did, we’ll never prove it.”

“No,” says Morse, tapping a new photograph this time – one of the lamp that had lain broken on the floor beside the chair Fleming was found in. “You could. This lamp. The bulb’s broken – supposedly broken in the struggle, I presume. But if Guy were killed with the blinds off, it would have been on. If the lamp’s off now…”

One of the constables whistles. Lott shoots him a furious glance, but Thursday’s already turning to young DC. “Get the lamp. Put a new bulb in and find out.”

“Yes, sir.” He dashes away, shoes slamming on the floor.

“Arthur,” Thursday turns to his bagman. “Get the pathologist’s report. Death was practically instantaneous, so how could there have been enough struggle to overturn the lamp. Check it – and check with him.”

“Yes, sir,” Lott hurries away to find the report. Thursday looks now to Morse, standing in front of the glass board as though he were just another DC.

“And you; you’d better come with me.”

Morse cocks his head in agreement and follows Thursday into his office, closing the door behind them.

***

Thursday sits and produces his pipe; the hot sun’s coming in the window behind him but he’s feeling almost itchy with the sudden electric energy of Morse’s incredible theory, and he needs something to calm his nerves. He tamps down the pipe and lights it, taking a few puffs before setting it down on its stand.
“This I-J business,” he says, looking to Morse with sharp eyes, “Others will be able to confirm it, will they?”

“Yes, of course. Any Latin scholar could. A sixth-former could – I was a fool not to have seen it sooner.”

“You’ve been a tad preoccupied,” says Thursday, kindly. Then, in a firmer tone: “And what you said about the dean scrounging around for cash – that could be proven.”

“I could bear witness; I’m sure others could as well. But more than that, the school’s financial records will have to show something. A donation from someone who doesn’t exist, or too much credited to the wrong person. The financial records are public – with enough work, you should be able to turn it up.”

Thursday takes up the pipe, treasuring the warm, smooth flavour of the smoke. “Quite a compelling case,” he says, eventually.

“I told you – I should have thought of it sooner.”

“And you said you could witness it,” says Thursday, slowly, putting down his pipe. His gaze falls on the open book on his desk – a history of decisions surrounding songbirds in English law.

“Yes.”

“But you’re not recognized legally as an individual. If you spoke at the trial, it would be as evidence, not as a witness.” The wheels of his mind are turning now, the pieces of the puzzle he’s been trying to assemble finally falling into place.

Morse looks at him. “I suppose so,” he agrees, confused.

“I need to think about this some more, lad. Can I call you this afternoon?”

Morse shrugs and rises from his chair. “You have my number.”

***

Thursday waits for the results from the lamp: it was off, not on; and from Lott’s checking of the autopsy report: death very nearly instantaneous with the knife being pulled from behind, no time for a struggle, before going to go speak to Crisp.

“We have a new primary suspect,” he says, taking a seat in the DCS’s office. “Joan Lovelace. We’ll need to go through the college’s financial records, but I think we can prove it.”

“Lovelace? You were pursuing Parks yesterday.”

“We were pursuing Morse yesterday,” says Thursday dryly. Crisp shoots him an unamused glance, and he shrugs.

“New evidence, sir. Turns out there’s some confusion in Latin between I and J – Fleming could have meant the latter. If he did… it pans out. There’s some reason to suspect the timing of the death could be off, which would give Lovelace means, motive and opportunity.”

Crisp frowns, unconvinced. “She’d still have to get into college without being noticed,” he points out, sitting back in his chair.
“You said yourself it’s not impossible, sir – for those familiar with these old buildings. Lovelace has been in Oxford for donkey’s years; may even have taught at Lonsdale.”

“Find out. See if anyone saw her there when you say she was there. And find out about the money.”

Thursday nods. “Yes, sir.” He remains seated, hands resting on the chair’s arms, waiting patiently. Crisp raises his eyebrows enquiringly.

“Something else?”

Thursday licks his lips, waiting a heartbeat to broach the subject. “It’s about Morse, sir.”


Thursday leans forwards, resting his hands on the desk between them, and speaking in a low tone. “I have an idea, sir. About his future…”

***

Police work, in Thursday’s experience, is 95% plodding through witness statements, old records, and forgotten papers, and only about 5% brilliant leaps. Without either part, though, the process grinds to a halt.

By three o’clock that afternoon they’ve found a witness who thinks they saw Dean Lovelace in Lonsdale college’s cloisters at 8:45. It’s not enough for a warrant, but it is enough to bring a full team onto combing through the college’s financial records. Thursday is certain now that if they keep at it long enough, they’ll find what they need to convict her.

At four o’clock that afternoon, he drives himself round to Guy Fleming’s house. Looking in the front window as he comes up the path he sees Morse stretched out on the sofa; for a moment his heart vaults into his mouth and he rushes forwards, but Morse clearly hears his step on the gravel and turns to look. He rises to his feet smoothly, and Thursday completes the walk to the door at a more sedate pace.

“Fred,” greets the songbird at the front door, stepping back to let him in. “I thought you were going to call.”

“Thought I should run by in person,” he says, taking his hat in his hand and following Morse into the front room.

“Tea?”

“No, thanks.” He takes a seat in the armchair, waiting for Morse to sink down onto the sofa.

He’s calm today, calmer than Thursday has seen him – over the past few days he’s always been anxious, or ill, or both. Now he waits and watches, forget-me-not blue eyes staring deeply at Thursday – eyes he indeed won’t forget, can’t forget.

“First off – we’re making good progress on the case, thanks to you. We’ve a witness who saw the dean in Lonsdale shortly after the probable time of the murder. With enough time, we should unearth the proof in the college’s records – if she didn’t keep the money for herself.”

“She didn’t,” says Morse, with certainty. He crosses his legs – a simple gesture, and not the eye-catching movement it might have been before, when he was less in control of himself. “Poor Guy; if
only he’d told me – if only he’d brought me…”

“You can’t blame yourself, lad.”

Morse looks at him with a steady gaze, his expression suddenly very old. “That’s easily said,” he answers. “It was my duty to be there for him.” He reaches up and runs a hand along his neck, fingers brushing against the chain hidden beneath his shirt.

“And now?” asks Thursday.

“And now, there will be someone else,” he says, with resignation.

“What if there weren’t? What if you stayed here? The way you put that case together, without even trying – you would make a prime detective, Morse.”

Morse’s face grows stormy, eyes narrowing. “Are you joking? Do you think it’s funny – you know where I’m going, you know what I’m going to be –”

“What you’re going to be is evidence,” interrupts Thursday. “Evidence in a murder investigation. We retain that kind of evidence for ninety-nine years. Long enough for you to do whatever it is you like, including being a copper.”

Morse’s eyebrows twist together, mouth creasing in confusion. “I don’t understand – what are you saying?”

“I spoke to DCS Crisp about it. He’s willing to speak to the Chief Constable, in light of the assistance you’ve provided to this case. If you were to become the property of the Oxford City Police – as evidence in a murder enquiry – you could be assigned to an officer for safe keeping. And if that officer were to be me – your choice – I would encourage you to enter the police college.”

“My choice,” echoes Morse. “As simple as that? I say the word and –”

“And you’ll have to work a damn sight harder than you ever have until now; police work is grunt work, nothing glamorous to it. And you’ll have a hard row to hoe with your fellows – you know that. But you’d earn your own wage – I imagine it would be paid out to me in trust, no problem there – and you could have your own space with your own things. And Win and I would be happy to help you; to care for you, when you needed it.”

Morse stands up abruptly, turning away towards the kitchen so that his narrow back is to Thursday, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Morse?” he says, softly. “I thought you’d be pleased, lad. You don’t have to go to auction, if you don’t want. And if you’d rather … I don’t know, work in a bookshop, or translate Latin, or… whatever else, we could try for that.”

Morse takes a long, slow breath – Thursday watches his shoulder blades scythe out and in beneath the thin cotton of his shirt. He can hear the air catch in Morse’s lungs, sees the way his shoulders shake at the apex of his breath.

The he reaches up with his right hand, takes the chain around his neck in his fist and snaps his hand away, wrenching the chain free. Without looking, he tosses it at Thursday, who scrambles to catch it.

He turns the metal tag over in his hand; engraved on one side is Endeavour Morse, on the other side is Guy Charles Fleming.
“Get me a new one,” he says, voice broken, still facing the kitchen. “With your name on it.”

“Morse…”

Morse turns around, and Thursday sees he’s smiling through the tears. “Promise me that, and I’ll come with you.”

TO BE CONCLUDED

Chapter End Notes

To be concluded tomorrow in the epilogue.

For those interested in the Inspector Morse era, I've posted a couple of short sequels to Songbird: Legal Persons and Cats and Kings.
That Sunday, Thursday helps Morse move out of Fleming’s house.

He takes a suitcase of his clothes, just a carrying case, really, with a couple of suits and some shirts and the usual necessaries. The rest of the house is packed up, waiting to be auctioned off once the Crown takes possession of the property.

“That’s all you want to take?” asks Thursday, as they stand in the empty front hall – the pictures that had hung on the wall have been taken down, leaving light rectangular patches on the walls, pale ghosts of the past.

Morse gives him a tired look; he’s clearly been up late getting the house ready, and even now his well-cut suit has a coating of dust at the cuffs and knees. “Even this isn’t mine, not really,” he says, hefting the bag.

“Glad you decided to take it; I’d have to arrest you if you decided to parade naked through Oxford.”

Morse’s lips twitch upwards at the corners, his eyes lightening.

“Truly, though, there’s nothing else you’d take? No one’s to know, Morse – and I’d say you’re more than owed it.”

The songbird hesitates, eyes flashing briefly to the front room. “There is a basket of records…” he begins. “I’d just… I’d hate for them to sit collecting dust somewhere. They deserve to be listened to.”

“Go and fetch them, then,” says Thursday, taking the carrying case. Morse hurries into the other room and picks up a wicker basket in his arms, holding it possessively as another man would a child.

“That everything?”

“Yes.”

“Come along, then. If you’re ready.”

Morse follows him out of the house, pausing to lock the door for the last time. He gives the keys to Thursday, then follows the inspector down the path to the Jag waiting for them in the road – perks of the job.

After they’ve loaded Morse’s paltry possessions into the boot, Thursday digs into his pocket.

“I have something for you. Since you asked.” He picks out the rectangular metal tag, hanging on a new fine chain, and hands it over to Morse.

The songbird turns it over, brushing his fingers over the inscription.

++ *Noli me tangere* ++
*Frederick Albert Thursday*

“I asked a colleague for something appropriate,” he says, when the songbird looks up.
In truth it had been DeBryn he’d taken his quandary to – what to put on a tag of ownership that meant anything but.

“‘Don’t touch me,’ he said – said you know what it meant.”

Morse nods.

“Then you should also know that it applies to me, just as much as any other. You’re your own man, now, Morse, and that’s a line I won’t cross.”

“The Romans used to inscribe it on the collars of stags – *Noli me tangere, caesaris sum* – don’t touch me, for I belong to Caesar.”

Thursday waits to answer until Morse looks up at him, cut-glass eyes staring into his own.

“I’m no Caesar, Morse. Not to you, not to anyone. But if that’s what the rest of the world has to believe to leave you alone, then so be it.”

Morse reaches up and slips the chain over his head, tucking the tag in beneath the collar of his shirt to lie flush against his skin. “There. Now we can go.”

END

Chapter End Notes

And that’s a wrap. Thanks for reading; hope you enjoyed.

I will be posting a short sequel to this/prequel to Songbird in the next week or so. That's all my plans for this 'verse for now.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!